

I am a Western Man: The Progressive Historian as Midwesterner; the Lives and Works of Turner, Beard, and Becker

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“We have had a pleasant year; but I am so ingrained a westerner that I rejoice at the newspaper accounts of how La Follette and the Western Insurgents are making new tariff history...”

-Frederick Jackson Turner

“As long as there is corn in Indiana and hogs to eat the corn, Charlie Beard will bow to no man.”

-Charles A. Beard

“I suppose you are perfectly hide bound now, a mere ‘easterner,’ stand patter... and protégé of the ‘Interests.’ You see I have the Kansas point of view.”

-Carl L. Becker

In *Pastmasters* (1969), a collection of essays on some of the most seminal figures from the American historical profession, editors Marcus Cunliffe and Robin Winks make an observation particularly germane to their field of study. “Historians cannot be separated from their work,” they note, “and to discuss historiography means that we must discuss personalities.”¹ In large part, to risk inflaming the former camp of the nature/nurture debate, understanding personality types requires an exploration of personal background, an analysis of the milieu at work in shaping the individual conscience. Additionally, one must consider the unique and often-contradictory career expectations of the historian in academe, which serve to increase the saliency of these forces. Placed precariously in a university setting where he or she is asked to tread a fine line between the arts and sciences, objectivity becomes an ambivalent mooring post. With the historian

¹ Marcus Cunliffe and Robin W. Winks, Eds. *Pastmasters* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), xii.

struggling to find a balance between detached neutrality, an even-handed study of facts, and active engagement with a past that might accomplish good in the present, the slightest bias, which might tip the scales, carries magnified significance. Political ideologies, geographical identification, and loyalties to class, race, gender or religion, combine, then, to form the basis of a worldview which inescapably seeks to present itself in historical thought. To such an embattled person, living what John Higham dubbed a “perennial double life,” is entrusted the vaunted task of recording, preserving, and interpreting the nation’s past for the ages.²

Yet, despite the general awareness concerning the importance of individual personality and background in crafting the 20th century’s most influential histories, such determining elements are frequently overlooked. The problem persists even in a school as extensively researched as the Progressive or “New” historians, the generation of liberal scholars active from the Progressive period (1890-1915) through the mid 1940s, which enlisted history in the service of the reform.³ References to any formative experiences underpinning their topic choices or presentations of time, space, and causality ordinarily receive little more than a passing glance. Instead most studies are devoted to critical evaluation of the *substantive* aspects of major Progressive historical works, lacking much insight beyond over-simplified generalizations of the men behind them.⁴ As a result, what

² John Higham, *Writing American History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1970), 138. This, of course, is a highly generalized portrayal of the American historian. For a humorous source of further detail on the pressures surrounding the academic post, specifically the erosive influences of consumerism and suburbia, see Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals* (New York: Noonday Press, 1987), 124-166. Richard Hofstadter provides a contrasting viewpoint in *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962). Instead of depicting the intellectual as corrupted, Hofstadter contends that popular democracy undermines public faith in an intelligentsia.

³ As defined by Hofstadter in *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, and Parrington* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), xii. For the chronology of Progressive historiography, see John Higham, *History: Professional Scholarship in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965), 212-213. Higham loosely marks the transition between the Progressive historians and the Consensus school at approximately 1948 with the appearance of Richard Hofstadter’s *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It*. Hofstadter himself dates the end of Progressive historiography at around 1950, with its last two “distinguished” works Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s *The Age of Jackson* (1945) and Merrill Jensen’s *The New Nation* (1950). Hofstadter, 438. Divergent in a number of ways, the most striking contrast between the two generations is in their emphasis placed upon conflict in history. The Progressives, active in an age rife with swirling political change, interpreted the past as a series of struggles between opposing forces, such as capitalists vs. “the people,” while the latter group, writing at the height of Cold War tension, stressed history in terms of relative unity.

⁴ Likewise, a cottage industry of biography has followed, particularly around Frederick Jackson Turner, performing many of the same functions, yet plagued by the same inadequacies. More specifically, in regards to Turner, exist such massive tomes as Ray Allen Billington, *Frederick Jackson Turner: Historian, Scholar, Teacher* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); and Allan G. Bogue, *Frederick Jackson Turner: Strange Roads Going Down* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998). Additionally there is an informative biographical compendium of letters edited by Wilbur R. Jacobs, *The Historical World of Frederick Jackson Turner* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968). See also Lee Benson, *Turner and Beard: American Historical Writing Reconsidered* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1960); Richard Hofstadter’s treatment of him in *The Progressive Historians*; and Howard Lamar’s essay “Frederick Jackson Turner” in Cunliffe and Winks, eds., 74-109. Less has been done on Beard and Becker. For biography on the former, see Ellen Nore, *Charles A. Beard: An Intellectual Biography* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983; see also Howard K. Beale, Ed., *Charles A. Beard* (University of Kentucky

the Progressives wrote is now widely known. The reasons that inspired them to write remain cloaked in vagueness.

