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IN RETROSPECT

CARL BECKER AND THE HAUNTING OF AMERICAN HISTORY

Cushing Strout

The editor of Carl Becker's letters observed in 1973 that whatever use posterity might make of him, "he haunts American historiography as no other historian can." [1] Eight years later Robert Darnton treated the alliance between social and intellectual history, championed by the New Historians – Becker, Charles Beard, James Harvey Robinson, and Vernon L. Parrington – as one that "fell apart during the next two decades," paving the way for the dominance of a new social history, written "from below," and for the turn of intellectual history toward following ideas "beyond libraries" into the minds of common men. [2] In this light Becker's ghost seemed to have lost its power to haunt. His interest in the intellectual climates of entire eras and his fascination with the great men of the American and French Revolutions (Franklin, Jefferson, Diderot) represented the kind of "elitist" and generalizing concerns that had fallen into disrepute. This picture is skewed, however, by its neglect of those developments in biography, intellectual history, and philosophy of history which keep alive Becker's power to haunt.

Becker's colleagues in the New History, Beard, Turner, and Parrington, seem now much more dated than he does. For one thing, they were more devoted than he was to a binary view of recurring economic conflict as a unifying theme. It not only polarized too neatly but turned conflict into continuity by repeating the same conflicts over and over in a monotonous dialectic that "blurred our historical appreciation of the changing contexts of struggle in which new groupings and new issues became the focus of new conflicts." [3] Moreover, they, unlike Becker, tended to write stories of "declension" in which they sang elegiac laments for what had been lost in the course of contemporary history, whether Turner's agrarian frontier, Parrington's Jeffersonianism, or Beard's "continentalism." They were in this sense in the tradition of American "exceptionalism." Becker was, in the end, as devoted as they were to American democratic republicanism, but he differed from them in having the sense that "we Americans are terribly afraid of being duped by

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what we regard as the wily Europeans" and run to two extremes: "either we wish to keep entirely out of European affairs; or else, if we take any part, we think we must run the whole show. We have to learn that it is necessary to take a part, but only our proper part; and that we are as apt to be duped by being too suspicious of the Europeans as we are by being too credulous."[4] Becker had the merit, as one of his illustrious students, William H. McNeill, has pointed out, of seeing the United States "as part of an Atlantic world whose headquarters remained on the European side of the ocean," where, "early warnings of future dangers to the Republic" would come. This view was especially pertinent in the 1930s when Americans reacted "as though hypnotized by the clash of arms and ideologies coming at us from the other side of the ocean."[5]

Becker's experience of disillusionment with Woodrow Wilson's foreign policy accentuated an awareness of the nonrational in human nature and action. He told William E. Dodd that conscious class struggle was implausible because "people's minds are far too muddled to carry on any such struggle for more than a short time." Historical research needed "a more subtle psychology."[6] He had written *The Eve of the Revolution* in terms of "complex and subtle instinctive reactions and impulses" and he hoped to do the same for the French Revolution.[7] He thought of his essays in *Everyman His Own Historian* as essays in "applied psychology, or psychological interpretations,"[8] not recognizable as such to most historians because he made no use of technical jargon, as the propagandists for the New History, James Harvey Robinson and Harry Elmer Barnes, often did. Becker's essays on the character of great men point forward to the more extensive biographies by the psychoanalyst Erik H. Erickson, for whom Jefferson was also an American hero. The rare best work in this vein has been distinguished from the common bad by its chary use of clinical language.

Becker was also a pioneer in thinking about the secularization of religion in both the American and French Revolutions. As early as 1914 he suggested that "not enough attention has been given to the religious aspects of the 18th century. In America, as in France, the old religious conceptions were in a sense being transformed into a kind of civil religion, and in this change is to be found much that helps explain the revolution — so I think at present."[9] By the 1960s in America civil religion had become a much-debated topic, and a number of historians explored the complex bearing of colonial Calvinism on the coming of the Revolution.[10] Becker's treatment of the French Revolution in *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers* saw the philosophes' outlook as a displacement of religious concerns, and his formulation was vulnerable to Peter Gay's charge of a spurious persistence of the Middle Ages. But Becker's theme of displacement has had a strong echo in a

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later era with Meyer Abrams's major study of the Romantics in *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971) which shows how Romantic thinkers and writers reformulated Christian ideas in a new secular way.

