Charles Beard, Connecticut Farmer

Introduction

In the course of one of their frequent chats about history and historians Charles Beard, a long time resident of New Milford, observed to his son-in-law Alfred Vagts that most historians had been products of the prosperous upper class. Few had been born into blue collar families, and even fewer had rural origins, noted the author of almost fifty books on American history. Professor Vagts, a specialist in diplomatic and military history, promised Beard that sometime in the future he would investigate this odd phenomenon. Many years later in retirement from teaching and living in Sherman, Connecticut Professor Vagts had an opportunity to examine the career lines of a number of historians, American and European, who were farm born in order to assess the impact of their rural background on their view of the past. When Professor Vagts visited Western Connecticut State College in February, 1976 as the guest of the History Club and Phi Alpha Theta to participate in the "Conversations with Historians" program he presented his thoughts on what he termed "Historicus Rusticus" for the first time. One portion of his fascinating lecture dealt with Vagts' personal reminiscences of Charles Beard, a Hoosier farm boy transplanted to a dairy farm-on which he did not live- overlooking the Housatonic River. This portrait of Beard, unusual because it deals less with the public and professional accomplishments of the man than with his life-long interest in agriculture, is published in Clio with the gracious permission of Professor Vagts.

Charles Beard was born into a family with an historical consciousness and interest, aware of their English and Quaker descent, their settling and resettling, from Nantucket to North Carolina and on to Indiana. His grandfather had assembled a small library from which a copy of Defoe's "History of the Devil" survives in the family. Also read was Abbott's life of Napoleon, with the Corsican serving as a foil for traditional American anti-Britishism. One of the few regrets Beard senior felt over his son's Oxford education was that he would never take the time and trouble to find out whether the Beards were descended from that fervent Puritan who was Cromwell's preceptor, Dr. Thomas Beard.

Beard was born on a small farm, from which he was taken to a larger one in Spiceland, a Quaker village with an Academy. But though Beard early learned to do chores--there is a photograph of him showing Raymond Moley how to swing a scythe--his father had not been strictly a farmer but had also been a contractor and land speculator and then became a bank president. This affluence enabled him to buy his sons a printing press and small newspaper and send them to college; he could afford to let his son go abroad to study in Oxford, after graduation from DePauw University.

Though he was not exactly a "farm boy," and certainly not a poor one, Beard was certainly rural in his background. He had not seen a great city until he went to college; his interest in municipal problems was aroused in Chicago's Hull House and then in his months of lecturing in England's Northern cities, Manchester and Liverpool. While in many respects remaining a secularized rural Quaker, Quakerdom could not convey oratory, nor could the other "grande muelte", farmerdom. This Beard learned accidentally. In the rather typical "running away from the farm" to the cities,[1] Beard after having observed the miseries in the midst of which Chicago's Hull House had been placed, in a sort of evangelism, believed that the urban, rather than the rural, proletariat deserved his more immediate interest, his first book coming to deal with "The Industrial Revolution" (London 1901).

Whether in Beard's subsequent writings there was more Socialistic historical materialism--there was or is also a bourgeois historical materialism like that of Madison which Beard liked to invoke--or more farmer, earthy materialism, no less historical, cannot be decided here. The former was more nearly coincidental with his interest in workers' education ever since the founding of Ruskin Hall and his interest in the Rand School, the latter combined with his farming interest, laborer and farmer in the end fated together. "Can farmers and working men do anything in the presence of the steel-helmeted giant of modern Business?" he would ask his colleague in history teaching and farming, William Dodd in 1928. "I have my doubts, alas!"[2] He was in doubt no less about the possibilities of Ruskin's imperative: "Land to those who can use it!" (Fors Clavigera), about farm proprietorship in regions becoming so very city-dominated as Connecticut.

He experienced his return to the farm and the farming interest--never sentimental, as in Brahms' nostalgic Lied: "O, wuesst' ich doch den Weg züruck, Den holden Weg ins Kinderland"--never when he was heading the "Institute for Municipal Research", never even in the years that some would call his Marxist period sharing Karl Marx's views on "the idiocy of rural life", or "the stupid peasant idyl",[3] taking up rural interest, theoretically and practically, discussing in such public forums as the Williamstown Institute of Politics in 1926, and there together with Henry Wallace, agrarian problems, eventually, largely from the proceeds of his writings, acquiring two modest-sized Connecticut dairy farms, of some 250 acres each, &. this following upon his return from a sojourn in Yugoslavia. They were run on the basis of the fairest share-cropping, the monthly net, for the most part derived from the "milk check", divided equally between farmer and owner, the latter keeping the books, inspecting the farm and the herd, half owned by the farmer, half by Beard, once or twice a week for some afternoon hours.

