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The Political Theory of Charles A. Beard

A GREAT historian has to be a good deal more than a historian. Charles Beard had, of course, a proper contempt for the fences set up between the social studies to keep away the rival bands of poachers; for me and for many others he was as much a political thinker using historical techniques as he was a historian using political insights. One of the founders of the realistic school in American political study, he was most of his life one of its recognized leaders. In constitutional law as well as constitutional history, in American government as well as the history of American civilization, he was a name to conjure with. He had a feel for the practical problems of politics, from city planning to federal administration, and he had a finger in not a few congressional bills and investigations. He was interested in historical thinkers like Condorcet and Buckle, but even more he was interested in Aristotle, Machiavelli, Madison, and the justices of the United States Supreme Court. The two basic concepts that absorbed him most were those of *power* and *civilization*; and if the second attracted him because of its dynamic unfolding of the whole life of a people, the first gave him—as it has given so many other political thinkers—the sense of the hard bedrock of reality.

His greatest work was *The Rise of American Civilization* and his best art form was history, but he used it less as a narrative than as a time frame within which to present a continuing social analysis. I suspect that he turned to history for his major effort, after several primarily political studies, because history offered the most fertile

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chance for a great synthesis that was glaringly lacking in American intellectual life. I have fancied him using the delicious burlesque lines that Thomas Love Peacock gives to a marauding chief:

The mountain sheep are sweeter,
But the valley sheep are fatter;
We therefore deemed it meeter
To carry off the latter.

While Beard carried off the fatter sheep of historical writing, I do not let myself forget that he found the mountain sheep of political theory sweeter.

I

The story of his early academic years is the story of the preparation of a political thinker who had been trained in historical evidence and theory and was exploring the dynamics of politics. As in the education of every original thinker Beard had first to unlearn a good deal he had been taught. At Oxford he had studied under F. York Powell, and through him he had been exposed to the methods of the Big Panjandrum of English constitutionalism, Bishop Stubbs, whose three-volume *Constitutional History of England* and whose nineteen Introductions to the nineteen volumes of the portentous Rolls Series of medieval chronicles clung like an incubus to every student of history and politics in England. The three pillars of the Stubbs edifice were: scrupulous sifting of the documentary evidence; belief in the Teutonic origin of democratic institutions; and emphasis on the local unit of government as well as history. Unlike many American academic pilgrims who returned at the end of the century from their hegira to European universities, Beard revolted against the Teutonic theory. "For more than a generation," Beard later wrote, "the Teutonic theory of our institutions deeply influenced historical research in the United States; but it was exhausted in the study of local government rather than of great epochs."¹ This was a shrewd judgment, but Beard might have added that his own first book, *The Office of Justice of Peace in England* (1904), had been part of this emphasis on the local unit. After that came his books on municipal government and reform, on the short ballot, on the initiative and referendum, and on the doctrine of judicial review.

¹ *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1913) 3.

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All these books were fresh, vigorous, and searching in their handling of materials. Yet they might have been written by any one of a number of bright young scholars in political science at that time. What happened to turn Beard from the writer of these books into what he had become by 1913 when he published *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*—a young lion, roaring in the classroom, as in his book, against formalism, stuffiness, timidity, and reaction? What was it that turned Beard into a smasher of the icons of political thinking in his generation?

Some of the things that were happening outside of Beard, in the intellectual atmosphere around him, may give a clue to what was happening inside his mind. The first decade of the century saw a great ferment in American social thought. There was the legal realism of Holmes' dissents on the Supreme Court, the militancy of Brandeis' work as a crusading attorney and social reformer, the rise of sociological jurisprudence under Pound and others; there was Dewey's pragmatism in philosophy, James Harvey Robinson's emphasis on the history of the West as the history of idea systems rooted in great epochs of social change; there was Veblen's brilliant demolition of classical economics, and the beginnings of an institutional theory; there was a vague but unmistakable whiff of Marxism in the air, which reached even the academies in the work of Simons and of Gustavus Myers on economic and social forces in American history; there were still Bryanist-Populist stirrings; there were clamorous demands for a new program of social legislation to balance the irresponsible power of the Big Money; labor was struggling for a place in the sun; there was a bitter contest over the power of judicial review of legislation by what Professor Burgess had proudly called "the aristocracy of the robe," and over the way the Supreme Court majorities were using this power in order to entrench an aristocracy of money.

