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Dr. Hansen

WRI 1000

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Paranoia Inflicts Paranoia Inflicts Paranoia

Richard Hofstadter writes “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” in response to conservative Barry Goldwater’s vie for the presidential nomination in the 1964 election. Hofstadter centers his essay around the development of suspicion surrounding politics in the United States by drawing support from popular conspiracies such as the Illuminati, the Free Mason Society, and the Red Scare to uncover the judicracy behind the popular mentality that is the paranoid style. The paranoid style, in Hofstadter’s essay, refers to the shared mentality of those fearing their personal rights will be forfeited on the government’s behalf, that of which predates even American democracy. Although this frame of mind is seemingly most prevalent and easily discernable in the ultra-conservative right wing thinkers of the past, Hofstadter prompts is worth exploring how paranoid style can be manifested indefinitely in the scope of any aggravated political climate throughout history.

Initially, paranoia arises in response to an impending fear that threatens the corruption of intrinsic values, which coincides with the origin of the paranoid style in Hofstadter's hypothesis. This chaos originated in colonial America when followers of the Jeffersonian democracy felt the threat that their newly formed government would regress back into a ruling style mirroring that of the British. Some may argue that this suspicion of the government and officials in power happens amidst times of overwhelming tension, but Hofstadter remarks that “The paranoid style

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is not confined to our own country and time” (Hofstadter 86). This claim holds true and is seen in the distrust happening in the current issues surrounding race and sexuality in response to oppression from the government. The heightened paranoia of today is so visceral that people are too distraught to express their opinion about controversial matters out of fear of backlash from believers of the opposing argument. Conversation is the most primitive and essential form of communication, and living with anxiety that entering into discussion with others will spark irreconcilable conflict is a direct product of the paranoid style.

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The accuracy of Hofstadter's argument has an eerie validity and sense of timelessness that is applicable to innumerable occurrences since the time of publication. Historically, conflicts begin because the scale of control is being abused and comfort is being forfeited. In this article, when personal control over religion, money, or government is disrupted, conflict ignites and tension rises. This tension is felt not only by a singular sect of people, but all governmental parties, ethnicities, religions, and sexes experience a loss of equilibrium when having a strong system of beliefs. For it is human instinct, to fight for morality, and with morality comes disagreement, and therefore paranoid style toward the oppressor.

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This is a strong draft. This paper offers a thoughtful reading of Hofstadter's essay and commentary on some of the ways that the themes that he associates with the paranoid style continue to be recognizable beyond the time that the essay was written. There are a few places in here where you have the opportunity to further explain and clarify the paranoid style for readers, both in terms of what Hofstadter is saying and of what you want to add to Hofstadter's claims and analyses. You have a little more space to work with these ideas, and I wonder if some of your sentences—densely packed with complex information—might benefit from being stretched out and developed over more spaced. Overall, though, this is a great response to Hofstadter's essay that offers readers a chance to continue thinking about the paranoid style today.

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