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The Populist Interpretation of American History: A Materialist Revision

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ABSTRACT: A materialist criticism of the interpretation of American history offered by Charles A. Beard finds that both the strengths and the weaknesses of the Progressive — or rather Populist — historians can be deduced from their character as intellectual representatives of the old middle class of petty proprietors. This class was especially influential in American history due to the presence of the "frontier," the petit-bourgeois regime of landed property, and the special character of American class coalitions. The way out of the current impasse in American historical studies is to develop a materialist interpretation of American history having the peculiarities of U. S. capitalist development as its central theme and drawing on the insights provided by the Populist historians and their New Left critics.

The Progressive Historians and Historical Materialism

IN 1932 JOHN CHAMBERLAIN DEFINED the Progressive tradition as "a struggle by little capitalists against big capitalists," and wondered "what all the fuss had been over breaking up the trusts and letting the little fellow have his own greedy chance in the market place" (quoted in Mann, 1962, 166). Yet the obstinate refusal of the members of the old middle class to become wage slaves had some positive intellectual consequences — notably, the materialist leanings of their ideologists. "It is hardly going too far," Charles Beard wrote

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in 1935, "to say that, in theory, America has one class — the petty bourgeoisie — despite proletarian and plutocratic elements which cannot come under that classification" (Beard and Smith, 1935, 197). It is with this social background in mind that one must approach the issue of the relation between Progressive historiography (I retain this misleading term for the time being, though I will argue later that "Populist" would be a more appropriate description for this school) and historical materialism.

The rise of the Progressive school marked the intellectual upsurge of the American petty bourgeoisie, with its mostly rural background, against the European-leaning, mostly Eastern bourgeoisie. As Beard described it, the year in which Turner presented his paper "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" at the Historical Association was "vibrant with the notes of the last great conflict between agriculture [by which Beard meant petty-bourgeois agriculture] and capitalism." The rise of the Populist Party, "which caused gentlemen in Wall Street to see visions of Jack Cade and Daniel Shays every night," was the central event of American political life "when the Wisconsin Professor posted his thesis at the gates of the Middle West" (Beard, 1928, 272–73).

One of the main sources of strength of the Populist movement was the fact that, unlike in England, where the industrial revolution was preceded by the "clearing of estates" (*i.e.*, by the dispossession of the yeomanry by landlords and capitalists), in the United States, up to the beginnings of the 20th century, a massive process of capital accumulation took place alongside a *growth* in the number of petty proprietors, especially in the countryside. All major American historians have remarked this bias of U. S. social structure towards the rural petty bourgeoisie. Speaking of the Revolutionary era, J. Franklin Jameson asserted that American agriculture, outside the plantation areas, was characterized by "the system of landholding which the classical economists called 'peasant proprietorship,' the system of small holdings where landowner, capitalist or farmer, and laborer are all one, the owner of the land supplying the capital and working the fields with his own labor and that of his family" (Jameson, 1956, 28). It is true that, as Lee Soltow has shown, in 1798 half of America's free males 21 and older owned no real estate, and the proportion owning property decreased from .49 or .50 in 1800 to between .43 and .47 by 1850 (by 1870 the proportion of real property holders was .43

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for whites and .39 for both blacks and whites) (Soltow, 1989, 235; 1975, 60). But Soltow also remarked that "the extent of landownership was America's outstanding achievement. Half of males 21 and older owned land. The proportion owning property was 29 percent in Sweden, 24 percent in Denmark, about 10 percent in England, and only 3 percent in Scotland" (Soltow, 1989, 237). As a result of this petty-bourgeois regime of landed property, farming occupied nearly 75% of the U. S. labor force in 1800, and over half of it until some time between 1880 and 1890 (Lebergott, 1966, 127). In 1860 the federal census reported two million farms; by 1900 the number had reached 5.7 million: "In 40 years almost twice as many farms had been made as were made in all the years between 1607 and 1860" (Carstensen, 1974, 2). And the number of farms continued to grow for another two decades: by 1910 it stood at 6,366,000, and by 1920 at 6,454,000 (U. S. Department of Commerce, 1975, 457). As Eric Foner remarked, "in 1900, the U. S. was already the world's foremost industrial power, yet a majority of the population still lived in places with fewer than 2500 residents" (Foner, 1984, 69). The significance of these figures for American social and intellectual development is better grasped if we compare them with the evolution of the social structure of the European countries during the same period. The number of persons employed in UK agriculture, for instance, remained stationary between 1840 and 1910 (from 1,515,000 to 1,553,000), its relative strength falling from 36% of the British labor force in 1801 to 11% in 1891 while it grew by 330% in the USA (from 3,570,000 to 11,680, 000) (Lebergott, 1966, 120, Table 3; Thomas, 1966, 205–210).

Not surprisingly, Friedrich Sorge was led to conclude in 1891 that, if due to the high level of industrial development, economic conditions in America had become similar to those of the European countries, with a sharp division of classes into exploiter and exploited, bourgeoisie and proletariat, "the classes in between, the petty bourgeoisie and the small farmers — particularly the latter — are both absolutely and relatively more numerous than in the industrial countries of Europe, as the Populist movement (of these in-between classes) has proven in recent years" (Sorge, 1977, 295). Given the political traditions of slaveowner-led plebeian movements such as Jeffersonian Republicanism and Jacksonian Democracy, the general environment of intellectual and political freedom, and the high level of literacy, it was only natural for the old middle class of petty proprietors, articu-

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late and numerically strong, to give birth to its own political and intellectual movements, and that these should have not only a petty-bourgeois but also an "agrarian" cast.

