

Beard's "Politics," Ours, and Theirs

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In October 1974—2 months after the resignation of Richard Nixon, 6 months before the fall of Saigon—DePauw University marked the centennial of the birth of one of its most distinguished undergraduates: Charles A. Beard. Over a quarter of a century after his death, Beard remained a living presence for the distinguished historians who came to commemorate and criticize him. For Eugene Genovese, a 44-year-old Marxist whose *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* had just been published and would win the Bancroft Prize that year, Beard's mishandling of slavery, psychology, ideology, and social class made his economic interpretation unviable. Still, Beard had "liberated American history" by asking big questions, and his integration of scholarship and political reform remained a compelling model for Genovese and his generation (1976, 44). For Henry Steele Commager, nearly 30 years older than Genovese and one of Beard's successors at Columbia, Beard was a bundle of paradoxes: a romantic realist who confused even himself with speculations about historical relativism. But Commager estimated that Beard had published over 40,000 pages of books, essays, and reviews and that a trickle-down influence could still be felt: "he filters down into textbooks, and to students of students of students, and he's everywhere." "We're all Beardians," he confessed. "We can't help ourselves" (Commager 1976, 118).

Are we all Beardians still? The study of politics, the practice of history, and the interpretation of the Constitution have all shifted in the 40 years since Commager and Genovese spoke in the wake of Watergate and near the close of the Vietnam War. Few now regard Beard as a living presence. Few even read *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*, which Macmillan first

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issued (mistakenly advertised as *The Economic Interpretation*) for \$2.25 in April 1913—the same month as the Seventeenth Amendment enabled the popular election of senators and a month after the Sixteenth Amendment gave Congress the power to collect income taxes. That same April, Beard's publishers also brought out the first English translation of Sigmund Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*. Like Freud, Beard helped define a distinct line of modern thought. But while there are still practicing Freudians, there are no practicing Beardians—that is, no readers who hew dogmatically to the interpretation Beard put forward in 1913.

We may nevertheless be Beardians in a looser sense. Despite what its author acknowledged as its “long and arid” surveys (1913, 324), its antinarrative catalogs, and its preliminary (and mistaken) accounting of facts, the book has remained for the last half century an important flickering flame, one that radical readers want to reignite and others still want to extinguish. But first-time readers (students coming, say, from the opinions in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*) may be confused by the controversy. That is because we now un-self-consciously inhabit the basic landscape of politics Beard mapped. Whenever we declaim against the influence of money on politics (or, for that matter, whenever we apologize for it), we walk the terrain of Beard's book, for Beard's book was first and foremost an interpretation based on an idea of how politics really works, as opposed to how politicians say it works or how political philosophers say it should work.

Beard would not have called himself a “Beardian.” He claimed his economic interpretation was not activist scholarship aimed at contemporary political reform but a throwback to an understanding of the Constitution that would have been recognizable to framers, ratifiers, and ordinary people of the 1780s. As we consider the continuing vitality of Beard's work and as we reflect on the conflicts *Economic Interpretation* both recorded and produced, we should take that claim seriously. Beard's book stands at a midpoint between our own time and the time he wrote most frequently about, the period after the American Revolution. For very different reasons, what ties these moments together—what connects our time both with Beard's and with the American Revolution—is a shared commitment to an expansive understanding of politics.

How we see the political transformations of the late eighteenth century is an effect of how we see politics itself and of what we mean when we call something “political.” But what did Beard see when he looked at the American Revolution? How did he picture the making of the Constitution? What was his vision of American politics?

For Wilfred Jones, an artist commissioned to illustrate Charles and Mary Beard's *The Rise of American Civilization* (1927), these were practical questions. In lieu of maps and portraits, the traditional visual complement of

history books, Jones produced 65 black-and-white woodcut "decorations" for the Beards' 1,651 pages of printed text. Jones no doubt read the manuscript, and he may have consulted with the authors, but he surely knew something already of Charles Beard's ideas about the forces that shaped American history.