This stay abroad,meant for a survey of Yugoslav government and administration, brought Beard who in and around Oxford had known Keir Hardie and Ramsay Macdonald, into the ambience of what was called at the time the "Green Internationale", that never formally constituted International. On the way to Belgrade he met in Berlin and was much impressed and perhaps guided by Max Sering, the doyen of German, if not all agriculturalists, at the time. In the Balkan capital where the political strife was violent and would soon erupt into shooting and dictatorship, the encounter most impressive and in the end harrowing was with that Croatian peasant leader Stjepan Radic (1871-1928)[4] who handed to Beard, as a sort of his political testament, the manuscript of his autobiography, published by Beard after his assassination.[5] In Yugoslavia Beard had encountered agriculture in its most un-American, unspacious form, with parcellization etc. Unforgettable to him the observation of a tobacco grower having his existence threatened if not ruined by the planting of powerline pylons in his tiny field.[6]

Beard's farming undertaking surprised, not to say dumbfounded, none as much as some of his fellow historians,whom in turn he would call "asphalt flowers", the German peasants' terms for city folk to which his son-in-law had introduced him. The late Richard Hofstadter in his treatment of "The Progressive Historians" (1968), in surprisingly unresearched writing with utterly unrealistic data on Beard's milk production, would have Beard live on and of the farm after, as was assumed, he had lost heavily in his stock investments in 1929. The farmers of Western Connecticut knew better. As their conditions worsened in the great Depression and they became finally inclined to consider a milk strike, a crowd of them came to the Beard New Milford residence, in a mood that reminded the writer only too much if not of the peasant wars of the ugly demonstrations of the suffering Schleswig-Holstein peasants against the Weimar government.[7] Beard dissuaded them from all such measures as blocking the milk trucks on the way to the cities and dumping the

milk, telling them that given the ample supplies available from sources outside the State, a strike was futile (and as hopeless as any earlier peasant war had proved as the European historian would recall). What he instead proposed was a milk law for Connecticut with features that gave the milk producers a price boost by keeping outside production away, a measure of Hamiltonian protectionism rather than Jeffersonian laissez faire. For this proposal Beard won the approval of Governor Wilbur Cross, another scholar in politics, and the State Legislature passed a bill largely written by Beard with whom Governor Cross would consult when naming milk commissioners.[8] In its defense, for its explanation Beard then went on the hustings, circuit riding so to speak, again as he had done when he had travelled through the North of England for the purposes of the extension courses provided by Ruskin College. The European observer who went along was in turn reminded of the Narodniki in their "going among the people", unpractical enough in Russia, so much so that some of them the peasants would slay them. Not Beard. When I asked an old farmer whether he understood him, he would answer: "O, I trust the perfesser". It was like the Napoleonic veteran when hearing some highflown imperial oratory reassuring himself and others: "Mais c'est l'Empereur qui l'a dit".

Beard kept on farming himself,[9] after World War selling one of his two holdings. (For one reason: Mary Beard would not have the man on the farm who beat up his wife.) They were kept laboratory-like. When gentleman-farmers in the vicinity like J.C. Penny went in for "fancy stock", Beard's foremost consideration was of the best and cheapest milkers, he himself owning half of the stock. He watched land prices as they began to climb as real estate, in Connecticut due to the vicinity of New York. When asked how in monetary terms his investment turned out, he mentioned a 2% to 3% interest.

In various ways Beard grew so to speak "land-bound"--while some of his critics would call him hidebound--he would explain to the newcomer to America what hidebound meant: a cattle condition--as another expression of the respect for realities, an un-Romanticism he shared with most of the land-born historians. He warned against the uncritical introduction of Ideengeschichte,[10] blocking in effect for some twenty years by his report to an interested publisher the translation of one of the foremost pieces of the history of ideas, Friedrich Meinecke's "Idee der Staatsraison". Psychohistory can never claim him as a forerunner. On the mentioning of Freud, Beard's face would grow red: Historians in no way had the full data of the analyst sitting by the side or at the head of the couch.[11] Sex was largely, as on the farm, biological process and the complications could only have been invented by such apartment house dwellers as Siegmund Freud. (Is there yet a rural-born psychologist?) There was in Beard's realism none of the Verdrängung or sublimation--which of the two more?--that had caught a Ranke, in so far heir of the Romantics,[12] Verdrängung that Marxism managed by speaking of "the idiocy" of rural life which stood in the way of class consciousness. It was not from any historical materialism of

the Marxian kind as has often been suspected or claimed that Beard would hold, as in his "last word", the proverbial kind, that "economics explains the mostest".