Beard was no academic *laudator temporis acti*; he was fiercely of his time. The ferment I have described worked mightily in his mind, and mingled with the yeast of his own temperament and background. His Indiana origins marked him from the Midwest; his early conditions were those of small means, a small town, a small college. He was unimpressed by the magnitudes around him, and by the glitter of eastern cities and businessmen and their intellectual apologists.

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He came from a region and class (to apply his own environmental approach) which felt that the original democratic promise of America had not been fulfilled, and that the heady claims of the idealist view of America did not always have much substantive meaning for the disinherited. He was restive at any attempt to clap blinders on him, passionate against the injustices he saw, contemptuous of whatever was shoddy or phony or inflated in its pretensions.

II

One can often best get at what a man becomes by studying what he rebels against. The consummate symbol of everything Beard was fighting in political science was his teacher of American constitutional law, Professor John W. Burgess, whose great work was his two-volume *Political Science and Comparative Constitutional Law* (1890). Beard later did a longish analysis of Burgess' thinking, as part of the history of American social thought that forms the gist of *The American Spirit*.² Trained in Germany, Burgess ruled for years over the empire of political science and constitutional law at Columbia, and his doctrines had shaped the thinking of most of the political science teachers of Beard's generation. In his theory of representative government he leaned heavily toward Montesquieu's statement that it had originated "in the forests of Germany." In his theory of the state he was a Hegelian idealist, scornful of any economic interpretation. In his teaching of economic policy he accepted laissez faire completely and inveighed against governmental interference with individualism. In his teaching of constitutional law he was a champion of the mechanical jurisprudence of the conservative Supreme Court justices. In his outlook on nationalism and internationalism he pleaded for the civilizing mission of the Teutonic nations in extending their power and culture over the backward races.

It is possible to see the body of Beard's political thinking, as it came to maturity over later years, in terms of a five-pronged attack upon the sort of thinking Burgess and his school represented. First, instead of making the state Godlike, in Hegelian fashion, Beard deflated it, and deflated also the lofty myths of the idealist school, which saw the state as somehow working out its abstract destiny

² *The American Spirit. A Study of the Idea of Civilization in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1942) 347-54.

in the vacuum of the "laws of freedom" in history. His revolt against the formalism of this thinking led him to a realistic study of the actual origins and actual operations of governments. His revolt against the moral hypocrisy of this thinking led him to emphasize the factors of hard-bitten economic and class interest, both in the actions of the owning classes and in the movements of popular revolt. This furnishes a clue to his studies in economic interpretation.

Second, Beard revolted against the mechanical theory of law and politics. Just before his death he wrote, in a mellow and reminiscent mood, about his early experiences as a student and teacher of American constitutional law.

At the opening of this century, when I began the systematic study of constitutional law at Columbia University . . . a justice of the Supreme Court, in the theory of the classroom, seemed to be a kind of master mechanic. Indeed, as I heard the budding lawyers and judges talk, I was often reminded of a machine once used in the Bank of England to test the coins deposited day by day. When a coin was gently placed on its delicately balanced receptacle, the machine trembled for a second or two and then dropped the coin, right or left, into the proper chest as sound or spurious according to its monetary merits. To me, fresh from seminars on historical methods, the weighing, measuring, and logistical method of "learning" constitutional law seemed in 1902 a strange way of searching for the meaning and upshot of cases.

No one went to the briefs, or to the personality and political opinions of the justices, or to the social struggles behind the case that could give the legal arguments and rationalizations some concrete meaning. The discussion of an income-tax case like *Pollock v. Farmers Loan and Trust Co.* was carried on "as if it had been an adventure in deductions drawn from a major premise grounded in the ineluctable nature of things."³

What applied to law applied also to politics. The Burgess school saw man as abstracted from all interests except the political. Beard preferred to see the whole man, to study not only the formal pronouncements of a statesman or a judge, but his opinions and interests as a whole.