Consequentially, while they have drawn a heavy traffic in fixation among modern historians, a mystique Lawrence Levine has termed the nostalgic “practice of creating a Golden Age of Historiography,” the leading Progressives wait to be examined in their full context.⁵ In particular, they need to be assessed as products of their native region. For indeed, the movement’s founder, Frederick Jackson Turner, its vociferous champion, Charles A. Beard, and its most sparkling mind, Carl L. Becker, were all sons of the Midwest, born in small rural townships in the tumultuous 1860s and 1870s. With few exceptions, the reasoning and purposes behind their works embody the zeitgeist of this region’s Populist ferment.⁶ This spirit imbued particularly Midwestern ideologies in these men, igniting their break with the conservative confines of the historical profession at the turn of the 20th century. The underlying impetus behind the emergent Progressive school, their

Press, 1954), Benson, Hofstadter, and, though it is less valuable than the essay on Turner, see Forrest McDonald’s “Charles A. Beard” in Cunliffe and Winks, eds., 110-141. On Becker, the reader is referred to Burleigh Taylor Wilkins, *Carl Becker* (Cambridge: M.I.T. and Harvard University Presses, 1961) and Robert E. Brown, *Carl Becker on History and the American Revolution* (East Lansing, MI: The Spartan Press, 1970).

⁵ Lawrence Levine, *The Unpredictable Past: Explorations in American Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 7. Levine, in a defense of the contemporary state of the historical profession, disapproves of this romanticizing trend. “My own feeling,” he states, “is that those who don’t appreciate the current historiography are free to show the way by creating a better one” (3).

⁶ There are, of course, alternative explanations posited by the relevant historiography, which fail to adequately account for the weight of regional determinism. One suggestive framework for a possible exception can be found in Ernst A. Breisach, *American Progressive History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 29-31, which charts the rise of Germany’s Karl Lamprecht concurrently with the Progressives. A product of the Prussian university system where many of the first American professional historians trained, Lamprecht broke traditional molds of scholarship to meet “quasi-Progressive” purposes. For further detail on Lamprecht and his influence on “New historicism,” see also Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 31-35. This is an intriguing approach to Beard who traveled in Germany while a young student and may have absorbed some of this new energy. However, it must be remembered that he spent the majority of his four-year sojourn in England, and was, at that time, more focused on political science than he was on history. John Higham offers another theory, removing the focus from the Midwestern populist revolt and placing it on a cultural change in middle class life over the course of the 1890s. Defining the “new activist” mood of the decade, he holds “it was everywhere a hunger to break out of the frustrations, the routine, and the sheer dullness of industrial urban culture.” See Higham, *Writing American History*, 73-102. T.J. Jackson Lears further develops this notion with his study on anti-modernism as a reaction to the “evasive banality of the cultural hegemony” prevailing in the bourgeois WASP, urban world of this period. Lears, *No Place of Grace* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). A third school of thought posed by Gerald D. Nash, applies the concept of anti-modern escapism specifically on the Midwest. Nash, *Creating the West: Historical Interpretations 1890-1990* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1991), 7. For Nash, “the changing face of the United States,” caused Turner “to express nostalgia for the old order, for rural small-town America, for agrarian values and lifestyles.” Finally, Daniel Gaido has authored a Hofstadter-like interpretation, writing that the Progressives “marked the intellectual upsurge of the American petty bourgeoisie.” In addition, he continues, they “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 the late 19th- and early 20th century capitalism on the old middle class of petty commodity producers, whose intellectual representative they were, awakened their interest in this subject.” Gaido, “The Populist Interpretation of American History: A Materialist Revision,” *Science and Society* (Fall, 2001), 350-375.

identity converted easily as the agrarian populism of their youths fused into a broader, urban-based, progressivism during their adult years.

