

¹ The phrase is taken from Beard's summary of the "general conclusions" of both the 1913 and 1915 books in *Economic Origins of Jeffersonian Democracy* (New York, 1915), pp. 464-467. The following pages focus on these general and Jeffersonians in the 1790's, was held to be also the root of the and Antifederalists in 1787-1788 and the conflict of Hamiltonians previously presented as the basis of both the conflict of Federalists War. The "conflict between capitalistic and agrarian interests,"¹ wife extended his hypothesis to include the origins of the Civil In *The Rise of American Civilization* (1927), Beard and his the formation of the Constitution and the early Republic. has been at issue in this debate is much more than an appraisal of and *Economic Origins of Jeffersonian Democracy* (1915). What *Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (1913) been engaged in dubious battle with Charles Beard's *An Economic* For more than half a century now, historians have

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“Second American Revolution” of 1861-1865. Hence the controversy over Beard involves our assessment of the entire period between the Revolution and the Civil War.

Moreover, Beard offers the most substantial American version to date of an economic approach to history in general. The specter of Marx has haunted historians’ responses to Beard. Although Beard was careful (as he observed in introducing a 1935 reprinting) to call his 1913 work *an* economic interpretation, not “the” economic interpretation, or “the only” interpretation possible to thought,”² one of Beard’s prominent critics asserted in his rebuttal that “eco-

conclusions rather than on the detailed argument of each of Beard’s two books. “It is established upon a statistical basis,” Beard concluded, that the Constitution of the United States was the product of a conflict between capitalistic and agrarian interests. The support for the adoption of the Constitution came principally from the cities and regions where the commercial, financial, manufacturing, and speculative interests were concentrated, and the bulk of the opposition came from the small farming and debtor classes, particularly those back from the sea board. . . .

The general conclusions then asserted that the same conflict was the basis of party strife in the 1790’s:

The men who framed the Constitution and were instrumental in securing its ratification constituted the dominant group in the new government formed under it, and their material measures were all directed to the benefit of the capitalistic interests—i.e., were consciously designed to augment the fluid capital in the hands of security holders and bank stock owners and thus to increase manufacturing, commerce, building, and land values, the last incidentally, except for speculative purposes in the West. The bulk of the party which supported these measures was drawn from the former advocates of the Constitution.

The spokesmen of the Federalist and Republican parties, Hamilton and Jefferson, were respectively the spokesmen of capitalistic and agrarian interests. . . .

The general conclusions characterized Jeffersonian Democracy as “the possession of the federal government by the agrarian masses led by an aristocracy of slave-owning planters.” They did not resolve Beard’s lack of clarity as to whether the slave-owning planters had supported the Constitution or, together with the “backwoods agrarians,” had opposed it.

² Charles A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (New York, 1935), p. viii.

Since those who have sought to revise Beard have not systematically explored alternative economic interpretations, the historian finds himself forced to choose between Beard's inadequate economic interpretation and a variety of eclectic treatments which agree only in filiopticistic admiration for the founding fathers.

These overtones are the more apparent when it is recalled that sustained criticism of Beard's work is largely a product of the Cold War years.⁴ At a time when the politics of dead center and an end to ideology prevailed in American society at large, historians rather suddenly discovered that Americans had always shared a consensus about fundamentals that enabled them pragmatically to muddle through. Thus Richard Hofstadter, who concluded one book in 1948 with the warning that "it would be fatal to rest content" with Franklin Roosevelt's

belief in personal benevolence, personal arrangements, the sufficiency of good intentions and month-to-month improvisation, without trying to achieve a more inclusive and systematic conception of what is happening in the world,

wrote another in 1955 which praised the New Deal's "opportunism" and repudiation of "the European world of ideology."⁵ Thus Daniel Boorstin, who in *The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson*

³ Forrest McDonald, *We The People: The Economic Origins of the Constitution* (Chicago, 1958), p. vii.

⁴ The two book-length critiques of Beard's *Economic Interpretation* were Robert E. Brown, *Charles Beard and the Constitution: A Critical Analysis of "An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States"* (Princeton, 1956) and McDonald's *We The People* (1958).