Third, Beard revolted against the laissez-faire mumbo jumbo, which made a fetish of individualism and forbade any state interference with business enterprise. He saw the doctrine of economic individualism for what it was—an effort to clothe the property

³ Introduction to John P. Frank, *Mr. Justice Black* (New York: Knopf, 1949) vii-ix.

interests of a plutocracy with the sanctity of a taboo. He refused to be seduced by the moral loftiness of the individualist ideal into ignoring the consequences of the resulting economic anarchism. Some of his most vigorous writing—in the pamphlet *The Myth of Rugged Individualism* (1932) and in the two opening chapters (on the Hoover era) in *America in Midpassage* (1939), “The Golden Glow” and “Dissolutions”—is on the futility of trying to run an economy simply by faith in the businessmen whom Beard called the “Lords of Creation.” Beard was not frightened, as Burgess and his school were, by the threat of “socialistic legislation.” He believed that the state had a direct interest in the general welfare and should act when necessary to protect that interest. It is curious to note that Burgess, though idolizing the state as against the individual, believed in practice in a weak state and a powerful elite of individuals; while Beard, who had a healthy skepticism about the state as an abstraction, believed in using it for the people, and while he scorned the *doctrine* of individualism he believed in practice in creating the conditions under which individuals would not be crushed by economic chaos. His interest in public administration flowed directly from his thinking about the regulative and control functions of the government.

Fourth, Beard revolted against any racist notions of the mission of a people or nation. His attack on “the Teutonic theory of our institutions,” in the first chapter of his *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*, was meant even more for Burgess than for Stubbs. Some twenty years later, in an essay on “The Teutonic Origins of Representative Government” he went at the whole theory with a devastating thoroughness. He could not accept the idea that representative government or democracy was due to the “genius” of any race; nor could he accept the idea of Burgess that the Teutonic peoples, endowed with this political “genius,” had therefore the mission of civilizing the rest of the world.⁴ “The civilized state,” wrote Burgess, “should, of course, exercise patience and forbearance toward the barbaric populations . . . but it should not be troubled in its conscience about the morality of this policy when it becomes manifestly necessary.”⁵ Beard had no patience with racism, whether

⁴ *American Political Science Review*, vol. 26, pp. 28–44 (February 1932).

⁵ John W. Burgess, *Political Science and Comparative Constitutional Law* (Boston: Ginn, 1890), vol. 1, p. 46.

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it was this polite form, or the ruthless form of the Nazis. He was equally impatient with it when it was directed, as he thought, against the Japanese in World War II.

Fifth, Beard reacted against the imperialism he found in Burgess, which was rampant in American thought at the turn of the century. He was extremely skeptical, in fact, of any kind of internationalist interventionism, and was inclined to regard the high-sounding slogans of American intervention as only window dressing for more sinister purposes. Himself no chauvinist, he came to believe in a system of economic nationalism, or what he called "continentalism." His studies in Jeffersonian thought and policy, which he pursued very early in his career, entrenched him in this.

III

It must be clear from this that while Beard did not develop his mature system of political thought for some years, all the threads of it were present in his early years as a teacher. They emerged from his rebellions against the arid, mechanical, and reactionary political thinking that he found in academic circles; and they were re-enforced by the new stirrings of political and legal and economic thought in the world outside the academies.

The clearest single statement of his approach to political science may be found in the Columbia lecture on *Politics*, which he gave as adjunct professor of politics in 1908. Quietly but unmistakably Beard delivered the manifesto of what might have been called the "new political science." He told his listeners that politics was not a narrow study, that the notion of "man as a political animal acting upon political, as distinguished from more vital and powerful motives, is the most unsubstantial of all abstractions."⁶ He committed himself against the deductive theories of the state and spoke highly of the Historical school, especially of Maitland's work. He thought that the best way to study institutions was to study their evolution. He applied this especially to property. The question for political study, he said, was not whether "private property as such be abolished, for the nature of man demonstrates that it cannot be," but what forms property should take and to what public use it should be put.⁷ He

⁶ *Politics*, Columbia University Lectures on Science, Philosophy, and Art, 1907-1908 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1908) 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

wanted a science of politics that would move away from moral judgments. He detected in the literature of politics a healthy trend away from natural rights theories, from theories of Providential guidance of the destinies of men and nations, and from theories of the racial character and mission of peoples. He detected also an emphasis on the diffusion of power among the masses.