There was in Beard's life much fulfillment of "Die Bestimmung des Gelehrten", the "designation of the learned man" as Fichte,[13] the most rural-born of all philosophers, had outlined it in 1794: "The learned man, the scholar is only insofar a scholar as he is considered as such by society. . . His knowledge acquired for society he must now really apply for the use of society; he must bring man to the feeling of his true needs. . . But how can and must he, however, spread his knowledge?" As to this Beard knew and used the media of his time.

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Footnotes

[1]At the outbreak of the Spanish-American War Beard volunteered but like so many was turned down, there being more than the Army could make use of. The episode might provide the Kolko's and their ilk with the suspicion that this was an indication of the farmers' urge for markets. Their Roots of American Foreign Policy. New York 1972.

[2]Beard to Dodd, May 12, 1928. Dodd Papers, Library of Congress.

[3]Arnold Knünzli, Karl Marx, Eine Psychographie. Vienna, Zurich, Frankfurt 1966, 525.

[4]Radic was in his writing an almost-historian. After overcoming the typical obstacles in the way of a peasant boy's education, he had studied at the Paris Ecole des Sciences Politiques, abroad like earlier Slavs had at Jena under Luden, like them protesting against "colonization" of which some of the Slav peoples were still victim, in his "Moderna Kolonizacijn i Slavin" (Zagreb 1904). To him, the ideal peaceful state would be one in which the peasantry would have the dominant, if not controlling role. The domineering role that the Serbs assumed in the new Kingdom after 1918 seemed to him imperialist in its nature. For R. see the articles in Encyclopedia of Social Sciences (XIII, 51) and Slavonic Encyclopedia, 1068 f.

[5]Current History XXIX (1928-29), 82 ff.

[6]The author, fresh from Europe, was present when Beard went along the boundary of one of the newly bought farms with the former owner. When coming to a steep hillside, Beard would ask how far up the boundary ran here. Old Mr. Darling: "Fur enuff, perfesser".

[7]It reminded him no less that the spokesmen of the German peasant wars had been non-peasants, such as the "Piper of Niklashausen" and the fiery preacher Thomas Münzer.

[8]Alfred Vagts Diary, May 18, 1935.

[9]At one time, in 1939, Beard considered, whether under William Dodd's influence or not, buying a South Carolina plantation on which to live, at least during the winter months, but refrained when reminded that he would have to assume responsibility of a considerable number of Negro "retainers", a responsibility Mary Beard was more ready to take on than her husband. Alfred Vagts Diary, Aiken, S.C., March 14, 1939.

[10]We know of only one farm-born historian of ideas, Christoph Steding, the author of "Das Reich und die Krankheit der europaischen Kultur" (Hamburg 1938). He was the Wunderkind of Nazi historiography, dying young. See the writer's review in Journal of Modern History XIII (1941), 267 ff., to whom Steding appeared a bad case of the "paysan perverti", to use a de Sade title.

[11]What greatly contributed to Beard's criticism was his friendship with a practicing psychiatrist, Dr. Frederick Peterson, who told him about his Wall Street patients, their number regularly increasing in crisis times when he, a foremost practitioner of "occupational therapy", a psychiatric version of the "work ethos", would set them to what was more "real work". Psychohistorians might well contemplate this passage from Lecky: "Had the Irish peasants been less chaste, they would have been more prosperous". A History of European Morals, 1877 ed. I, i, 146.

[12]"Only then does one live when one does not know of oneself. . . . The right joy is to forget oneself, to surrender,. . . The ideal of historical education would be if the subject could make himself the organ of the subject, i.e., of science itself, without being hindered by the natural or accidental limitations of human existence, to recognize and present the full truth." However, the personal limitations on the historian's striving for objectivity hinder to obtain fully his aim. On one early occasion in his career Ranke noted that "unfortunately historiography needs favors from men, and I myself particularly as I am on my way." His Samtliche Werke LIII/IV, 167 f., 216, 404 f.; XV, 103.

[13]At the time of writing of "National Interest" the writer persuaded Beard to read Fichte's "Geschlossener Handelsstaat" (1800) a very autarchical proposal.