

Carl Becker and the Historian as Priest and Prophet

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One of America's most gifted philosopher—historians, in describing the rationalist movement of the eighteenth century in Europe, observed that the intellectuals of that age had merely transferred the ideals and values of the thirteenth century Christian cosmology from a religious to a secular basis and had retained them virtually unchanged in a cosmology of their own. In the removal of the heavenly city from a spiritual to a secular foundation, the historian had replaced the priest as the conservator of value and had become the interpreter of orthodoxy to rationalistic communicants.¹

One is tempted to extend Carl Becker's delightful imagery of the historian as priest to the full extent of its parallel, for not only was the historian the high priest of the new order, but the purposes and methods of his office bore a strong resemblance to those of the religious structures of the preceding ages. The method of the historian was a new scholasticism with the documentary records of the past serving in the place of holy writ and the outstanding historians assuming the mantle of the saints, fathers, prophets and philosophers. Like the scholastics, the historians sought in the authority of their written documents for uniformities in human experience that would give them the authority which a Bible-derived theology had bestowed upon their predecessors. On the basis of their researches a structure of generalizations began to arise which the eighteenth century historian regarded as elucidating the laws of nature as they applied to human society. On the basis of such generalizations, a new orthodoxy arose and while the priests administered its truths to the rising generation, the more bold extended the curve of its findings into the future

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and, with the confidence of an Old Testament prophet, announced that they had discovered a key to continual progress and prophesied that there would one day be a secular millenium in which reason would have triumphed over ignorance and error and where men might dwell in peace and felicity.

It was not in the eighteenth century, however, that the historian-priest with his new orthodoxy established the tenets of his faith in the cloisters of the new order, the state universities. Esthetes may argue whether the founder of what amounted to a new monastic order was Humboldt, Niebuhr, or Ranke, but to the last, historians for a century paid homage and to his seminars as to a shrine made dutiful pilgrimage. Ranke's own benedictine dedication to his work set a strenuous example to others of his order. His "criticism, precision and penetration," became a *modus operandi* equivalent to the monk's pledge to poverty, chastity, and obedience. In his concept of history as a recapitulation of past actuality, Ranke felt that he had established the catholic history, accurate and complete. His disciples, like converts to a new revelation, spread the gospel of Ranke with missionary zeal in all the western world.

In the fullness of their faith, the historians of catholicity believed that they had discovered the rules and procedures by which society should be conducted toward full idealistic realization. "Shall we ever discover the immutable laws of History?" asked Henry Adams. He entertained the idea and even offered his version of the law, but finally abandoned the search. Some of his contemporaries were less doubtful. John Fiske saw the laws of history inscribed in the works of Adam Smith and Charles Darwin and became a ready convert to Spencer's insistence that these and other so-called natural laws were the way of truth. The whole tribe of "ologies" born in this age constituted new orders of the priesthood anxious to preach the gospel of the science of society. Even the "new history" defined by Robinson, though less sure of its entire accuracy, was sufficiently confident to lend its efforts wholly to good causes as defined by the terms of nineteenth century liberalism.

It was one of the purposes of Carl Becker to protest against historical catholicity. In one light, Becker may appear as a protesting prophet bearing witness against the false priestcraft of

his day. As such he was an iconoclast destroying the partial images of the past that had assumed the proportions of idols erected by the priests of the cults of historical idealism, Prussian statism, economic determinism, social Darwinism, the Rule of Phase, or any other presumably scientific system. The spirit of Becker's protest was that of the liberal protestant who refuses to submit to rules for which he can find no justification in holy writ.

Becker had an idealist's concept of history. To him it was past actuality. He noted, however, that the historian did not deal with this actuality but with generalizations about it which drew inferences from a thousand and one separate facts. Such a simple historical "fact" as Caesar's crossing the Rubicon could never be restored "as it actually was," for it was a singular event which once acted out could never be recreated. The event consisted not alone in Caesar crossing the Rubicon, but in all of the associated occurrences within Caesar's army, between Caesar and the Senate, to say nothing of the exact condition of the setting in which the entire event occurred. That the past was a totality and that it was largely irrecoverable, no one could deny. As a matter of fact, no one did deny it. Even Ranke, whose school of scientific history Becker was obviously attacking, did not insist upon total recovery. Scientific history required only that the significant events be discovered and placed in a proper relationship to each other. If this were effectively done, then the only changes that could be made would be in the embellishment of detail. Perhaps not all historians would agree what details were significant, but obviously certain ones could be eliminated as unimportant. It is of little historical importance, for example, to know how many women wearing blue hats and matching parasols attended Ford's Theater on the night of Lincoln's assassination. As to the accuracy of the details which are selected as of historical significance, even Becker admitted that these could be restored with great accuracy.²

A greater problem to the relativist historian lay in the meaning of the facts. Because the historian operates on the level of generalization, how could one be sure that his generalizations were accurate? "With a little intelligent prompting," Becker

asserted, the facts "will speak, within reason, whatever they are commanded to speak."³ Thus each age interprets the past to suit itself and history can never be restored as it was. This is the real meaning of Becker's relativism. With such a concept, Becker, like Luther, proclaimed a priesthood of all believers. But Luther, after denying the old authority and when confronted with the radicalism of the anabaptists and the anarchism of the peasants, defined a new orthodoxy. Becker was not a crusading prophet of a new order. He refused to enlist his craft as a tool for any group who would rush humanity cross-lots to some imagined paradise. He chided for sin which he could see, but he did not know the way to salvation. Becker was an anti-nomian who knew no orthodoxy except that of the individual historian. Like liberal protestantism, historical relativism threatened to fragment at the touch and to become all things to all people. Every man his own historian came to mean that one man's history was as good as that of another or perhaps that all were equally defective and misleading.