The best literary representative of this class is Mark Twain, whose work constitutes one of its most enduring contributions to American culture; while in philosophy it gave birth to the school known as Pragmatism (for a Marxist assessment of this current see Novack, 1975). Politically, the petty-bourgeois movement was based — especially in its Greenback, Granger, and Populist phases — upon the small farmers of the Middle West and South, pulling behind them the urban middle classes and even certain strata of the radicalized workers. The most prominent among these organizations was of course the People's Party. Populist leaders such as "Cyclone" Davis and Tom Watson drew heavily upon the writings of Jefferson in their struggle against the encroachments of the "Hamiltonian" capitalists (Woodward, 1986, 249–50, 371). Later, the ranks of the Progressive movement came to be filled by the native-born urban petty bourgeoisie, reflecting the diminishing importance of the rural population in the American economy. Beard's work synthesized the petty-bourgeois interpretation of American history with a more urban bias than Turner, who in his opinion had ignored the influence of the working-class movement on American historical development — though he partly excused him because his paper on the frontier "was read at Chicago in 1893, a year before the Pullman strike" (Beard, 1921, 349).

Beard subsumed all the major political and social conflicts of the period ranging from the American Revolution to the aftermath of the Civil War to a conflict between capitalism and "agrarianism," or, as he sometimes termed them, between "personality" and "realty." The reason for the existence of the two-party system in the United States as distinguished from the multiple party systems of Europe, he argued, was to be found in the "conflict between agriculture and capitalism" (Beard, 1929, 141–42). As Staughton Lynd has shown, the source of the "capitalism vs. agrarianism" scheme was the American Democratic Jeffersonian–Jacksonian tradition, bequeathed to the Progressives by the Populist movement (Lynd, 1980, 247–68). Beard accepted almost unquestioningly Jefferson's depiction of the origin of the American party system (Beard, 1914a, 19), and in response to a query in 1935 about who among the Founding Fathers was the greatest he replied without hesitation: "Jefferson was the greatest. Jefferson

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combined in his person the best of both the Old World and the New" (Counts, 1954, 233).

Beard was interested in the American labor movement, as his writings, and especially those of his wife, show (see Mary Ritter Beard, 1920). But his intellectual sympathies were always for the rural middle class: after his resignation from Columbia he bought a farm in Connecticut, and was fond of closing his letters with the signature "Charles Beard, Dairy Farmer" (Nore, 1987, x, 29, 91). In Beard's opinion, Marx suffered from "the pure urbanism of his interest and thinking. Neither he nor Friedrich Engels had any intimate, first-hand knowledge of rural ways of life; both spent their lives in industrial cities; both despised, with ill-concealed hatred, the peasant as well as the farmer, the landed gentleman, and agriculture itself" (Beard and Mary Ritter Beard, 1948, 529). On the whole, Beard and his fellow Populists (Turner, Parrington, Dewey, etc.) had the same ambivalent, love–hate, Lady Chatterley attitude toward Marxist theory that the middle class had toward the workers, with whose wrongs it to a certain extent identified, whose alienation toward the crassest forms of bourgeois ideology it shared, but with whom it could not completely identify, sometimes out of fear, sometimes out of a feeling of superiority.

Beard's inability to come to terms with Marxism is evident in his confusion of historical materialism with individual economic determinism (see Beard, 1986, Conclusions). When Marx said that being determines consciousness, he did not mean that the individual in his private conduct is always guided by his material interests — however plausible this may seem in the light of recent American political history (the yearly salary of U. S. Congressmen is 11.5 times, and that of the President 16.9 times, the federal minimum wage). On the contrary, according to historical materialism, with the best of men ideal motives are supreme. Nevertheless, the materialist conception of history is still correct, "because when viewing society in its process of change, we find that the ideals which play an important role in the activity of any given society at any given moment, had their genesis in the economic conditions of the time or of some time which preceded it" (Boudin, 1920, 260).

The same confusion characterizes Beard's identification of historical materialism with Madison's theoretical views under the title of "the economic interpretation of history" (Beard, 1922b). In the

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Federalist No. X, Madison argued that the basis of intellectual and political movements is to be sought in the division of society "into different classes, actuated by different sentiments and views" due to "the possession of different degrees and kinds of property," while the property regime itself — and therefore social inequality — has its origin in human nature, which is held to be unchanging (Madison *et al.,* 1952, 50). These ideas are virtually identical with those of the French historians of the Restoration period, one of the main sources out of which Marx developed the materialist interpretation of history (Guizot, Thierry, Mignet, etc.).[1] The obvious difference between them and historical materialism is the origin of property relations, which Marx did not seek in an unchanging human nature but in the degree of technological development and the corresponding level of labor productivity — hence his epigrammatic definition of historical materialism as "our theory that the organization of labor is determined by the means of production" (Karl Marx to Frederick Engels, July 7, 1866; in Marx and Engels, 1953, 218).

As for Beard's views on political economy, he never grasped the basic proposition of Marxist political economy, according to which simple commodity production, on which the agrarian *yeoman* economy rested, is both the logical and the historical precondition for the development of commodity production based on wage labor — *i.e.*, of that same capitalism which was devouring his petty-bourgeois agricultural America.[2] These theoretical inconsistencies would be incomprehensible had Beard been the Marxist historian some scholars considered him to be. In fact, Beard's work was, in social terms, the swan song of the old middle class that was being eliminated from the historical scene by modern corporate capitalism, and, in intellectual terms, the *summa* of the Populist–Jeffersonian school of American historians.

1 On the relationship between Marx's philosophy of history and that of the French historians of the Restoration period, see the best introduction to historical materialism: Plekhanov, 1981, 558–71.