Representative among Progressive historiography's founders for their roots in America's heartland (indeed, Vernon Parrington and James Harvey Robinson also shared origins in the Midwest), Turner, Beard, and Becker stand above their colleagues by sheer longevity in reputation.⁷ Their histories continue to monopolize modern fascination, and it is therefore to them that this study turns. Applying a style of analysis John Clive labeled Cliography, it seeks to answer for the Progressives the question he posed towards the great English pastmasters: "What can one expect to find in the biography of a historian that will best illuminate the relation of his life to his work?" Blending one part biography with another part historiography, the Cliographic technique aims at uncovering "formative influences" in the making of the historical mind.⁸ For the Progressives, a single influential experience is clear: their Midwestern upbringings underwrote their history.

However, before considering the impact of the Midwest upon the historical thinking of the Progressives, let us briefly examine why this approach has gone overlooked. From there, the essay surveys the climate from which they emerged and the conditions which influenced their developments. In doing so we discern an array of aspects in Progressive history imparted by the late 19th century Midwestern experience. Specifically, we find a tradition marked by three interlocking forces: activism, conflict with the East, and pragmatism. Our next step takes a prosopographic look at each man, tracing these forces in their lives and work, to round out their existing historical portraits. Rather than treating the accuracy of main Progressive texts, it seeks instead to locate the Midwestern thread connecting their ideas.

That the Progressive historians sprang from the Midwest is no well-guarded secret in itself. Nor is it disputed that this constituted a sharp break from the conservative New England character which marked the early years of the profession, encompassing both its amateur and scientific-professional ranks. These

⁷ Indeed, Parrington and Robinson were both born in Illinois, the former in Aurora, the latter in Bloomington. Parrington came from significantly lesser means than Turner, Beard, and Becker, while Robinson's family enjoyed substantially greater financial security.

⁸ John Clive, *Not by Fact Alone: Essays on the Writing and Reading of History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 191-194. As Clive notes, the historian desires "something more" than biographies on specific historians have to offer. "We want to know why the great historians chose to write history in the first place," he records, "and what it was that led them to write the kind of history they eventually produced." While he proposed applying this method to legendary English greats like Macaulay and Trevelyan, it readily converts for an Americanist undertaking. John Braeman attempts this approach with Beard, focusing not on the Midwest specifically, but on his Indiana Quaker community, family life, and schooling. See Braeman, "Charles A. Beard: The Early Years in Indiana," *Indiana Magazine of History* (1982), 93-127.

are both accepted truths, incorporated into relevant research with what has evolved into a near-formulaic procedure. In standard practice, the background of each historian is hurriedly broached by way of a brief introduction to a comprehensive analysis of theory, the real focus of inquiry. Having eagerly dispensed of this formality, the matter is almost always dropped to a secondary concern and only rarely considered as a possible *modus operandi*.⁹ In a passage exemplary of this trend, Peter Novick writes “At a time when the historical profession was dominated by the Northeast, the major New/Progressive Historians were from the Midwest. The common tie *may* have contributed to their sense of solidarity- and estrangement.”¹⁰ This “common tie,” while recognized matter-of-factly by nearly every historiographer, is left noncommittally to stand on its own.¹¹

Other historians, foremost among them Richard Hofstadter, mention the Progressives as products of the Populist Midwest in richer detail, but apply this potential link with hesitant cautiousness. Careful to avoid the appearance of any artificial grouping, this approach enables them to accentuate their differences.¹² A noble intention, it is also an important one, for contrasts undeniably do separate these historians, like any others past or present. Yet the prevailing tendency to downplay likenesses suffers from its own shortcomings: in the pursuit of differences, it forfeits the telling similarities which also exist. Harping on the reticence historians have shown in acknowledging the concept of the Midwest as a

⁹ Such is the case with, among others, Higham, David W. Noble, *Historians Against History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965), Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), and Breisach. Hofstadter’s *Progressive Historians* is a quasi-exception. While devoting only small space to exploring the backgrounds of Turner, Beard, and Parrington, he employs a psychoanalysis, dissecting their personalities as impetuses behind their histories.

¹⁰ Novick, 94, emphasis mine. Of further note, rather than discuss the Progressives’ Midwestern origins in his main narrative, Novick buries it in a lengthy footnote.