⁵ Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York, 1948), p. 347, and *The Age of Reform from Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York, 1955), pp. 314-326. In *The American Political Tradition*, Hofstadter referred to Beard's "great study" on the Constitution as the "high point" of "modern critical scholarship," while in "Beard and the Constitution: The History of an Idea," *American Quarterly*, II (1950), 195-213, he debunked it as an expression of Progressive debunking.

(1948) found in that ideology the germ of a dangerous pragmatism, presented in 1953 the view that the American Revolution's salutary undogmatic character anticipated "the genius of American politics."⁶ Thus Louis Hartz, author in 1940 of an article on "Seth Luther: The Story of a Working Class Rebel," argued in an article of 1952 that "the central course of our political thought has betrayed an unconquerable pragmatism" and expanded this thesis in his influential *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955).⁷ Beard's critics charge him with selecting facts favorable to his thesis and with interpreting where he claimed to narrate. They are vulnerable on the same score. Robert Brown, for example, repeatedly cites John Adams in contending that New England society was democratic even before the Revolution;⁸ but Brown (as Samuel Brockunier points out) does not quote John Adams' statement that the state of Connecticut has always been governed by an aristocracy, more decisively than the empire of Great Britain is. Half a dozen, or at most a dozen families, have controlled that country when a colony, as well as since it has been a state.⁹

Cecilia Kenyon, who has effectively criticized Beard's assumption that Antifederalism was democratic, reveals her own assumptions in an essay called "Where Paine Went Wrong." Paine (she says)

⁶ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1948), pp. 237-248, and *The Genius of American Politics* (Chicago, 1953), p. 68 et passim.

⁷ Louis Hartz, "Seth Luther: The Story of a Working Class Rebel," *New England Quarterly*, XIII (1940): "American Political Thought and the American Revolution," *American Political Science Review*, XLVI (1952), 326; *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York, 1955).

⁸ Robert E. Brown, *Middle-Class Democracy and the Revolution in Massachusetts, 1691-1780* (Ithaca, N. Y.; 1955), and *Reinterpretation of the Formation of the American Constitution* (Boston, 1963).

⁹ S. Hugh Brockunier, Foreword to Richard J. Purcell, *Connecticut in Transition: 1775-1818*, second edition (Middletown, Conn.; 1963), p. x.

In 1959 when I began the studies collected in these pages, my own initial attitude toward the Progressive his-toriography of Frederick Jackson Turner, Charles Beard, Carl Becker and Vernon Parrington, was uncritical. I did not expect to be driven beyond Beard, to lay greater stress than he did upon city

¹⁰ Cecilia Kenyon, "Where Paine Went Wrong," *American Political Science Review*, XLV (1951), 1094, 1095, 1098, and "Men of Little Faith: The Anti-Federalists on the Nature of Representative Government," *William And Mary Quarterly*, third series, XII (1955), 3-43.

¹¹ Forrest McDonald, *E Pluribus Unum: The Formation of the American Republic*, 1776-1790 (Boston, 1965), pp. 235-236.

I.

Sometimes in the course of human events, as the Declaration of Independence had proclaimed, it becomes necessary for people to dis-solve political bands. . . . The American Revolution was only a begin-ning in teaching men the process, but once it was done—once the vulgar overstepped the bonds of propriety and got away with it—there was no logical stopping place. *Common Sense* led unerringly to Valmy, and Valmy to Napoleon, and Napoleon to the Revolution of 1830, and that to the Revolutions of 1848, and those to the Paris Commune of 1871, and that to the Bolshevik Revolution, and that to the African and Asian Revolutions in Expectations, and those to eternity.¹¹

Lucky America, McDonald concluded, had Founding Fathers who were able to check the popular revolutionary forces they had unleashed.

was "incurably naive"; he espoused an "idealized conception" rather than observing "historical actuality"; he failed to recognize that the proper task of the Founding Fathers was to achieve "at least a moderate measure of justice in a society ruled by men who would always and unavoidably be influenced by private and some-times selfish interests"; in a word he was "essentially alien."¹⁰ The process of reading Paine and Paine's ideas out of the American tradition culminated in Forrest McDonald's treatment of the pe-riod in *E Pluribus Unum*:

artisans, upon slavery, upon the role of ideas. These themes were imposed, one at a time, by the subject matter itself.