Dividing the two volumes of *The Rise* between the "Agricultural Era" and the "Industrial Era," the Beards traced American history from the discoveries of Columbus to the discoveries of the modern Machine Age—and it was the latter discoveries that would illuminate everything else. Close readers saw an allusion to Charles Beard's own work about 40 pages from the close of the second volume. There the authors described how early twentieth-century political scientists (they did not name Beard himself) had abandoned the "verbalism of jurisprudence," had given up crafting "speculative treatises on the logic of an elusive abstraction called 'the state,'" in order to search for "the springs of motive that induced individuals and groups to take part in the governing process and for efficient causes determining the functions of politics" (Beard and Beard 1927, 2:760–61). Beyond Beard's particular account about economic antagonism among the makers of the Constitution, this was the conflict—between the romance of jurisprudence and the realism of history and politics—that chiefly animated his early writings on the Constitution.

Conflict was for the Beards the heart of history and politics. The titles they gave their chapters on the American Revolution highlighted imperial and internal conflicts; their illustrator, in turn, personified them. For the prerevolutionary chapter entitled "The Clash of Metropolis and Colony," Jones depicted two young men with cudgels breaking the windows of a tea merchant's shop. For a chapter on "Independence and Civil Conflict," Jones rendered a sad, solitary soldier—perhaps someone suffering the winter at Valley Forge or caught in the immediate aftermath of the war, a demilitarized man paid in government securities. And for the chapter on the framing and ratification of the Constitution, which the Beards called "Populism and Reaction," Jones gave readers his most unusual "decoration" yet (fig. 1): an image of a man in a wig assisting a woman into a carriage as two artisans look on with frowns of resentment, reflecting perhaps on what Madison called "the various and unequal distribution of property" (Beard and Beard 1927, 1:334).

Here, reduced to simple images, was a complex and uncomfortable story about the American Revolution and the origins of the Constitution. Standing in for "populism" were the protagonists of the Revolution, the men who broke the tea merchant's shop, who fought and won the war—the people. Jones obviously did not aim to depict the specific conflict between realty and personalty of Beard's *Economic Interpretation*. Instead, the artist harnessed the energy of that thesis, illustrating how a postrevolutionary aristocracy of elites (and it is



Figure 1. Wilfred Jones, “decoration” for chapter 7, “Populism and Reaction” (Beard and Beard 1927, 1:297); 6 × 7 centimeters.

especially unfortunate that the first female figure Jones rendered is a representation of “reaction”) had diverted the nation from its revolutionary democratic roots. Here was a past with which current readers could identify. This was a story that did not center on abstractions like liberty and equality, on pamphlet wars, on military heroism or strategy, or on the closed-door compromises of brilliant politicians.

At least one contemporary reader found these pictures troubling. Writing in the first issue of the *New England Quarterly*, Harvard historian Samuel Eliot Morison described the Beards’ books as an example of a new school of history. “To those who have been asking what the ‘new history’ may be,” he wrote, “the answer is, here we have it: an account of the dynamic forces that mould human society, rather than a narrative of the events produced by those forces” (1928, 95). But he expressed dismay about anachronisms in Jones’s images. If “the ‘new history’ must have decorations,” Morison joked, “may not the new historians exercise some control over the decorators?” (98). Morison may have missed the point. As he well knew, practitioners of the “New History”—a phrase coined by Charles Beard’s Columbia colleague and coauthor

James Harvey Robinson (1912)—sought to modernize their craft by drawing more explicit connections between past and present and by displacing traditional military and political history with a more robust interdisciplinary account that incorporated new discoveries from the social sciences. Jones merely visualized these displacements, inviting modern viewers to identify with anger, depression, and resentment in the past.

The life of *Economic Interpretation* over the last century has been a curious one, itself full of conflict. A biography of Beard's book can easily take a chiasmatic form—say, that the book at birth was largely accepted by scholars and rejected by the public and then, by age 50, that its thesis was widely diffused through the public and rejected by scholars. The dissemination and diffusion of Beard's thesis reached its high point in the 1940s and 1950s, in the wake of *The Rise of American Civilization* (Beard and Beard 1927) and in secondary school and college textbooks. Only then, as it achieved orthodoxy, did academic historians begin to work to dismantle it, in the end making it difficult for any professional historian to sign on to the specifics of the divide between farmers and financiers, between debtors and creditors, between holders of real property and of paper wealth, between democrats and aristocrats, as the explanation for the origins and meaning of the Constitution.