That there is some validity in the charge of relativism in history is too patently obvious to deny, for much that passes as history is no more than scholarly propaganda. From this observation, however, there are clearly two lines of reasoning. One leads from relativism to revisionism and thus back to the old orthodoxy of universal history. The other leads from relativism to nihilism which can only end in anti-intellectualism or an historical equivalent of existentialism. Becker followed the latter alternative.

Perhaps the clearest light in which Becker can be seen is that of an Ecclesiastes, weary of the world and lamenting its vanity. His mind is that of the Epicurean who finds his world disordered and tumultuous, himself without hope, and the people in such a state that nothing can be done to change their lot. Becker is his own best example of the truth which he affirms that each generation writes its history in terms of its own needs and values. Historians have called his time the age of the "Lost Generation," and lost they were as to purposes and goals. Nineteenth century liberal ideals had obviously failed of realization. The events from the rise of Bismarck to the First World War were powerful arguments against the

liberal ideal. The terribly tragedy of that war was a final disillusionment to those who had dared to hope. The crusading spirit of earlier times fell prey to disaster. There is in the writing of Becker the sharp irony, the thinly veiled cynicism and the open ridicule of one who has seen the folly of a vision which he may have longed to hold himself, and who now turns the full wrath of his scorn upon those who do not as yet know the illusion has been shattered. Here is the portrait of a man who would have led a crusade had he not known the folly of aspiration. Knowing beforehand the antidotes for the poison of passionate belief, he was certain that before he had well begun someone would hand him the draught.

In Becker the parallel is complete, not only between priest and historian, but between the fate of history and of liberal protestantism as objects of popular faith. In his rejection of historical catholicity, the historian became a protestant, but unable to define an acceptable orthodoxy he became an anti-nomian, a modernist, and finally an atheist, denying the faith. The study of history is futile, Becker asserted. In one hundred years of historical research before 1914, libraries were filled with facts and an incredible amount of expert knowledge of human experience was brought to light, but what influence had all this profundity exercised upon the life of the time? It could not be demonstrated that it had done anything to restrain the foolishness of politicians or to enhance the wisdom of statesmen. Neither had it enlightened the masses or made them more wise or reasonable. World War One had come despite their reasonings and stood as the most futile exhibition of unreason ever made by civilized society. Stupidity was undiminished; fanaticism was unabated and the human capacity for deceiving themselves and others was unimpaired.⁴

As the relativist lost faith in history he also lost his capacity to attract a following and his congregation, in search of the security that had once been offered them, left him in search of new faiths, new priests and prophets. These were found in the collective person of the scientist, especially the mathematician and the physicist, followers of the specious metaphysical deductions drawn from the affirmations of Copernicus and Newton. Long practiced in a belief of absolutes, they were un-

shaken when researches into the microcosm of the atom and the macrocosm of the universe revealed disparities in their orthodoxy. They confronted the new phenomena with at least undiminished hope that a correlated meaning for it all could be found and concealed their doubts from the congregations. Their spectacular successes in performing miracles transformed the flagging hope of the congregation into a ravishing faith that threatened to recreate human civilization in its own materialistic image. The rise of the physical scientist as priest and prophet commenced with the rise of industrialism, and in proportion as faith in the humanities and social sciences died, the new dogma arose. There is at present no sign of a weakening in its leadership.

Few historians could accept the dictum of the relativist and follow him into intellectual anarchy. Some minds doubtless found satisfaction in nihilism and likely the critical facility which it fosters is still a necessary adjunct for the historian. Objectivity, if it is possible at all, may come only when one is convinced that his own values are simply personal and institutional rather than universal and immutable. But all minds are not content to remain trembling on the brink of eternity and to dwell in contemplation of nothingness; for after one is disabused of a belief in the God of the Hebrews he may yet feel the necessity of a belief in some God, in immortality and in at least human values. The main line of historiography has followed the alternative leading from relativism to revisionism and back again to the orthodoxy of universality.

Universality is once more the goal of modern historiography, but the historian is much more humble in his affirmations than formerly. Like the modern liberal, who is virtually a stoic, the modern historian sees the accomplishment of his purposes as a far distant goal not to be attained without many reverses and after the passage of much time, but he is assured of success through his faith in the indomitability of the enlightened human spirit. The study of history is only one of the many ways in which man seeks to understand himself. It is an effort to distinguish order from the chaos with which human life is surrounded; to reduce it to a system and to discover its true meaning. History is one aspect of the infinite and its study is as

deep and penetrating, as meaningful and significant as the mind that delves into it seeking to know.