2 "Just as at a given stage in its development, commodity production necessarily passes into capitalistic commodity production (in fact, it is only on the basis of capitalistic production that products take the general and predominant form of commodities), so the laws of property that are based on commodity production, necessarily turn into the laws of capitalist appropriation. We may well, therefore, feel astonished at the cleverness of Proudhon, who would abolish capitalistic property by enforcing the eternal laws of property that are based on commodity production!" (Marx, 1956, 639, note).

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The Course of American Class Struggles

Beard's overview of American class struggles runs as follows:

Almost from the foundation of the national government there have been two major political parties in the United States. Their names have changed, but continuity in the measures and composition of each has rarely been broken — until recent times, at least. One is the Federalist–Whig–Republican party, associated with Hamilton, Webster, Lincoln, McKinley, Coolidge, and Hoover and its center of economic gravity has been the industrial and financial interests of the nation. Although it made a combination with farmers in 1860 and still has a strong hold on them in the North, the chief sources of its economic strength remained the same for nearly one hundred and fifty years. The second party is the Republican–Democratic organization, with Jefferson, Jackson, Bryan, and Franklin D. Roosevelt as its sponsors. Its historic center of gravity was long in the agricultural interests of the country, although a large body of importing merchants and urban mechanics was early brought into its fold. This interpretation of our party divisions does not mean that all industrialists have been in one camp and all tillers of the soil in the other, but that the predominating interests in American politics have been industrialist and agricultural respectively, with organized labor displaying, on the whole, Democratic inclinations. If reference is made to the great issues involved in this party antagonism, it will be found that they also have a distinctly economic bearing. Broadly speaking, the Hamilton–Webster–McKinley combination supported high protective tariffs for American industries, centralized banking, a currency based on gold, ship subsidies, a strong navy, internal improvements, commercial enterprise, and light taxation on great fortunes. In the main the Jefferson–Jackson–Bryan party was on the opposite side during the nineteenth century. Exceptions may be found, no doubt, in American history, but in the main the cleavage was fairly clear until the twentieth century opened. (Beard, 1945, 66–67.)

According to the Progressive historians, the American Revolution removed not only the mercantilist barriers to commerce, industry and settlement but also the imperial checks on the political activity of the lower classes of colonial society. The triumph of the American cause for home rule was followed by a series of reforms having a more or less serious influence on the class structure of American society, such as the abolition of primogeniture, entails and quit-rents, the confiscation of crown, proprietors' and loyalists' lands, the removal of mercantilist restrictions on American foreign commerce, the opening up of the

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trans-Appalachian region to agricultural colonization, etc. These changes intensified the already democratic character of American social and political life, giving the agrarian masses (into which the Populist historians included also the slaveowners), the inveterate foes of the capitalist class, control over the state legislatures, which were used to pass anti-capitalist legislation such as paper money and stay laws, to default payment of the federal debt, etc. Once independence had been achieved, therefore, the native capitalist class rose to suppress the consequences of agrarian agitation. The adoption of the federal Constitution gave the bourgeois enemies of agrarianism the weapon they needed to restrain the activities of the state legislatures and of the parliamentary majority in the federal government, most notably in the form of the system of checks and balances (indirect election of the President and the senators, an independent judiciary appointed by the President with the concurrence of the Senate, etc.).

The Progressive interpretation of the American Revolution and the Confederation period had the virtue of stressing the need of the upper classes for a stronger central government once the British barriers to the "leveling tendencies" of the American petty bourgeoisie were removed, but it was distorted by its subsumption of the slaveowner into the yeoman farmer and its consequent overlooking of the role of the former in the framing of the Constitution. Beard saw in the conflict between Federalists and Anti-Federalists an early version of the social struggles of his own time, as he understood them: the struggle over the Constitution was, in his opinion, nothing but "*a war between business and populism.*" Under the Articles of Confederation "populism had a free hand, for majorities in the state legislatures were omnipotent" (Beard, 1962, 87–88, emphasis added). The obvious question is: what about the other section of the dominant classes, the slaveowners? As Staughton Lynd argued, Beard failed to see that the Constitution was a compromise between capitalists and slaveowners because he sought to turn the attention of historians away from slavery toward the struggle of capitalism with "agrarianism" (Lynd, 1980, 151). But if the slaveholders supported the adoption of the Constitution and the creation of the new federal government, then it is mistaken to speak of a linear continuity between Anti-Federalists and Jeffersonian Republicans. The constitution was adopted as a result of an upper-class reaction to the "excesses" of the plebeian masses during the Confederation period (aided by plebeian strata such as

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the city artisans and the frontier farmers, which supported a stronger federal government for their own reasons), and of the need to strengthen the Union *vis-à-vis* the European powers. This Thermidorean coalition broke up during Washington's government when the slaveowners switched sides and joined the ranks of the opposition: this is the view entertained — after the Civil Rights movement — by most contemporary historians (Nelson, 1987, 21).