Beginning with the desire to defend Beard and the Progressive historians, I selected a microcosm in which class conflict was apparent: one of the Hudson River counties where tenant farmers in 1776 still enjoyed leases requiring grain to be ground at the lord's mill, the annual payment of certain "fat hens," and the yearly performance of work on the lord's land with cart and team. My hypothesis was that scrutiny of three events—the 1766 tenant rebellion, the confiscation of more than 200,000 acres from Loyalist landlords during the Revolution, and the division of the county in 1787-1788 over whether to ratify the United States Constitution—would demonstrate a continuity of protest in the heavily-tenanted southern and southeastern parts of the country. And so it proved, at least to my own satisfaction. Dutchess County appeared to bear out Carl Becker's thesis that a struggle over "who should rule at home" began before the war for independence and continued when the war was over. (See Essay 2).

To be sure, the political leaders who articulated Dutchess discontent were hardly social revolutionaries: they were rising "new men" who sought to compete with the great landed families for leadership of the Revolution. No matter, I argued that representatives need not be typical of the constituencies that elect them. I illustrated the point by studies showing that in the English Civil War, despite the underlying conflict of constituencies, leaders of both camps in the Long Parliament had similar socio-economic backgrounds.

But then difficulties arose. In southern Dutchess the landlords were Loyalist (the largest, Beverly Robinson, was an accomplice of Benedict Arnold) and the tenants were Whigs. In neighboring Albany County, however, the landlords were patriot Livingstons, and the tenants rose in support of British troops coming down from Canada in 1777. (See Essay 3). Both groups of tenants rioted and rebelled, but which side they supported evidently depended,

not on any Whig or Tory ideology of their own, but on the political outlook of their landlords. Here was no simple correlation between poverty and patriotism, as Beard and Becker often seemed to suggest.

A look at the urban poor made the Progressive view still less plausible. The barest attempt to trace the continuity of working-men's organizations and attitudes during the Revolutionary era must at once encounter a massive paradox in the position of Progressive historians. The paradox is this: If (as Becker held) the city workers were the most militantly revolutionary group in the years 1763-1776, and if (as Beard maintained) the United States Constitution was a counter-revolutionary coup d'état, how is it that the city workers all over America overwhelmingly and enthusiastically supported the United States Constitution? If Becker was correct in believing that "the fear of British oppression was transformed into the fear of oppression by the national government,"¹² surely the mechanics, foremost in the movement for independence, should have shared the Antifederalist fear of centralization? But they did not. In Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Charleston, as well as in New York City, the workers were Federalist. In New York City the case is particularly clear, because universal manhood suffrage and the secret ballot obtained in the election of delegates to the state ratifying convention, yet the Federalist ticket was elected twenty to one. (Essays 4, 5).

Nothing revealed in the course of the New York case study disproved the thesis that a domestic struggle for power accompanied the War for Independence. On the contrary, provided that struggle was understood as a contest for class dominance rather than discrete pecuniary gains, New York spectacularly exemplified it. The brilliant New York conservatives grouped around the families of Livingston and Schuyler functioned throughout the Revolution as something very similar to an "executive committee of the ruling

¹² Carl L. Becker, *The History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1760-1776* (Madison, 1909), p. 275.

class," consciously distributing themselves between state and national politics, deliberately implementing the appointment of Robert Morris as Financier and the movement for the Constitution thereafter. (See Essay 5). Yet Beard's dichotomy of "personality" and "reality" led him to cast the Hudson Valley landlords as Anti-federalists, and to dismiss the Constitution's artisan supporters as "politically non-existent."¹³

I digested these unforeseen discoveries while beginning my first teaching job, at a Negro women's college. Living as we did on the campus of a Negro college, associating from day to day almost entirely with Negroes, and so insensibly absorbing something of what it means to be born into the Afro-American sub-culture, I became more conscious of the degree to which American historyography simply leaves the Negro out. One day, rereading Turner's essay on the significance of the frontier, my eye was caught by a sentence: "when American history comes to be rightly viewed it will be seen that the slavery question is an incident."¹⁴ The idea suggested itself that Turner and Beard, concerned lest the conflict of Eastern capitalist and Western farmer be obscured by an outdated rhetoric of hostility between North and South, had minimized the role of slavery in American history before the Civil War. With this in mind I read through, first, the writing of Turner and Beard, and second, the letters of the Continental Congress and records of the 1787 Convention. The neglect of slavery in the former, the centrality of slavery in the latter, struck me as equally apparent. (Essays 6, 7).