Becker would have been glad to find an ally in a literary historian (also a Cornellian) because he was himself, unlike the other Progressives and New Historians, unusually sensitive to literature, as his notably gracious and witty style proves. Turner never appreciated Willa Cather's memorable novels about the frontier, while Parrington and Beard were notoriously obtuse in their denigration of Hawthorne and Henry James for not being "realists." Becker, however, found James much to his taste and was fascinated by Joyce's *Ulysses*. Becker wrote a chapter on Jefferson's style in the Declaration compared to Lincoln's public discourse, and used fictional techniques to dramatize the coming of the American Revolution in the minds of reluctant rebels, as in his essay "The Spirit of '76" with its imaginary document and protagonist.

Beard wryly wrote him: "I have heard on good authority that you are no Historian; nothing except a Man of Letters. It makes me jealous."[11] This complaint of the "scientific" historians is precisely what makes Becker seem more modern than they do in a time when the border country between history and literature is being increasingly recognized as a partially shared territory.[12] Lawrence Stone in 1981 noted a disenchantment among some leading historians with the dream of a quantified historiography and saw a revival of "narrative" as a short-hand code word for a shift to cultural and emotional rather than quantifiable matters, from groups to individual examples, from the analytic to the descriptive, and from the scientific to the literary.[13] It is a shift in which Becker would find himself quite at home.

In historical theory his ghost would also recognize some congenial contemporary developments. Paul Veyne's *Writing History* has stimulated a renewed interest in narrative history among French theorists who were formerly inclined to treat it as an embalmed corpse in nineteenth-century garments. Veyne argues that history has no scientific method because to say "what really happened," in Ranke's phrase, requires "originality, cohesion, flexibility, richness, subtlety, and psychology" – in short, the very values associated with complex works of art.[14] The heart of Becker's famous presidential address to the AHA, "Everyman His Own Historian," was his assertion that historical facts have "a negotiable existence only in literary discourse" because written history is an "imaginative reconstruction of vanished events" in which "form and substance are inseparable: in the realm of literary discourse substance, being an idea, *is* form,; and form, conveying the idea, *is* substance."[15] This position precisely anticipates Hayden White's *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (1973), with its presen-

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tation of historiography in terms of the linguistic tropes that are alleged to be the fundamental element in the writings not only of his European examples, but of all historians.[16] White also argued that the literary forms of tragedy, comedy, romance, satire, and irony characterize historical stories; and Becker himself criticized James Truslow Adams's *The Epic of America* on the ground that it left one without "a sense of the epic and tragic which might have been found in the story of American history."[17]

More recently, Paul Ricoeur in the two volumes of his *Time and Narrative* (1984, 1985) has tried to link up modern French and Anglo-American thinking about narrative form; but as David Carr has shown in his *Time, Narrative, and History* (1986), both the French and American narrativists (e.g., White and Louis Mink) end up in skepticism about historical knowledge because they take it for granted that reality presents itself to us as mere sequences until the constructing imagination enters to give events a beginning, middle, and end. Then of course the constructions seem to stand between us and some unknowable, unformed reality. What is radically missing in the contemporary linguistically-oriented reflections on history, as Carr argues, is any awareness of how much our actual temporal experience is organized and structured before we tell more sophisticated historical stories about it. (His criticism applies even more pertinently to the poststructuralist literary movement that encapsulates us in the prison-house of language on the premise that narratives only reflect the structure of their own operations.)