The triumph of the capitalist over the "agrarian" classes, Beard argued, was completed by the adoption of Hamilton's economic program: the funding of the federal debt and the assumption of state debts at their nominal value by the new federal government led to a massive transfer of capital into the hands of the bourgeoisie, because most of the public debt certificates were concentrated in the hands of Northern capitalists (Beard, 1986, 35, 37, 21). The origin of this interpretation is to be found, in Beard's own words, in Jefferson's "roll of the 'paper men' in Congress in March, 1793," which he later "incorporated in the *Anas*" (Beard, 1913–14, 283–84). More important than the rather crude debate on the personal interest of the members of the Constitutional Convention in these measures (which in any case can never reach a satisfactory conclusion, since there is no way of knowing what their security holdings were in 1787) is to inquire into the true relation between the federal Constitution and Hamilton's economic program and the development of American capitalism. There is no doubt that the most *progressive* features of the federal Constitution of 1787, such as the creation of a unified national market and the impetus this gave to Western colonization, not only stimulated the development of capitalism but also assured it the support of the urban artisans and a section of the yeoman farmers (Main, 1965, 280–81; Kulikoff, 1993, 101–02). It is also clear that one of Hamilton's aims was to foster the development of an indigenous capitalist class — at any rate, that is how 19th-century historians on both sides of the Atlantic used to refer to it (Guizot, 1851, 123). Moreover, in Europe the public debt played an important role in the development of capitalism: if the state creditors are native capitalists, the public debt becomes, in Marx's words, "one of the most powerful levers of primitive accumulation" (Marx, 1956, 872). But the public debt in the United States did not become such a prominent factor of the primitive accumulation process as in the European countries because the main causes of the growth of the public debt and state taxa-

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tion (militarism, monarchical institutions, a state church) did not exist (U. S. Department of Commerce, 1975, 1117).

In his analysis of the social bases of Jeffersonian Republicanism Beard was sometimes able to go beyond his "capitalism vs. agrarianism" scheme and show that abstract "agrarianism" was in fact a coalition of plebeian classes, most of them yeoman farmers, led by an aristocracy of slaveowners (Beard, 1965, 398–401). Jefferson's program was, according to Beard, the exact reversal of Hamilton's: no public debt, low taxation, tariffs for revenue only, no central bank, inflationary measures and debtor-relief legislation, and a policy of agrarian expansionism that culminated in the Louisiana and Florida purchases and, later, in the annexation of Texas and the Mexican War. The continuous entering of new Western agricultural states into the Union naturally strengthened the Republican party and led to the gradual disappearance of the Federalist opposition. At the same time, the Jeffersonian embargo and especially the 1812 War, providing a new impetus to industrial development and leading to the growth of the public debt, strengthened the influence of the capitalist classes on the Republican party and led to a partial reenactment of the Hamiltonian program under Republican auspices (rise of the tariff, chartering of the second U. S. bank, federal promotion of internal improvements, etc.).

But Beard's unconscious tendency to transform the slaveholders into petty-bourgeois "farmers" whenever they opposed the economic and political initiatives of the Eastern bourgeoisie becomes once again evident in his account of the birth of the second party system. The Jacksonian coalition — that motley array of slaveowning *amis du peuple*, petty bourgeois reformers and panacea-mongers, and *bona fide* working-class leaders with an inflammatory rhetoric and a middle class program — was not, according to Beard, a *slaveowners-led* reaction of the plebeian classes against the influence of the bourgeoisie on Jefferson's Republican Party, but "a Triumphant Farmer–Labor Party." As for Jackson himself, he was a "son of the soil" which "furnished excellent presidential timber for the new democracy" because "he was a farmer — *a slave owner, no doubt, but still a farmer*" (Beard and Mary Ritter Beard, 1962, Vol. I, 553–54, emphasis added).

Though the Jacksonian period saw the gradual adoption of white manhood suffrage by the states, the direct election of Presidential electors, the election of Presidential candidates by nominating con-

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ventions, and other democratic reforms, neither the accumulation process of the slaveowners nor that of the Northern capitalists was hindered by these democratic measures, and, indeed, it is hard to find other examples in history of two exploiting classes prospering so nicely under a supposedly all-powerful plebeian regime. In fact, the Jeffersonian coalition of slaveowners with the plebeian classes, and especially with the rural petty bourgeoisie, was renewed, with a more urban bias and an appeal to the wage workers, under Jackson — which led, among other things, to the ethnic cleansing of the Indian population west of the Mississippi (for an excellent analysis of the dilemmas that this most heterogeneous class coalition posed for labor leaders like Orestes Brownson and Herman Kriege see Herreshoff, 1967, 31–52).

That sort of plebeian coalition led by pre-capitalist dominant classes, with their inevitable mixture of progressive and reactionary aspects, was not an uncommon phenomenon in European history. In Russia, for example, the nucleus of the liberal party (the so-called Cadets) was formed, according to Kautsky, "by the large-scale landowners, as distinct from the latifundia owners, *i.e.*, precisely that class against which liberalism in Western Europe directed its principal efforts." Much like the American slaveowners,

> this oppositional stance was made easier for the gentry because it came into direct conflict with the proletariat, the other opposition class, less frequently than did industrial capital in towns. As long as the peasantry remained calm, the Russian landowner could afford the luxury of liberalism, just as English Tories and some Prussian Junkers had permitted themselves the aura of friendliness towards their work force at the beginning of industrialization. (Kautsky, 1983, 386.)

In a similar way, the Southern slaveowners could play a paternalist role towards Western yeoman farmers and Northern urban workers as long as abolitionist agitation and slave rebellions remained marginal phenomena.

The Beards were at their best in showing the shortcomings of certain traditional interpretations of American history. Constitutional arguments, they argued, could not explain the political struggles of the middle period, since each section supported a "strict" or a "loose construction" of the Constitution according to its degree of control over the federal government at a given moment. Thus New England

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nullified federal law when her commerce was affected by the War of 1812, but rejected the nullification doctrine when it was proclaimed 20 years later by South Carolina; the slavocracy argued that the Constitution was to be strictly and narrowly construed whenever tariff and bank measures were up for debate, but upheld the opposite doctrine when a bill providing for the prompt and efficient return of fugitive slaves was passed in Congress, etc. (Beard and Mary Ritter Beard, 1962, Vol. II, 40–41). As for sectionalism, it was merely the result of the fact that "no European country had ever had a highly developed group of capitalists, a large body of independent farmers, and a powerful landed aristocracy each to a marked degree segregated into a fairly definite geographical area" (*ibid.*, Vol. I, 689). In other words, the diversity of economic conditions due to the enormous extension of the country gave to its class conflicts a peculiar geographical character.