He called for greater realism in the study of the functioning of democracy: an effort to study the sources of democratic ideas, as Henry Jones Ford and Frank J. Goodnow had already begun to do, in their relation to the conditions of eighteenth-century society; a recognition of the unreality of the doctrine of divided powers in the complex world of the twentieth century; a realistic study of party government, especially through the kind of historical studies that would try to analyze precisely the makeup of parties and describe them realistically in their social and economic setting.⁸ He saw that under modern conditions the exclusive stress on individual liberty no longer could be justified; that *laissez faire* was being challenged; that there was a continued increase in the functions of government, and that a new industrial democracy was in the making.

This was new and challenging doctrine. Yet had Beard kept to such generalizations, he might have been feared but he would not have been made—as he was to be—the prime target of the conservative attack. It was when he launched upon specific studies of the hot problems of the day that he got into trouble. The hottest problem of all, because it reached most deeply to the protection of corporate interests against legislative assaults, was the problem of the Constitution as the guardian of private property, and the Supreme Court as in turn the guardian of the Constitution. Beard sailed into the stormy waters in his little book on *The Supreme Court and the Constitution* (1912). He did not, however, take the tack of challenging the Court's right to the power of judicial review. In fact, after a skillful survey of the historical conflicts over the Court's exercise of that power, and a scrupulous use of sources as he had been taught to make under York Powell, he concluded that the framers of the Constitution and the statesmen and judges of the republic's first generation *did* intend the Court to have it. Nevertheless, the overtones of the book made it clear that Beard reserved the right to

⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

his own judgment on how particular Court majorities exercised their power of judicial review. In dealing with the debates in the Constitutional Convention and the ratifying conventions, and among both the supporters and opponents of the Constitution, he gave his readers a foretaste of the realistic method he was to follow in his book on the framing of the Constitution.

The storm that was raised by *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (1913) has been many times described. By the very boldness of his title Beard had served notice that he was nailing a thesis on the doors of the academies. "The theory of economic determinism," he wrote, "has not been tried out in American history, and until it is tried out, it cannot be found wanting."⁹ Twenty years earlier in his famous paper on the frontier, read at a meeting of the American Historical Association, Turner had tried out another theory—and the members of the historical profession had found it far from wanting. There can be little doubt that Beard was trying to do for his generation of historians what Turner had done for his. The big difference, of course, was that while Turner's theory had outraged some of the professional vested ideas in history, it had not been dangerous to the contemporary business vested interests. In fact, as Beard was later to point out in a discussion of Turner's doctrine, "although Turner did not invent the phrase 'rugged individualism', he did in effect . . . identify it with the frontier spirit . . . Turner set many historians to thinking that individualism had been the driving force in American civilization. Wittingly or not he fortified the teaching of Sumner in economics and sociology and of Burgess in political science."¹⁰

This sheds a good deal of light on Beard's own intent in his book on the Constitution. He was still carrying on his assault on the false gods of Burgess and Sumner—the gods of individualist capitalism. He was testing out a theory which, if it proved tenable, would undo much of Turner's influence in bolstering capitalist individualism and would show that the real dynamism of American history was the conflict of group and class interests—a conflict so profound that it operated even in the sacred area of the framing and ratification of the Constitution itself, and in the minds of the most sainted and revered men of American history.

⁹ P. 7.

¹⁰ *The American Spirit*, 360–64.

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It must be clear from this that Beard's book differed from Turner's thesis in another respect also. Turner had developed an approach to American history—in fact, one that was so closely restricted to the particular conditions of American life that it has itself become one of the sacred writings in the thesis of the *uniqueness* of the American experience. Beard's book, although outwardly addressed to historians, was actually an essay in the general theory of politics. It was a study in the dynamics not only of American history but of political conduct as such; the inference was that the Founding Fathers acted not as Americans or as capitalists but as human beings. It was thus primarily a study in political motivation, in the drive behind great political events and great epochs, in the dynamics of class interest.

The tempest it stirred was thus tempestuous on a number of counts: Beard's book hit at the tradition of individualism in American thinking and therefore in American economic policy; it undermined the belief in the uniqueness of the American experience; it stripped the veil of piety from the study of the motives of political conduct, even in the case of the great heroes of American history; it brought the theory of group interests and of class conflict into the center of the study of American politics; it dealt a blow to the conservative Supreme Court majorities and their apologists, for if it was true that even the Founding Fathers were human beings governed by their sense of economic interest, it was a fortiori even truer of the Supreme Court justices who passed on the validity of federal and state legislation that sought to control Big Property; thus it dealt a blow to the strongest panoply in which property in Beard's day clothed itself—the inviolate panoply of constitutional "due process of law"; at the same time it gave the *coup de grâce* to the mechanical jurisprudence of the time, the rebellion against which (as I have suggested) was one of Beard's own strongest motivations. Thus Beard's book had even more importance in the field of public law and in the study of politics than it had in the study of American history.