Becker's historical relativism was reasonable enough in its insistence that "cold hard facts" are really statements about events made on the basis of evidence and inferences that convince us, and this process is subject to historical change. To this extent he woke up naive positivists from their dogmatic slumbers. But his view had its own radical ambiguities. He usefully promoted the study of the sense of the past because of his idea that the written history that actually influences the course of events is "almost always an idealized history" that is organized to justify a particular purpose of a group, such as the "idealization of classical republicanism & of stoic & Roman Virtue in the latter 18th century."[18] But he could provide no philosophical basis for the knowledge that such a study would presumably represent. Historians mixed memory and desire, according to his pragmatic view of their work, just as nonhistorians did in their ordinary life, and Mr. Everyman's concerns shaped what historians wrote. He seemed to take it for granted, as J. H. Hexter has noticed, that Mr. Everyman would be a decent American democrat rather than a German fascist with an image of the past serving Hitler's purposes.[19] "If Stalin and Hitler have taught me something, so much the better," he remarked, reconsidering his view in the introduction to his *New Liberties for Old* (1941). They taught him not only that liberal democracy in the West,

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for all its weaknesses, incarnated some enduring values, but that pragmatic relativism as a theory of history might take a "final fantastic form" in the virulent antirationalism of European dictatorships in which truth and morality would both be relative to the purposes of any dictator ruthless enough "to impose his unrestrained will upon the world."[20]

Becker's relativism reflected his own partial bondage to the late nineteenth-century positivistic assumptions he was famous for attacking. It is always dangerous, as Emerson remarked, to shoot at a king without killing him. Becker wanted to find a theory of progress that would be formulated entirely in terms of a matter-of-fact control over the environment, without reference to anything else, and progress had become possible therefore only in the shift from verbal symbols and ideas to the control of external things with the aid of mathematical science. Yet at the end of *Progress and Power* he concluded that this bleak vision of man's "imperishable monuments" and "immortal deeds" as mere accidents in the cosmic weather of an indifferent universe running down is less "an objective world of fact than man's creation of the world in his own image."[21] Becker's thought thus oscillated between a humanistic attention to purposes, values, ideas, and stories, on one hand, and a positivistic emphasis on mere fact, technology, materialism, on the other. In this light there is sufficient conflict to help account for his recurrent stomach ulcers which eventuated in an operation cutting out much of his stomach in 1940.

What is missing from Becker's account of historical inquiry is the force of the constraints that evidence, logic, and our understanding of society and psychology must exert on any venture in the writing of history. But they are missing too from the most recent Nietzche-inspired theories of discourse as a form of power. Fashionable modern skepticisms resonate more with Becker's early relativism than they do with his later dissatisfaction with it. If he can be seen as a stepping stone toward them, he also represents a warning about the limits and dangers of a skepticism that cannot account for the capacity of mind to do more than reflect memory, desire, and Mr. Everyman's interests. He was much impressed with William James's idea of the "specious present" in "the stream of consciousness," but a mere stream in a flitting present could not even define itself in these limited terms. The historical imagination must be more than this pragmatic daily mundane consciousness of our present moment. We have yet to understand fully how temporally-oriented stories, without being literal copies of anything, can tell us truths about actual events in biography, history, and even in some aspects of some kinds of fiction.

Becker can sit for a group portrait of the Progressive historians, who look increasingly dated to us, but he looks uneasy there, staring out at the middle distance instead of at the camera. I see him instead hovering in a ghostly way

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in the background of any current picture of vital elements visible on the historiographical landscape.

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5. William H. McNeill *Mythistory and Other Essays* (1986), p. 159.
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7. To William E. Dodd, June 17, 1920, ibid., p. 72.
8. To Leo Gershoy, (January 1934), ibid., p. 199.
9. To William E. Dodd, (March 1914), ibid., p. 28.
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14. Paul Veyne, *Writing History* (1971), p. 230.
15. Becker, *Everyman His Own Historian* (1935), p. 251.
16. See Hayden White, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," *History and Theory* 23 (1984): 1–33.
17. To James Truslow Adams, November 1, 1932, *"What is the Good of History?"*, p. 168.
18. To Henry Johnson, (December 1922), ibid., p. 86.
19. J. H. Hexter, *On Historians* (1979), p. 38.
20. Carl Becker, "Some Generalities That Still Glitter," *New Liberties for Old* (1941), p. 145.
21. Becker, *Progress and Power* (1936), p. 102.

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