¹¹ In two other exemplary instances, Howard K. Lamar and Burleigh Wilkins both refer to Progressive historiography as “a Midwestern interpretation of history.” Unfortunately however, neither scholar delves into great detail to support their claim. Lamar, for instance, dedicates only a scant paragraph to the Populist environment of the Progressives’ youth. Billington and Benson also purport to analyze background, in Turner’s case specifically, to determine how the frontier thesis was formed. The former provides invaluable detail of Turner’s frontier-like hometown, but makes less of a connection with Midwestern populism, stating its impact “can never be known.” Billington, *The Genesis of the Frontier Thesis* (San Marino, CA: The Huntington Library, 1971), 81. Likewise, while Benson contends that the frontier thesis “was the direct product of its historical setting,” he also falls short in providing evidence. See, Benson, 42. Nash comes the closest to explaining Progressive history as Midwestern, contending that the ideas of Turner and his generation did not develop in an “abstract vacuum, but in the context of the environment. However, Nash’s keen insight is mostly concerned with Turner and subsequent frontier scholars, providing less attention to the other Progressives. Additionally, he does little more than state familiar general trends in late 19th century Midwestern history, devoting minimal attention on how they affected the historiography.

¹² Hofstadter, xii-xiii, 41-42. In one instance, Hofstadter duly records that the Progressives “came from the same region and belonged to the same class and generation.” Furthermore they all “took their cues from the intellectual ferment of the period 1890-1915, from the demands for reform raised by the Populists and Progressives.” Yet at the same time, Hofstadter demonstrates a reluctance to go farther along these lines. “If I call these men Progressive historians,” he equivocates, “it is not because of a desire to group them together as an altogether unitary ‘school,’ still less to suggest that they took precisely the same view of the political changes of their age.”

distinctive influential force, D.W. Meinig makes a fair criticism. “The regional concept has been too readily dismissed as a crude tool,” he chides, “whereas it really is a basic tool that has been used crudely.”¹³

A final factor contributing to this reluctance of historians to become Cliographers, probing beneath the surface of the Progressives’ Midwestern heritage, is the paucity of scholarship available to assist them. As Carl Ubbelohde has documented, the Midwest, unlike the South, has attracted few scholars interested in exploring its regionalist features (as compared to its specific states or communities). No authoritative work exists to outline the traits of the Midwestern identity.¹⁴ Commenting on its elusive character, Russel Nye posits that the though Midwest is “easier to identify than to explain... there is nothing else quite like it in all the world.”¹⁵ Two crucial questions, then, central to Cliography, have gone largely unanswered: What did it mean to be a Midwesterner in the late 19th century? And, moreover, how did this identity impact Progressive history?

As Becker deftly observed in prefacing an essay of his own on the identity of a specific Midwesterner, the Kansan: “Broad classifications of people are easily made and are usually inaccurate; but they are convenient for taking a large view and it may be worth while.”¹⁶ It is with his understanding in sight that this study proceeds, aware of what is lost with broad strokes, but hoping for that something “worth while.”

The West, Woodrow Wilson and Turner, once a pair of young scholars boarding together at Johns Hopkins University, both agreed, has a “voice” of its own.¹⁷ For each man, sensitively attuned to the sweeping cultural changes reverberating throughout the late 19th century, that voice bellowed the angry sound of protest. Strife and discontent charged the region in the brief interlude between the close of the Civil War and the Populist ascendancy of the 1890s. In a rapid

¹³ Cited in Carl Ubbelohde, “History and the Midwest as a Region,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* (1994), 46.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 44. Ubbelohde notes that out of more than 10,000 history dissertations completed between 1970 and 1980 only 8 applied some form of Midwestern regional analysis. I contend that Russel B. Nye’s *Midwestern Progressive Politics* (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1959) comes the closest to describing what it means to be Midwestern. He contends, as did Turner, that a connected series of “interrelationships” permeates the area, providing a certain unity and legitimizing its grouping as a geographical region. For the historiography on the Midwest as a region, see Ubbelohde.

¹⁵ Nye, 3-4.

¹⁶ Carl L. Becker, *Everyman His Own Historian: Essays on History and Politics* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1966), 4.

¹⁷ Much has been made of the bond between Wilson and Turner and of their mutual understanding on the importance of the west in American history. Wilson, the older of the two, was a vocal supporter of Turner (once trying to secure him a lucrative Princeton professorship), himself never a man to shy away from flattery, following the presentation of his Frontier thesis. However, it is apparent that in later years, when Wilson occupied the Oval Office, Turner was stung by how little his opinion was heeded on policy matters. On the “voice” of the West and Wilson, see Nye, 3, 13; for Turner, see Frederick Jackson Turner (hereafter FJT) to Carl L. Becker (hereafter CLB), 21 January 1911, Jacobs, 135.