The start of the Civil War, the Beards argued, was due to the growing economic and demographic superiority of the Northern bourgeoisie, which was not paralleled by a corresponding growth of its political power. They dismissed the puerile objections of those historians who argued that the Civil War was an unnecessary revolution brought about by the agitation of fanatic doctrinaires with a quotation from Seward's famous "irrepressible conflict" speech: "Did any propertied class ever reform itself? Did the patricians in old Rome, the noblesse or clergy in France? The landholders in Ireland? The landed aristocracy in England? Does the slaveholding class even seek to beguile you with such a hope? Has it not become more rapacious, arrogant, defiant?" *(ibid.*, Vol. II, 108–09). The refusal of the slaveowners to give up their human property led to a social revolution akin to the Puritan and the French Revolutions (*ibid.*, Vol. II, 53–54). The Beards showed that during the decade that followed the election of Lincoln, the size of the average farm in the ten cotton states fell from about 400 acres to 230, while the number of freeholds embracing a hundred acres or less rose from 330,000 to 517,000. In the next 30 years the number of farms south of the Potomac and Ohio River line doubled in every state except Arkansas and Louisiana. "Thus the abolition of slavery altered the status of the white farmer in a fashion that offers an interesting analogy to the change in the position of the French peasantry after the mighty cataclysm of 1789" (*ibid.*, Vol. II, 269).

Yet even in the Beards' apparently materialist interpretation of the Civil War the Faustian character of Progressive historiography

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comes to the fore once again, with the result that other features of their analysis are diametrically opposed to the Marxist interpretation of the Civil War. According to the Beards, slavery was *not* the fundamental cause of the Civil War because this demand never appeared in the platform of any great political party and the spokesmen of the Republican Party emphatically declared that their party never intended to interfere with slavery in the states in any shape or form — an utterly absurd argument *(ibid.,* Vol. II, 39–40). Only a tiny minority of the population endorsed the abolition of monarchy and the privileged orders and agrarian reform at the beginning of the French Revolution, or the abolition of private property in the means of production at the beginning of the October Revolution, yet no serious historians would deny that bourgeois republicanism was the essential content of the first, and socialism of the second.

The reason for the Beards' lack of appreciation of the centrality of slavery is to be found in the Populist view of American history, according to which the guiding thread to the American past is the struggle of the capitalists against the petty bourgeoisie — everything else being subordinated to this. "In 1860," they wrote, "the country stood in fundamental respects just where it did in 1787 under the Articles of Confederation. Nothing but another radical change in the membership of the Supreme Bench or a constitutional revolution such as that effected in 1789, could repair the havoc wrought in business enterprise by agrarian actions" (Beard and Mary Ritter Beard, 1962, Vol. I, 689). The chapter dealing with the Civil War in Beard's book *The American Party Battle* (which provides the best short outline of the Populist interpretation of American history) carries the title "A Federalist Program under Republican Auspices," and argues that "at the close of the civil conflict, the Republicans were in a position similar to that of the Federalists in Hamilton's day, with respect to nearly all fundamental issues" (Beard, 1929, 83).

That is, of course, an anachronism. The development of the productive forces had completely transformed the anatomy of the major classes of American society by 1860: the place of the old tobacco and rice slaveholders of the coast at the helm of the slaveowning South had been seized by the new aggressive cotton and sugar slaveowners of the Southwest; the supremacy in the North had passed from the hand of the old merchant bourgeoisie to the new industrial bourgeoisie which had forged, through the canal and railroad network, new

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economic links with the Northwestern farmers; the Western farmers themselves had completed the process of agrarian expansionism under the leadership of the slaveowners and were seeing their efforts to pass free homesteads and internal improvements legislation thwarted by these same planters; finally, a growing class of wage earners, composed mostly of immigrants, was replacing the artisan class of the revolutionary period. By the mid-19th century, the number of wage earners in America, mostly immigrants or sons of immigrants, for the first time exceeded the number of slaves: "In 1800 only about 10 percent of the American workforce was employed for wages; by 1860 the figure was about 40 percent, heavily concentrated, of course, in the North" (Ashworth, 1996, 142; Foner, 1996, 103). The new party alignment that preceded the outbreak of the Civil War reflected this new disposition of social forces, and the major issues at stake — the abolition of slavery and agrarian reform in the South — were new.

Since, according to Beard, the real aim of the American bourgeoisie during the Civil War was to implement a refurbished version of Hamilton's program, it was logical for him to argue that "if the southern planters had been content to grant tariffs, bounties, subsidies, and preferences to northern commerce and industry," the real economic questions at issue, "it is not probable that they would have been molested in their most imperious proclamations of sovereigny" (Beard and Mary Ritter Beard, 1962, Vol. II, 37). The historical roots of Beard's definition of what constitutes an "economic question" was described by Marx's daughter in 1891 as follows: "Recognizing the antagonism between capital and labor to-day, the Grange makes no definite contribution to the solution of the problem." Though it promoted discussions on economic questions among its members, "on further investigation the questions of political economy resolve themselves into 'gold, silver, greenbacks, national banks, corporations, inter-state and transcontinental transportation, and the tariff as it relates to agriculture'" (Aveling, 1969, 131–32). For the Populist historians, every economic demand not issuing from the white petty bourgeoisie, such as the agrarian reform demanded by the freedmen and the socialization of the means of production advocated by the working-class organizations, were not "fundamental issues" at all, though they certainly would have had an infinitely deeper impact on American historical development that their soft-money, low-taxation, anti-trust panaceas.

