



A REVIEWER'S NOTEBOOK

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THE LATE Charles A. Beard was a complex and often contradictory character. While he did not invent the "economic interpretation" of history, he gave it its first great impetus in America by writing his *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*. That was back in 1913, the lyric year when social change was very much in the air. Two generations of historians were to take their cue from Beard's book, but in the meantime Beard himself went on to other interests. When totalitarianism appeared on the scene in Europe, he leaped eloquently to the defense of the Founding Fathers. He wrote a book to extol the checks and balances that had been built into the American system at Philadelphia in 1787, and he paid his respects to the Federalist Papers by calling them "enduring." Although he had called the Constitution an "economic document," it was quite evident that Beard ultimately came to regard it as a lot more than that.

Nevertheless, even though the moral aspects of history bulked

larger and larger in his eyes as he grew older, Beard never specifically repudiated his early work. And his "disciples" still went about their business of scoffing at the fifty-five members of the Constitutional Convention for their allegedly overpowering zeal in defending their own narrow economic interests.

The Beardean thesis, stated briefly, was that the Constitution was written by a group of conspirators who wished to put limits on democracy in order to defend their own property interests in "personalty," which is the word Beard used to cover money, public securities, manufacturing, shipping, and speculative western lands. According to Beard, the laborer, the small farmer, and the back country debtor had little voice in the making of the Constitution. Nor did they play any conspicuous part in the ratifying conventions of the eleven states which accepted the reasoning and the handiwork of the Founders.

This "personalty" interpretation of the Constitution was contested by some of the original re-

viewers of the Beard book. But in 1913 and 1914 dissenters from the Beard thesis were looked upon as prejudiced Tories. Moreover, they could not controvert Beard out of any deep researches of their own, for it was quite obvious that they had not looked into any of the sources which Beard appeared to have mastered.

SINCE NOBODY took the trouble to look things up, virtually every scholar in the land came to accept Beard's evidence as true. It was not until an associate professor of history at Michigan State University, Robert E. Brown, commenced to poke about in the Massachusetts town records of the late eighteenth century that anyone suspected Beard had misused his evidence. Brown discovered that nobody had written the truth about the so-called "debtor farmers" who supported Shays' Rebellion. In 1787 there was no large disfranchised "mass" in Massachusetts. The freehold voting qualifications were so liberal that practically every adult male could vote. The so-called Shaysites and their sympathizers completely controlled the government of Massachusetts after the election of 1787, yet they did not recall the Massachusetts delegates to the Constitutional Convention. Furthermore, they later ratified the

Constitution, on the ground that it was to practically everyone's interest to do so.

Putting two and two together, Professor Brown began to suspect that if small farmers and debtors had approved the Constitution in Massachusetts, maybe the same thing had happened in other states. Accordingly, he set himself the task of checking all of Beard's "evidence" that the Constitution was the product of "personalty," not of the small freeholder.

The result of Professor Brown's completed labors is a stiff and prickly work called *Charles Beard and the Constitution: A Critical Analysis of "An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution"* (Princeton University Press, \$3.50). Checking Beard, delegate by delegate, Brown discloses that if any economic interest predominated at Philadelphia in 1787, it was that of the landed proprietor, both small and large. The public securities held by the delegates were negligible in comparison with the good fat acres. "Realty" was the big thing, not "personalty." And even where men did own "personalty," they frequently owned even more "realty."

George Washington, to pick one prominent example, owned 45,000 acres of land in 1799 in addition to real estate in Washington, Al-

exandria, Winchester, and Bath. His real estate in that year was worth \$266,819; his "personalty" was worth only \$25,212. Thus Washington had over 90 per cent of his wealth invested in realty and less than 10 per cent in personalty. True, these figures might have to be reduced in order to arrive at Washington's holdings for 1787, which was twelve years earlier. But even so, it is virtually certain that personalty was never a prime thing in Washington's estate.

A critic might interrupt at this juncture to argue that since real estate is "economic," then a Constitution that was written by holders of real estate must *ipso facto* be an "economic document." But Beard didn't rest his "economic interpretation" on anything that could be stretched to include all property owners, the small and middling as well as the great. If he had, he would have been compelled to admit that Jefferson, not Hamilton, prevailed in 1787. He would also have had to admit that the "masses" made the Constitution, for the "masses," in 1787, owned land.

WHERE BEARD went wrong in the first instance, according to Professor Brown, was in his assumption that the property qualification for voting in 1787 was essen-

tially "undemocratic." In a frontier country, where land was to be had on the easiest of terms, land ownership was certainly no badge of aristocracy. Anybody could get land — and practically everybody did. As more than one delegate to the Constitutional Convention observed, at least 90 per cent of the adult white males in America were freeholders and hence voters. Moreover, in some places the artisans and mechanics also had the vote. The delegates to the Convention kept the 90 per cent rigorously in mind when they were busy figuring out a system of checks and balances that would appeal to the ratifying conventions in the predominantly agrarian states.

Far from being an "aristocratic" or "antidemocratic" document, the Constitution was a work of common sense that kept the needs of the common man very much in the foreground. A good thesis could be written to prove that the Constitution was rather consciously designed to form a bulwark for a middle class that would always comprise about 90 per cent of the people. If such a thesis would constitute an "economic interpretation," then there is nothing to be said in derogation of such. Gilbert Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc, champions of the "distributive State," would highly

approve. Karl Marx, of course, would not.

But beyond all "economics," whether of the "reality" or the "personality" brand, the Constitution was designed to form a stable support for the individual's "inalienable" rights. These rights naturally include the right to property, both real and personal. The Constitution is an "economic document" in the sense that it is designed to protect men in the rights of ownership. Such rights are important to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But Beard only came around to this broader view years after he had written his first controversial book.

An International Economy by GUNNAR MYRDAL. New York: Harper & Brothers. 381 pp. \$6.50.

When Gunnar Myrdal was professor of political economy at Stockholm University, he expounded the doctrines of Keynes. When he was Swedish minister of commerce, he did not hesitate to impose government control over exports, imports, and foreign exchange in order to assure "full employment." Now that he is Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe it is his official function to be concerned with the de-

struction of international economic cooperation which is the inevitable outcome of welfare state interference with world trade. His book, *An International Economy*, is a futile attempt to solve the dilemma of contradictions between Mr. Myrdal's past and present ambitions.

He states the problem clearly. The Welfare State, which in Myrdal's terminology is the "integrated" state, "induces international disintegration." (p. 48) It leads to world-wide conflicts of interests because welfare policies of protection, favors, and privileges must discriminate against foreign goods, capital, and labor, thus destroying the world market and using it as a dumping ground for "excess supplies" of cotton, cheese, peanuts, etc., from government warehouses. In short, the Welfare State becomes the economic source of international conflict.

The obvious solution to this dilemma is a return to the free market, and to individual cooperation on the world market. But this solution, which is identical with a return to individual liberty and capitalism, is unhesitatingly rejected by Professor Myrdal. He criticizes it "as not only reactionary but also as ineffective, since it goes against an immutable historical trend." (p. 52) This immut-