Where did this leave one's understanding of the Revolution and the Constitution? Beard had interpreted the Constitution as a vic-

¹³ As to the artisans, see Beard, *An Economic Interpretation*, pp. 24-26. In the 1935 reprinting of his book, Beard conceded that he had wrongly placed the landed aristocracy of New York among the Antifederalists (*ibid.*, pp. xv-xvi).

¹⁴ *The Early Writings of Frederick Jackson Turner*, ed. Everett E. Edwards and Fulmer Mood (Madison, 1938), p. 213.

tory for mobile capital over capital invested in agricultural production. I began to suspect that, while small freeholders of the North and West were indeed unrepresented at Philadelphia, the Constitution was a compromise between capitalists like Robert Morris and the particular kind of farmers who owned Hudson River manors and southern plantations. I found this rough sense of what had happened confirmed by an epigram of Georges Lefebvre:

In England, after the revolutions of the seventeenth century, gentlemen and bourgeois joined to share power with the king; in the United States they dispensed with the monarch by common agreement . . .¹⁵

Attempting to examine in detail what took place at the Convention, I became intrigued with the coincidence that the Constitution's most dramatic concession to slavery, the so-called three-fifths compromise, occurred almost on the same day that the Continental Congress, meeting ninety miles away in New York, banned slavery from the Northwest Territory. Further scrutiny suggested that the two decisions had not seemed contradictory to contemporaries. Both were parts of a larger accommodation between the governing classes of North and South which could be termed "the compromise of 1787." (Essay 8).

It seemed to follow that the conflict between Jefferson and Hamilton represented, not (as Beard argued in his *Economic Origins of Jeffersonian Democracy*) a continuation of the conflict between Federalist and Antifederalist, but the break-up of the coalition which had made the Revolution and the Constitution. Far from originating as the defender of all agrarians, Jefferson's party was initially Southern in leadership and support. I developed the thesis that the Progressive historians' dichotomy between capitalist and farmer followed Jefferson's misreading of the 1790's as a contest between corrupt speculators and honest yeomen. The study of Dutchess Antifederalism had led me to the polemical manuscripts

¹⁵ Georges Lefebvre, *The French Revolution from Its Origins to 1793*, tr. Elizabeth M. Evanson (London and New York, 1962), p. xviii.

Beard posited an essentially unchanging conflict throughout American history between capitalists and farmers. But the evidence is overwhelming that internal conflict was a secondary

¹⁶ This passage is quoted from Essay 10, below, p. 247.

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of Albany Antifederalist Abraham Yates (see Essay 9); and as I worked on Yates's history of the movement for the Constitution and Jefferson's analysis of the 1790's I began to see Beard's history as the product of a radical tradition which went back, through Populism, to these men and beyond. When Turner compared the region of Populist strength a century later to the areas which went Antifederalist in 1787-1788, and Beard termed the period of Shays' Rebellion "Populism and Reaction," this vision of our history was "a latterday variant of the Jeffersonian mythos which saw nature's nobleman, the yeoman farmer, fleeced and oppressed by the paper speculators of the cities."¹⁶ From Jefferson, too, and not from the muckraking style of the Progressive era alone, came the shallow economic interpretation that conceptualized opponents as conspirators interested only in personal power and profit. Beard's history was Jeffersonian history. Seeking to demythologize Jeffersonian Democracy in a spirit of hard-headed Hamiltonian realism, Beard nevertheless failed to free himself from Jefferson's most characteristic habits of thought. In contrast, the picture presented in the following pages has been stimulated by two recent upheavals: the American civil rights movement, which suggested a fresh look at the importance of slavery in the Revolutionary era; and the worldwide colonial independence movement, which seemed to offer a new model for conceptualizing the Revolution and its relation to the Civil War. The resulting hypothesis seeks to incorporate what both the Beardian and anti-Beardian arguments have solidly established, while attempting to surmount what each argument has been unable to explain.