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The Populist interpretation of the Civil War offered by the Beards could be put to very reactionary uses. As Thomas Pressly argued, from Beard's works it is easy to gain the impression that the Southern planters, whatever else they had done, had at least opposed Northern capitalism and kept it from running the country before 1860, and this romanticized view of slavery was employed, among others, by Frank Owsley, a member of the ultraconservative "*I'll Take My Stand*" group, to weave out of it a vindication of the South in the Civil War (Pressly, 1954, 208, 241–49; Novick, 1990, 236). When the Lassalleans experienced a similar enthusiasm for Bismarck's quarrels with the German bourgeoisie, Marx reminded them that the Junkers' was a *reactionary* critique of capitalism, and that their own income was derived from the crudest and most brutal forms of exploitation.

A materialist analysis of the Civil War period shows that the Republican Party's adoption of a bourgeois program during the Civil War and Reconstruction (protective tariffs, funding of the public debt, robbery of public lands, government aid to corporations, currency contraction, etc.) alienated from it the plebeian strata of the West and South, and especially the rural middle classes. But as the Marxist historian James Allen put it, the middle-class opposition to the bourgeoisie, "unless based upon an alliance with popular democracy in the South and with the working class, was bound to travel in the direction of a coalition with the extreme right," the former slaveowners, since "the middle class may act as a balance of power for a time between two contending classes, allying itself with one or the other, but it must needs surrender its political hold as soon as one or the other has been defeated" (Allen, 1970, 192, 213–14). Thus, during Reconstruction first Johnson and then the Democratic Party succeeded in winning the support of the middle class, and even of a part of the working class, for the demands of the ex-slaveowners (in the South, the "poor whites" and the agrarian middle class were won over by the planters over the issues of taxation, aid to railroads, and racist propaganda and terrorism). The Granges combined radical agrarian reforms with planks for a general amnesty to the leaders of the counter-revolution and support for the Johnsonian restoration plans; 20 years after the triumph of the planter counter-revolution, the most powerful political movement ever produced by the rural petty bourgeoisie, the People's Party, endorsed the Democratic candidate Bryan, who had a solid basis of support in the restored South. "It is one of

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the anomalies of history," W. E. B. Du Bois concluded from these data, "that political and economic reform in the North and West after 1873 joined hands with monopoly and reaction in the South to oppress and reenslave labor" (Du Bois, 1969, 623).

The Beards' cursory treatment of Reconstruction — the "revolutionary phase" of the Civil War (Marx, 1972, 274) — follows from their Populist interpretation of the Civil War. If the main aims of the bourgeoisie had been achieved with the reenactment of the Hamiltonian program during the Lincoln administration, the struggle for agrarian reform and for civil and political rights for the freedmen could be dismissed as secondary issues, sometimes, as in the case of the Fourteenth Amendment, used as an excuse "to restrain the state legislatures which had long been the seat of agrarian unrest" (Beard and Mary Ritter Beard, 1962, Vol. II, 105). This "conspiracy theory" of the Fourteenth Amendment was thoroughly disposed of by Louis Boudin, who showed that the true intent of its framers was to protect the civil rights of the freedmen, and that its subsequent function as a bulwark of the property rights of corporations resulted from its perversion by the Supreme Court after the capitalist–planter "reunion" of 1876 (Boudin, 1938–39).

The Beards' deep disappointment with the results of the Civil War can be seen from their rendering of the 1892 platform of the Populist Party, which argued

> that America was ruled by a plutocracy, that impoverished labor was laid low under the tyranny of a hireling army, that homes were covered with mortgages, that the press was the tool of wealth, that corruption dominated the ballot box, that the fruits of the toil of millions are boldly stolen to build up colossal fortunes for a few unprecedented in the history of mankind; and the possessors of these in turn despise the republic and endanger liberty. (Beard and Mary Ritter Beard, 1962, Vol. II, 210.)

The "left-wing agrarian movement" slowly gathered strength and finally "in 1896 it overwhelmed the Democratic Party and split the Republicans." As a consequence, in the presidential election of that year the Democrats, led by Bryan, made "a frontal attack on 'the money power' in the style of Jefferson and Jackson, using old and new issues to rally farmers and mechanics to their side of the alignment." On the other side of the line, the Republican candidate McKinley was "loyal to the Hamilton–Webster–Seward heritage" (Beard, 1929, 108–11).

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Again, the limitations indicated above precluded him from seeing that the demands of the mass of the farmers were not only the old issues in a new guise but largely grew in response to the assaults of the new monopolistic, industrial and financial, capital on small property holders — to which should be added the demands of the new class of black sharecroppers, which the Beards (and the Democratic party) did not recognize as part of the American "farming" community. Sorge described the alignment of class forces in 1896 as follows:

> The Republican Party is the party of the bourgeoisie par excellence. The Democratic Party, in general, constitutes the party of the little man in the North and the party of the white people in the South. A majority of the wage workers in the North votes mostly for the Democratic Party because (or whereas) their exploiters belong to the Republican Party. In the South, the members of the ruling white race, the old slave owners and their retinue belong to the Democratic Party while the blacks adhere to the Republican Party. (Sorge, 1987, 146.)