Ironically, it was only after the book reached middle age that it exercised its greatest power in helping to shape the historical study of the American Revolution. By the middle of the 1960s, the relentless academic scrutiny of *Economic Interpretation* cleared the way for two divergent post-Beardian paths. Most obviously, the collapse of Beard's thesis created interpretive space for a new school focusing on the ideological origins of American politics, a school that remains well known to students of American political thought through the influential work of the late 1960s by Bernard Bailyn and Gordon S. Wood. But the challenges to Beard also helped spur social historians who began with deep sympathies for his economic interpretation. Staughton Lynd (1967) claimed that he never meant to go "beyond Beard" when he started studying urban artisans, but his research had convinced him that Beard had completely mistaken their politics. Why had they supported the Constitution, joining forces with "elites" like Alexander Hamilton? From questions like that, historians began to tell a new story about the making and the makers of the Constitution. In place of Beard's own focus on elites came a new populist view that, as Alfred F. Young (1988) argued, elites had incorporated the reasoning of ordinary people, even behind closed doors in Philadelphia, into the design of the Constitution.

The new populist and ideological views of the origins of the Constitution developed in the wake of Beard were distant from either of the late nineteenth-century modes of interpretation he hoped to overturn: those of the jurists and

of the evolutionary historians. Beard dismissed the jurist's view as too artificial; the evolutionist's, as not artificial enough. The jurist's idea that the Constitution was the product of the whole people was sentimental nonsense: something to say in Fourth of July orations and Supreme Court opinions but not in history. Beard felt he had a smoking gun in the divided writings of John Marshall; toward the close of *Economic Interpretation*, he juxtaposed Marshall's historical account of the fact that the Constitution was barely ratified by a divided population with Marshall's juristic claim in *McCulloch v. Maryland* that the Constitution was in substance a product of the people. Beard sided with Marshall the historian.

For Beard, the evolutionary alternative to the juristic account was equally unacceptable. The evolutionary view—the idea that “colonial history made the Constitution,” as Andrew McLaughlin, Commager's advisor at the University of Chicago, put it (1905, 275)—treated the state as an organic being, the product of changes independent of particular political actors. For Beard this, again, was nonsense. The state was something made, a work of art, or artifice. And it was necessary to strip away all the rhetoric of growth in law and politics and to follow late nineteenth-century jurists like Rudolph von Jhering, whose *Law as a Means to an End* was first translated into English and published in Boston in 1913. Jhering, Beard told his readers, had advanced the doctrine that “law does not ‘grow,’ but is, in fact, ‘made’” (1913, 13). But Jhering, Beard said, merely elaborated in the late 1870s what Ferdinand Lasalle had already said in 1861. And, before them—after much study—James Madison had come to the same conclusion as the German thinkers.

Beard always claimed that his economic interpretation was not new but itself a throwback—a revolution against the romance of the jurists and the evolutionary historians and a return to a prior realism. An account of economic forces in the making of the Constitution, Beard claimed, could be found in Marshall's *Life of Washington*, written in the first decade of the nineteenth century. And historian and novelist Richard Hildreth had also described economic interests in the making of the Constitution in his midcentury *History of the United States*. But for Beard, the supreme statement, the best evidence, was the tenth *Federalist*.

As Douglas Adair (1951) observed, Beard was the very first analyst to make *Federalist* 10 required reading—although he did so a few years before 1913. Beard first isolated Madison's essay from other numbers of the *Federalist* in his collection of *Readings in American Government and Politics* (1909), anthologizing it under the heading “Philosophy of the American Constitutional System.” (Beard wrote a headnote to his selection, which he glossed thus: “The Constitution a compromise between democracy and aristocracy”; 49.) Here Madison's essay constituted part of a set of documents designed for use with

Beard's narrative textbook *American Government and Politics* (1910), a volume that unapologetically praised the genius of the framers. In *Economic Interpretation*, Beard described *Federalist* 10 as "a masterly statement of the theory of economic determinism in politics" (1913, 15), suggesting that anyone who thought economic determinism was a "European importation" would have to acknowledge "that one of the earliest, and certainly one of the clearest, statements of it came from a profound student of politics who sat in the Convention that framed our fundamental law" (16). In *The Rise of American Civilization*, the Beards again held this paper up as the key to the Constitution (Beard and Beard 1927, 1:333–35). Beard reveled in what he took to be Madison's realism, his account of interest group politics as what we talk about when we talk about politics.