I think it is pretty clear that Beard meant it to be thus. The doctrine on which he based the central thesis of his book was, as is well known, that of James Madison, and the *locus classicus* of that doctrine was in Number 10 of *The Federalist*. After quoting in his first

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chapter a long excerpt from Madison's essay — on "the division of society into different interests and parties" and on the proposition that "the most common and durable source of factions has been the various and unequal distribution of property" between "those who hold and those who are without property . . . those who are creditors and those who are debtors . . . a landed interest, a manufacturing interest, a mercantile interest, a moneyed interest" — Beard comments: "Here we have a masterly statement of the theory of economic determinism in politics." He adds that Madison is an adequate disproof of the position of "those who are inclined to repudiate the hypothesis of economic determinism as a European importation . . ." ¹¹ Thus, while the material Beard was to use to document his thesis necessarily came from historical archives, and the episode he dealt with was an episode from American history, the study was essentially an adventure in political analysis.

IV

Beard's next two important books tried to make explicit some of the implications of his approach for politics. The *Economic Origins of Jeffersonian Democracy* (1915) was an effort to apply Madison's thesis to the origins of American party government, and to show how not only the party antagonisms of the Federalists and Republicans but also the basic economic and political thinking of their spokesmen — Hamilton and Adams on the one hand, and Taylor and Jefferson on the other — grew out of the divergent property interests of the economic groups that composed the parties. This book left its mark on all later writing on party politics. It was more sprawling and less tidily put together than the one on the Constitution, but in some ways it was the meatiest and richest that Beard wrote. Students of politics can still quarry in it for evocative leads. For Beard himself it was important because it rooted his own political thinking in Jeffersonianism. He was never to cast himself loose from Jefferson, whether in his agrarian sympathies, his attitude toward capitalism, his conception of a gracious life, his cultural values, or his outlook upon Europe's entanglements and their relation to American foreign policy.

It would be a mistake to interpret Beard's political theory as

¹¹ *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*, 15–16.

Marxist, and he himself repeatedly warned against such a misconception. To be sure, Marxism was in the air all around him; like everyone else who lived and thought in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, Beard could not escape the shadow of Marx. But the direct influence of Marxism upon him was minimal. Even in the days when he was trying to apply the materialist interpretation of history, there was never any hint that he cared about the dialectical process that was so dear to the Marxists. He believed that class interest and economic motives explained a good deal, but he would have been horrified about committing himself to a class-struggle view of politics. He was horrified by the communist state and its values, and he never showed much interest even in a commitment to a democratic socialism. The fact is that he was no systematic political thinker himself, and that systems like the Marxian filled him with dismay.

Had he sought a social theory in which to root his own thinking, he could have found it in Thorstein Veblen's work. Veblen, in some ways as original as Marx, in many ways more subtle and credible, had dug very deep to the anthropological, economic, and psychological roots of modern institutions. As early as 1904, a decade before Beard's books on the Constitution and on Jeffersonianism, Veblen's chapter on "Business Principles in Law and Politics" in his *Theory of Business Enterprise* had anticipated most of Beard's conclusions. But Beard feared other peoples' systems, whether they were European or American. He preferred to build on the *aperçus* in the essays or random statements of a Madison, a Hamilton, a Marshall, a Webster. That left him unfettered to apply his interpretive lead to the specific conditions of a historical period. As he had put it in his 1908 lecture on *Politics*, one of the things the historian could do for politics was "to discover inductively the precise composition of parties or their relation to surrounding social and economic phenomena."¹² To make his detailed studies of his theories of the dynamics of politics, Beard thus had to become a historian; it was the only way he could study the relation of whatever his problem was to the "surrounding social and economic phenomena."

For the most part he left it to others to extract the implications. He had a horror of what might be called "grand political theory." He

¹² *Politics*, 24.

never formulated a theory of the state. Randolph Bourne, for example, using as his point of departure the Beard studies, ventured on such a “grand” theory in his “Unfinished Fragment on the State” (1918);¹³ but it was more than half a failure, and Beard — given his conditionings and his strong empirical bent — was wise to forgo this sort of adventure, which the young radicals of his time, inspired by his work, undertook.