It is ironic that the modern historian takes pride in the very multiplicity once singled out for attack by the relativist: that human interests and insights are such that the uses of the past and his understandings of it are seemingly infinite even where greatest regard is shown for factual accuracy. It is one of the strengths of the study of history that events which have been observed and recorded, even by partisan witnesses, can be examined at leisure through the eyes of as many participants as have preserved their accounts and, whereas the individual perception of reality as it occurs is limited to personal acuity, the historian, by the use of his sources, is able to obtain a degree of omniscience impossible to any living witness at the time the event occurred. The relation of the historian to the separate facts of the past is similar to that of the judge as compared to the witness as to the facts of contemporary life. The modern historian does not, however, make the mistake of assuming that every new judgment is equally valid or that its acceptance wholly invalidates previous assumptions. Each new historical insight should properly be regarded as an hypothesis, offered in modification or extension of a previously held point of view. It may be that the needs of a new age, fresh and penetrating analysis, new facts, or even prejudice may prompt the new interpretation. It may be intended merely to supplement the older view, as the economic interpretations of the Beards' proposed to do, or it may offer a new point of departure as was suggested by Turner's essay on the frontier or Andrews' and Beers' view of American history from the vantage point of emerging British imperialism. These hypotheses propose an enlargement of understanding rather than a hopelessness of ever discovering the facts of the matter, and the results of this approach have been startlingly successful. Every school boy is familiar with the reports of the causes of the first World War as they are related by the official historians of each of the major participating countries. Only the most biased nationalist could assert, in view of the differences of fact and interpretation of fact that existed, that his national version was accurate and complete. It required many years of dedicated effort for historians

in the name of objectivity to reconstruct the story of that extremely complicated event, but their labors established firmly the idea of revisionism rather than relativism as the proper approach of the historian and in recent years no event in history has been free from such scrutiny. Yet it is a matter of common knowledge that not all revisionist versions find acceptance. Before a new idea is admitted to the canon of orthodoxy, it must pass the scrutiny of all the experts in its area of specialization. The whole priesthood of historians sits in judgment upon the uses made of the past. If they are properly jealous of their authority as guardians of the facts they may distinguish between a desirable new reforming insight and an heretical departure from the faith.

Becker asserted that facts are slippery things, and it appears that he is right, but it is the purpose of the historian to make them as solid, cold and hard as information and critical judgment may allow. It is too soon to make categorical judgments upon the value of the study of history as a source of reliable guides for the future, but Saluemini and a growing group of others unhesitatingly regard history as a scientific study capable of producing scientific results.⁵ Preserved Smith notes that already the study of the past has uncovered numerous uniformities in the ordinary acts of man that are laws in the sense of generalizations that allow highly accurate predictions of future conduct.⁶ The laws thus derived are at least as applicable to the individual in society as generalizations about matter and energy are in their application to the individual molecule or atom. Beale, after a penetrating analysis of what historians have said about the causes of the Civil War asserted that despite their many contradictory opinions and incompatible generalizations, the net result of their researches had brought us much nearer to an understanding of that event than ever before. He felt that the fault with American historians lay not so much with the results of their work as with the grandeur of their expectations.⁷

As one views the future of historical study it seems safe to assume that history may yet add to the wisdom of statesmen, help the politician to avoid error and perhaps add something to the perception of the masses. It is possible, too, that before this golden day can be attained the new faith in the omniscience of

science and scientists may have achieved earth's holocaust, but this is one of the stirring, if frightening challenges of our time. So far as historians are concerned, they must continue to be thorough in their researches and judicious in their judgments, willing always to project the curve of their insights into the future; less assertive than the prophets, perhaps, but less ambiguous than the Delphic Oracles. Always in their collective capacity they will be both prophets of doom and of salvation calling not for the allegiance of the congregation but for their consideration and understanding. History is by nature a liberal study. In the enthusiasm of a new insight it may become dogmatic as liberalism itself can become. This is an error to be guarded against, but unless history has insights and pursues them in a climate of free inquiry and free expression it becomes a meaningless study and its adherents can scarcely avoid the futility of a modern Epicureanism.

1 Carl Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932).

2 Charlotte Watkins Smith, *Carl Becker on History and the Climate of Opinion* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1956), p. 97. Quotes from a Becker book review published in *Philosophical Review*, XCIX (May, 1940), 363.

3 Carl L. Becker, *Everyman His Own Historian* (New York: F. S. Crofts and Co., 1935), p. 169.

4 Carl L. Becker, "What Are Historical Facts?" *The Western Political Quarterly*, XIII, No. 3 (Sept., 1955), p. 339.

5 Gaetano Salvemini, *Historian and Scientist* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1939).

6 Preserved Smith, "The Place of History Among the Sciences," *Essays in Intellectual History*, David Muzzey (ed.) (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1929), p. 209.

7 Howard K. Beale, "What Historians Have Said About Causes of the Civil War," *Theory and Practice in Historical Study: A Report of the Committee on Historiography*, Social Science Research Council Bulletin 54 (New York, 1946), pp. 90-92.