But what did Beard mean by "politics"? The first thing Beard noted in a 1908 lecture entitled "Politics" was that its meaning and study had undergone a dramatic shift in only a quarter century. It was now ultimately a study of people and forces more than of abstractions like liberty or the state. In taking the turn, political scientists had radically expanded what counted as their field of study. It would no longer do to tie politics strictly to law or to delimit the range of what constitutes a political act to the legal domain: "It is apparent," Beard explained, "that the jural test of what constitutes a political action draws a dividing line where none exists in fact, and consequently any study of government that neglects the disciplines of history, economics, and sociology will lack in reality what it gains in precision" (1908, 6). The adjective "political" now floated freely, as much a product of what modern political scientists chose to study as a discernible and delimited sphere of human activity.

But this was not the first time in American history that the understanding of "what constitutes a political act" had been transformed, expanded, or upended. The period Beard wrote about also witnessed a dramatic shift in the use and meaning of the adjective. During this time, as cultural historian Leora Auslander (2009) and others have recently argued, ordinary people increasingly came to see their everyday lives—their consumption patterns, the way they interacted with family members and neighbors, the organization of their society—in political terms. The term "political" itself suddenly exploded during the age of the American Revolution (fig. 2), appearing nearly 20 times as frequently in the newspapers of the 1780s as in the previous decade (from 4,369 articles to 85,916, during a period when the number of papers merely doubled; Slauter 2010, 337). Printers did not simply set the word in type more frequently than they ever had before; the word now came to mean something new. People engaged in political acts when they bought or abstained from certain goods or objects, as well as when they voted, engaged in protests, or served their country. Revolutionaries now employed the label "political" to describe social or eco-

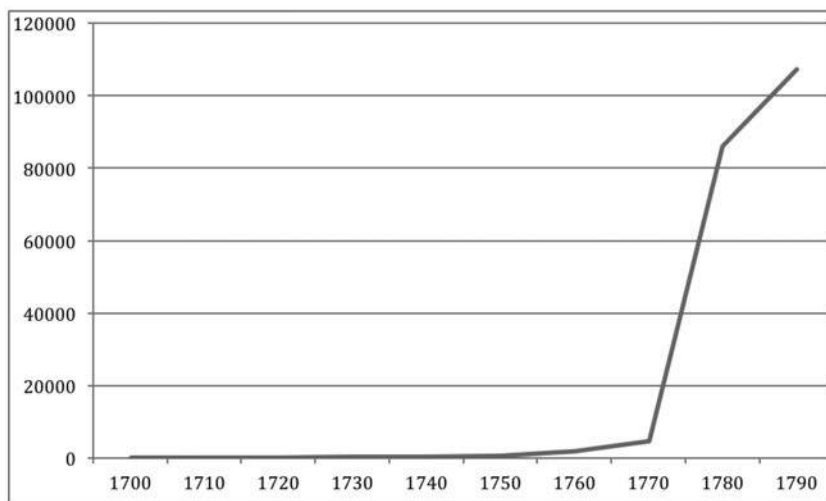


Figure 2. Number of articles in American newspapers using the word “political,” by decade (1700–1799).

nomic relationships that had seemed natural or inevitable before the Revolution. They had brought about a conceptual revolution.

In the century since Beard’s book, and most dramatically in the wake of the 1960s, the idea of “what constitutes a political action” has ballooned far beyond the expanded scope that he recommended or practiced. Beard always maintained that he was interpreting the Constitution from a perspective that would have been recognizable to the people who wrote it or first read it. His attraction to the late eighteenth century was primarily an attraction to what he took to be its realism, most fully embodied in Madison’s political thought. But that attraction may have been predicated on a sympathy between his own expanded understanding of politics and the expansion of the concept during the American Revolution. Although they might not have chosen to depict their Revolution in the ways that Beard or his illustrator did, American revolutionaries would surely have recognized angry artisans, sad soldiers, and conspicuous consumers as political actors. That we do so now is a legacy of both Beard and the conflicts he aroused, especially among the most sympathetic of his readers.

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