The political thinkers in the American tradition who interested him most, aside from Jefferson, were Madison and John Taylor of Caroline in the early period, and in his own day Brooks Adams, Justice Louis D. Brandeis, and Justice Hugo L. Black. What ties these men together is a hard-bitten, unfooled quality they had in common, rather than any ideological uniformity. Madison saw the property divergences behind the party system; Taylor saw the hollowness of “the aristocracy of paper and profit”; Brooks Adams, for whose *Law of Civilization and Decay* Beard wrote an introductory essay in his last years,¹⁴ saw that the rise and fall of civilizations followed not upon ideological or moral factors but upon the shifting of the trade routes of empire in history; Brandeis and Black were judicial radicals who talked about economic realities rather than juristic categories. This was what Beard went for, wherever he found it.

The closest he ever came to making explicit his own political theory of class interest was in his little book of Amherst lectures, *The Economic Basis of Politics*, delivered in 1916 but not published until 1922, with additional material in later editions. Where in his *Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* Beard had tried to prove too much by tracing the direct economic impulses of particular men, he shifted in his Amherst lectures to a broader and somewhat vaguer theory of the economic interests of classes, industrial groups, and occupational groups, and their impact on politics. He stuck to his contention that it is the conflict of economic interests that underlies and conditions the political process, and is therefore the shaping force in politics as in history. Beard refused to see this conflict — as the Marxists saw the class struggle — as beginning after primitive communism and ending with the construction of a utopian communist society. He rejected utopianism, whether in the

¹³ Randolph Bourne, “Unfinished Fragment on the State,” *Untimely Papers* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1919) 140–230.

¹⁴ Brooks Adams, *Law of Civilization and Decay* (New York: Knopf, 1943).

golden age of the conjectural past or the golden age of the conjectural future. He saw the conflict of groups and classes as inherent in history and in political society, and therefore never ending. He refused to believe that man "may so control the distribution of wealth as to establish an ideal form of society and prevent the eternal struggle of classes that has shaken so many nations to their foundations."¹⁵ In all this his thinking was essentially valid, and his ideas have not been shaken by events.

But the political thinker who refused to accept the dogmas of Marxism was also skeptical of some of the dogmas of democracy, at least in his earlier days. In tracing the growth of Western political theory under the pressure of changes in class position and class interest, Beard made it clear that he considered the Industrial Revolution of James Watt more important than the equalitarian revolution of Rousseau.¹⁶ He tended always to see political ideas as the rationalization of a class bid for power. Thus he saw Rousseau as a "passionate propagandist" who "set forth the moral and philosophic justification for the revolt of the third estate," and found his system of the "general will" as embodied in the mathematical majority "so unreal, so ill-adapted to the world of industry and trade, commerce and agriculture, that . . . we can hardly imagine how it could become the philosophy of any people."¹⁷

While Beard was aware of the extent to which America had borrowed the equalitarian idea from Europe—from Locke even more than from Rousseau—his emphasis was less on democratic theory than on the new economic base that the theory found in American social conditions. Americans had done away with the landed owners of Europe, they had no aristocracy or clergy with any power, and they had no European type of proletariat. Besides, the wide distribution of land "brought about in fact a considerable economic equality to correspond to the theory of political equality."¹⁸ Beard saw with clarity that the theory of political equality did not have easy going even under the social conditions of America, that the owning groups feared the spread of Rousseauist Jacobinism in America, that they would have liked to stratify citizenship and

¹⁵ *The Economic Basis of Politics* (New York: Knopf, 1945) 28.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 46–49.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 49–54.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 56–57.

introduce the estates system by writing into the Constitution a personal property qualification for voters, had they not known they could not get away with it. They relied instead upon the system of checks and balances “to secure the rights of property — particularly personal property — against the assaults of the farmers and the proletariat.” And Beard acidly added: “Much ingenuity has been spent by American lawyers in elaborating the theoretical fictions of Montesquieu. The real significance of the separation of powers and its relation to the balance of class interests in society was appreciated by eighteenth century writers, but if more modern statesmen have understood them they have seldom been frank in setting forth their views.”¹⁹