There is no doubt that the economic policy of the Republicans favored the capitalists; the problem with Beard's analysis is that the principles of their "agrarian" (*i.e.*, petty-bourgeois) opponents also represented the interests of the bourgeoisie, although with more concessions to the needs, the interests, and even the prejudices, of the plebeian strata of the white population. This follows clearly from Beard's description of one of the last links in his chain of "agrarian" heroes: Theodore Roosevelt. The demands included in the Progressive platform of 1912 (trust regulation, a graduated income tax, a conservation program, direct primaries, the initiative and referendum, the recall of executive officers, popular review of judicial decisions involving the constitutionality of social reforms, etc.), which according to Beard "summed up all the newer social tendencies of the age," were absolutely unable either to restore the rural petty bourgeoisie or to change in any substantial way the condition of the American wage earners, who were increasingly becoming the vast majority of the American population (Beard, 1929, 149).

Populism and Anti-Imperialism

As their analysis entered the 20th century, the Beards became increasingly aware of the inability of their theoretical framework to

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capture the dynamics of American society. It is true that, faithful to his theoretical scheme, Beard continued to believe that "the creed of Jeffersonian 'Republicanism' is the 'New Freedom' of Wilson Democrats." He quoted approvingly the declaration of presidential candidate Wilson, who asserted that "the masters of the Government of the United States are the combined capitalists and manufacturers of the United States" (Beard, 1914a, 18; Beard, 1914b, 506–07). But in spite of Wilson's middle-class trust-busting rhetoric, the corporations not only did not suffer but also positively thrived during his administration: "In Spanish-speaking countries hospitality is expressed by the phrase 'my house is your house'," Wilson's Secretary of State Bryan told a group of businessmen in 1915. "I can say, not merely in courtesy, but as a fact: my Department is your department; the ambassadors, the ministers, and the consuls are all yours. It is their business to look after your interests and to guard your rights" (quoted in Williams, 1962, 78–79).

Thus, though in his works on U. S. foreign policy, written after the American intervention in World War I, Beard never openly abandoned his "capitalism vs. agrarianism" scheme, its inability to account for contemporary American social and political struggles had by then become so clear that he had to supplement it with another theory, the British economist John A. Hobson's under-consumptionist theory of imperialism (Hobson's *Imperialism* and Rudolf Hilferding's *Finance Capital* were the two main theoretical sources of Lenin's *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism*). As early as 1906, Beard acknowledged his debt to Hobson, who was like him a petty-bourgeois critic of capitalism and whose analyses and remedies he repeated almost verbatim in his subsequent works (Beard, 1968, 623–24).

Though Beard supported American intervention in World War I, a first-hand account of the devastation brought about by the war in Europe and his research into the motives that led to American participation in the war made him change his mind on this subject and oppose U. S. intervention in World War II (Beard, 1922a). By the 1920s, Beard was already calling the Spanish–American War "an imperialist crusade in the name of civilization," and confessing his prejudice

> for the ideals that were professed before we began, under the thoughtful patronage of our mother, England, to acquire dependencies, protectorates, moral obligations, and mandates in the interest of humanity, to administer

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water-cure and Krag-rifle medicines, to shoot, bayonet, gas, bomb, and eviscerate backward peoples in the name of the higher good and profitable investments. (Beard, 1927b, 150.)

The main reason for American imperialism, Beard argued, following Hobson, was the export of American capital, which led American capitalists to put pressure on the government to intervene on their behalf even in the most dangerous corners of the world (Beard, 1969). "The United States, through the investment of capital, has become a silent partner in the fate of every established order in the world," he argued again and again. "The great question is: 'Shall the government follow trade and investments?' That is the one great issue in foreign affairs before the people of this country" (Beard, 1922a, 246, 266–67). Criticizing those economists who asserted that foreign loans and capital exports were the only cure for the illness of industrial societies suffering from "overproduction," he insisted (once again, following Hobson), that domestic demand could be increased by laying "high domestic taxes upon the capital accumulations which became exportable under the policy pursued," and by expending the proceeds of such taxes "on public enterprises in the United States" such as "highways, housing, schools, museums, and libraries" (*ibid.*, 94. This argument is taken from Hobson, 1997, 85–86).

The link between Beard's Populist politics and his anti-imperialist views appears most clearly in a speech he gave in August 1927 at the Institute of Politics. Recalling that before the Civil War and the growth of industrialism the United States was ruled by farmers and planters, Beard predicted and endorsed an agricultural and political alliance between the South and the West: "There are signs at hand," he said, "that the old union may again be renewed under a broader social philosophy and more competent leadership. Personally, I hope that the new confederation may be effected and may command talents equal to the occasion." Then he proceeded to advocate heavier income and inheritance taxes to pay for rural roads, schools and electrical plants, saying that every dollar taken "from the surplus of the plutocracy" and diverted from foreign investments to domestic use was a gain to America. "Incidentally," he went on, "this would reduce our chances of becoming mixed up in the next European adventure in Christian ballistics." He also urged that the American investor abroad should be given to understand that the United States will not

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"fetch his money home on a silver platter." He then declared in favor of the rapid development of rural cooperatives, adding that to this end "the farmers are entitled to use the federal and state governments, just as other economic interests use these agencies." To call governmental aid to farmers paternalistic "and then turn around and supply a merchant marine to shippers, a protective tariff to manufacturers, and military and naval protection to anybody who tries to make money in China, Haiti or Nicaragua," he concluded, "is to dissolve the show in comedy" (Beard, 1927a, 9). Such heretical views led to Beard being labeled an "isolationist" (read: anti-imperialist) crank by the intellectual praetorian guards of imperialism.