Thus Beard made clear his basic position on the study of economic interests and political ideas. It was one that depreciated political power as compared with economic power; regarded political contrivances (like the system of checks and balances and the division of powers) as the shadow and not the reality, as the mask that hid the face and the glove that clothed the hand of class interest; saw ideas and idea systems as having no initiating force of their own, but being mainly reflections of class drives. Beard was later to retreat from this position, and a book like *The Republic* (1943) came very close to being a defense of a system of political and economic pluralism, and of checks and balances, as the only possible basis of a free society. The Beard of the earlier phase, however, was more summary and abrupt. He was fond of quoting Maitland’s remarkable insight that “the whole [of] constitutional law seems at times to be but an appendix to the law of real property.”²⁰ One may guess that there were moments when Beard saw himself as an American Maitland who had engineered the tour de force of showing American constitutional law as a sort of appendix not to land tenure but to personal property and security-holding. Maitland, said Beard, “was entirely emancipated from bondage to systematists.”²¹

Beard’s career was similarly a campaign to emancipate American political science from the systematists. He fought the arid pedantry of systems, whether Marxist or any other. He fought the dreary platitudes of the mechanical thinkers of the checks-and-balances

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 44–47.

²⁰ *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*, 8n.

²¹ *Ibid.*

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school. He fought also the rhetoricians of the democratic idea, whether they were Rousseauists, idealists, or Wilsonian "world-imagists" who sought to extend a moral imperialism over the world. Finally he fought all the thinkers, liberal and conservative alike, who preferred to gloss over the underlying realities of class and group interest. "Have the economic groups once recognized by statesmen and political philosophers disappeared?" he asked. "The answer is emphatic. It is to be found in the census returns, which, as certainly as the domesday book of William the Conqueror, record the perdurance of group and class interest despite the rhetoric of political equality."²²

When Beard came to write the several volumes of *The Rise of American Civilization*, he stuck to the emphasis on changing economic realities. As a historian, he was a political thinker applying his basic approach to the successive social situations in the time frame of American life. Yet in the crucible of the actual conditions of American history, Beard modified the fierceness of his early position. He was no longer concerned to prove a theory of economic determinism, but only to show that the economic factors were the most important in the whole complex of forces that shape a political society. When he came to write a new preface in 1935 to the *Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*, he whittled down his intent by saying that the economic factors had been "so long disregarded" that he had tried "to redress the balance." During the whole latter part of his life, he belonged most clearly with what may be called the "multiple causation" school of political and social theory.

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To most students of government Beard is best known for his descriptive and interpretive writing on American government in action under contemporary conditions. The successive editions of his textbook *American Government and Politics* influenced a whole generation of teachers and students. *The American Leviathan: The Republic in the Machine Age* (1930), written with William Beard, is without much doubt the best statement of his thinking in this area, and has not been surpassed since for its realism, its balance, and its perceptions. What Beard did for the study of American

²² *The Economic Basis of Politics*, 60.

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government was to help shift the emphasis from the structure of government to its daily impact on the lives of the people, from government-in-books to government-in-action, from the pietist to the behaviorist. His books were especially fruitful in the discussion of the economic and human factors in the working of the judicial power, in the study of the new dimensions of the presidential office, of the realistic factors involved in the party system, and of the immense new importance of public administration and the administrative process.

Beard had in his early Columbia years come under the influence of Goodnow, one of the pioneers in the study of administration. In the municipal field he had worked with what he called the "ABC" trinity—Allen, Bruere, and Cleveland. He had spent some time in Tokyo helping to reorganize municipal administration. Sometimes, as in his Princeton address on *The Philosophy, Science and Art of Public Administration* (1939), he defensively tended to overestimate the scientific precision of public administration. But there were few students who did as much as he to underscore the role of technicians in the government services, especially in the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior, and the character of administration as a form of technology. When, in 1928, he edited a symposium called *Whither Mankind?* he struck an affirmative note in his introductory essay. He sturdily stood up for the civilizations of the machine age, flinging out the challenge that "the imagination of an Einstein, a Bohr, or a Millikan, may well transcend that of a Milton or a Vergil." As for the charge of materialism leveled at our age, he asks whether "the prevention of disease by sanitation [is] more materialistic than curing it by touching saints' bones? Is feeding the multitude by mass production more materialistic than feeding it by a miracle?"²³

Two years later, in 1930, he returned to the attack in another symposium, *Toward Civilization*. Written on the eve of the depression, his last chapter is a plea for a rational planning of the economy and the application of engineering techniques not only to industry but to society. He points out that Plato was a utopian planner, and Aristotle a planner who advocated critical rational intelligence; that the laissez-faire philosophy of nineteenth-century England was a

²³ *Whither Mankind?* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1928) 1–24.

temporary break in the sweep of civilization; and that the Greek philosophers had more sense about government than Cobden and Bright. He traces the progression of planning from the city to the national unit, prophesies that it is only in its beginning on the national plane, and ends with a somewhat grandiloquent flourish: "Imagination, informed by the known laws of nature, but unbound and free to experiment and dare, combined with the spirit of rationality, lives and flowers in the engineering age and will swing new planets into the ken of those who watch the heavens for signs of the future."²⁴

This is Beard the rational radical and the scientific humanist. It is the Beard who ended the second volume of *The Rise of American Civilization* with the now classic sentence, "If so, it is the dawn, not the dusk, of the gods,"²⁵ perhaps unconsciously paraphrasing Franklin's little speech about "the rising, not the setting, sun" at the conclusion of the Constitutional Convention. If Beard was too optimistic at the time on the eve of the Great Depression, it was largely because he failed to distinguish between the rational forces of technology and the irrational forces of unplanned business enterprise. The intensity of Beard's recoil from the spectacle of what business had done with the resources and technology of American life may be measured in an article of his in the *Forum* in July 1931 on a "Five-Year Plan" for America. He sketches the outlines of a program that includes a National Economic Council, the repeal of the antitrust laws, a declaration making all major industries into public utilities, a Board of Strategy and Planning to do the basic work of forecasting and of allocation, and a series of "syndicates" for the government of industry.²⁶ This is rather breath-taking, given the moderation of Beard's views on economic policy in later years, and his fears that the drastic increase in governmental power would lead to totalitarianism. But it is indicative of how far in the radical direction he was willing to go under the stress of great events which, as he saw them, required drastic action.

This is not the place to analyze in any detailed way Beard's views on economic and foreign policy. I want here to note only that as a political theorist Beard was caught in a difficult dilemma. He was

²⁴ *Toward Civilization* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1930) 297-307.

²⁵ *The Rise of American Civilization* (New York: Macmillan, ed. 1927), vol. 2, p. 300.

²⁶ "A 'Five-Year Plan' for America," *Forum*, vol. 86, pp. 1-11 (July 1931).

willing to accept most of the New Deal program; yet in his later years he began to have doubts not only about the interference with the judicial power represented by President Roosevelt's ill-fated "court packing" plan, but also about the trend of centralized power as he saw it in the successive Roosevelt terms. His skeptical mind saw through the rhetoric of "national honor" and "national interest," as those phrases were generally used. His book on *The Idea of National Interest* (1934) pulls few punches; at the same time he found himself, in the companion volume, *The Open Door at Home* (1934), advocating what amounted to a policy of economic nationalism. He did not quite face up to the logical corollary of such a program, which would have meant socialism and a managed economy. Yet I do not intend my emphasis here to be wholly critical. Whatever the roots and the validity of Beard's isolationism—or as he called it "Continentalism"—he had the courage of his convictions; and there was an inner logic that tied these views of his in with his earlier writings on idea systems as the rhetoric of class interest.

Beard was not a systematic thinker. He had no theory of the state, and even in *The Republic*, he had little that was fresh to add to the analysis of the basic nature of democracy. His strength lay in his capacity to deflate the pompous and to shift the discussion always to the concrete material of economic life. He was largely a theorist of power in its varied and bewildering forms—the party machine, the presidency, the pressure group, the corporation, the press, the engines of propaganda and diplomacy, the wheelings and maneuverings of power politics in the international field. He belonged, with Machiavelli, to the tough-minded rather than the idealist school of political thought. In his urgency to get at the bedrock of economic power, he tended to underestimate the political factors, just as he almost always underestimated the innate force of ideas and the role of leadership. But his influence on American political thinking was invigorating. His whole career sheds light on the organic relation between history and political science when politics is analyzed—as Beard analyzed it—in terms of dynamism, and when history is written—as Beard wrote it—in terms of the realities of power.