Beard's reform proposals were utopian, in the sense that it is impossible to abolish imperialism without abolishing the class differences that give rise to the need to export "surplus" capital and commodities in spite of high levels of unemployment and poverty at home. Equally objectionable is the conclusion that Beard (also following Hobson) drew from his analysis of imperialism, according to which science and technology have "slashed into the division of labor among nations, given greater economic independence to industrial societies, and lessened the dependence of nations upon imports of manufactures and raw materials" (Beard and Mary Ritter Beard, 1966, 455). On the contrary, Marxists would argue: technological development and the consequent growth of commodity production have enormously increased the economic interdependence among nations; but this "globalization" (to employ the currently fashionable euphemism for imperialism) does not imply, as Hobson and Beard feared, the historical necessity of the military aggression of the stronger against the weaker capitalist nations, but the need to abolish capitalist commodity production altogether and replace it by a rational economy planned on a global scale.

Beyond Beard

Unfortunately, limitations of space do not permit a detailed critical review of post-Beardian historiography in the light of 20th-century class struggles — something I have attempted to do elsewhere (Gaido, 1999). Here I will only indicate that the most important and original critic of Beard was the "New Left" historian Staughton Lynd, whose main insights — derived from his involvement in the Civil Rights

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Movement — I have attempted to incorporate into the present study (Lynd, 1980).

Lynd went too far in his minimization of the class struggles during the American Revolution, which certainly was a bourgeois revolution, though with peculiar characteristics due to the fact that in the countries of Western Europe all the land was occupied in the epoch of the bourgeois–democratic revolutions, whereas the American Revolution, and later the Civil War, took place in a country where the bulk of the soil was public property. There were many parallels between the French Revolution and the American Revolution; revolutionary France, ten times as large as revolutionary America, confiscated twelve times as much property (as measured by subsequent compensations), and had five *émigrés* per thousand of population, whereas there were 24 Loyalist *émigrés* per thousand of population in the American Revolution (Palmer, 1959, Vol. I, 188–89). Jackson Turner Main estimated the amount of loyalist property confiscated by the American revolutionaries at £5 million sterling, or about "4 per cent of the nation's real and personal estates," and claimed that it both democratized America's social structure and abolished feudal survivals on landed property such as quit-rent — though in view of the overwhelming importance of the colonization process (which did not exist in 18th-century France) he argued reasonably that the annexation of the lands between the Appalachians and the Mississippi had a greater impact on American social structure than the confiscation of the loyalists' estates (Main, 1973, 330–32). Of course, the revolutionary character of the Civil War, as measured by the inroads it made into pre-capitalist private property, was more marked: the abolition of slavery without compensation represented a confiscation of about $3 billion of property, or 44% of all wealth in the major cotton-growing states of the South in 1859 (McPherson, 1982, 17; Ransom and Sutch, 1988).

After the critical assaults of later historians, and in the light of such social processes as the virtual disappearance of the rural petty bourgeoisie (Geisler, 1993, 533; McMichael, 1998, 104), the enormous growth in the proportion of wage laborers, the rebellion of the blacks and the growing assertiveness of the ethnic minorities composing the American mosaic (whose role in American historical development the Beards, as true WASPs, had slighted), interest in the Beardian interpretation of American history gradually dwindled during the last

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decades. Unfortunately, contemporary historians have been unable to produce an alternative interpretation of American history. In my opinion, the way out of the present *impasse* is to develop a materialist interpretation of American history having the peculiarities of U. S. capitalist development as its central theme[3] and drawing on the insights provided by the Populist historians and their New Left critics.

Conclusion

We may sum up the results of our study briefly. The Progressive historians, and particularly Charles Beard, were the first to offer an analysis of American history having the development of American capitalism as its central theme, because the devastating effects of late 19th- and early 20th-century capitalism on the old middle class of petty commodity producers, whose intellectual representatives they were, awakened their interest in this subject. Given the three-centuries-long colonization process and the characteristics of the American regime of land tenure, heavily biased towards the rural petty bourgeoisie, this struggle for survival of the old middle class against the bourgeoisie was bound to develop an anti-capitalist "agrarian" ideology. This tendency was reinforced by the peculiar character of 19th-century American class coalitions: first a slaveowning aristocracy rising against the Hamiltonian program at the front of the rural petty bourgeoisie (Jeffersonian Republicans), then the same coalition resuscitated and reinforced by a contingent of urban wage laborers (Jacksonian Democracy), finally, the same aristocracy, deprived of its human property but still in possession of most of its land, leading the plebeian masses against the bourgeois program implemented by the Republican party, with an ever larger section of mostly immigrant wage laborers (the postbellum Democratic party). To this bizarre history of class alliances must be ascribed the strengths and the weaknesses of the Progressive — or rather Populist — historians: their emphasis on class struggle as the basis of politics, their endeavors to show how and when the capitalist class took possession of the state machinery, their opposition to imperialism, etc.; and, on the other hand, their confu-

3 See Kautsky's extraordinary response to Sombart's *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?* (Kautsky, 1906) and Lenin's analysis of the "American Path of Bourgeois Development" (Lenin, 1964a, 1964b), which formed the basis of the program of the Bolshevik Party from 1907 to April 1917.

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sion of the planters with the rural petty bourgeoisie, their cool attitude toward abolitionism and Reconstruction, their lack of insight into the historical role of the working-class movement, etc. Nevertheless, a materialist interpretation of American history can be developed drawing on the insights provided by the Progressive historians and their New Left critics, and combining them with the studies of the classical European Marxists on American capitalist development.

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