boom following the Homestead Act of 1862, a swarm of ambitious settlers descended upon the Midwest, hungrily devouring land with dreams of lucrative agricultural ventures despite inhospitable soil and weather.¹⁸ When the dust stirred by roaring locomotives settled, a Plains region that in 1860 was home to 2 million farms discovered that number had tripled by 1900. The staggering immensity of this migration triggered the federal Census Office to proclaim the frontier closed and the age of free land officially over.¹⁹

Peopled by opportunistic individuals from diverse geographical and ethnic backgrounds, these pioneers shared unity in their eagerness to lay claim on the 160 acres grandly promoted by Eastern advertisements. (The campaign to encourage western development had promised a veritable land of plenty where rain, fertilizer, and modern technology would enable profitable agriculture to blossom). Similarly, the rugged nature of the land and harrowing experiences of the western diaspora forged traits onto the Midwestern conscience which would endure through the Progressives' days and beyond. Fiercely resilient, they were true agrarian capitalists, willing to embrace any tactic offering success. To that end, they specialized cash crops, foregoing self-sufficiency, and purchased the latest technological advances in farming equipment. Finding social mobility possible in a competitive economic system, Midwesterners kept an ever-watchful eye on this area of self-interest. More importantly, in their struggle to tame the land, they adopted an outlook of pragmatic resourcefulness, open-minded to whatever methods seemed likely to solve their problems.²⁰

The burgeoning populace soon realized that they had not traveled alone.²¹ Accompanying them westward was the financial backing of Eastern capital, and with it, the aspirations of a rising presence in the postwar American scene, the tycoon. A powerful figure in the Gilded age, the captain of industry brokered a

¹⁸ For the purposes of this study, we shall set the borders of the Midwest in accordance with the Turnerian understanding, including: Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, Missouri, Iowa, Minnesota, Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas.

¹⁹ Nye, 9 and Robert C. McMath, Jr., *American Populism* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 20. McMath's study, more recent than Nye's and able to update three decades of Populist scholarship, has a dual focus, concentrating on the South as well as the Midwest. As a result, he devotes far less time on exploring the existence of Midwestern identity. His is not an inappropriate starting point if one contends, as Lawrence Goodwyn does, that Populism was born in the South over the crop lien system. However, as Eric Foner demonstrates, the primary concern of the Reconstructed United States was not in rebuilding the South, but in developing the more profitable Western territories. See Goodwyn, *The Populist Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 20, and Eric Foner, *Reconstruction* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 213. The official closing of the frontier was more psychologically than substantively devastating. As Billington notes, "more government land was homesteaded after 1900 than before." Billington, 76.

²⁰ See Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), 36-46 on these trends and their departure from the myth of the yeoman farmer.

²¹ Modern estimates hold that as much as 90% of available land was allotted not to small homesteaders, but to private real estate speculation companies and the railroad industry. Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 21-22.

new commercialized way of life, one that seeped past the Appalachians and into the constellation of rural communities dotting the country's interior. Ushering in an era of combination, greed, and big business exploitation, they heralded the forces of mechanization, urbanization, and industrialization. Connected to eastern cities by miles of railroad track and telegraph line, urban manufacturing centers, along with meat packing plants, lumber yards, and steel, iron, and grain mills, mushroomed in the West. More than standing out as obtrusive eyesores, reminders of modernity's dark side, such cities as Chicago, Indianapolis, and Detroit testified to the grim working conditions of factory wage labor.²²

Further, the Robber Baron wielded immense political power over a system corrupted by bribery and shameless machine electioneering. Manipulating the intellectual climate, they found harsh social Darwinism particularly useful in justifying a laissez-faire attitude, while conveniently ignoring the hypocrisy of espousing protectionist tariffs. Addressing a Sunday school class, John D. Rockefeller Jr. spoke for his fellow magnates when he told the children:

The growth of a large business is merely survival of the fittest... The American Beauty rose can be produced in the beauty and fragrance bring cheer to its beholder only by sacrificing the early buds which grow up around it. This is not an evil tendency in business. It is merely the working out of a law of nature and a law of God.²³

This momentum would augur in the age of vast conglomerations, fundamentally altering the state of capitalism. Though still paying rhetorical homage to small market principles, the modern capitalist now lived in a corporate world governed by corporate rules, anathema to older competitive economics.²⁴

Midwestern farmers and small-town residents, already contending with the difficulties of planting, watched the changing tide apprehensively. The emergence of massive corporations— octopus-like (in the literature of the day) with their tentacles outstretched into most facets of daily life— posed menacingly against the beliefs and, more presciently, the wallets of Midwesterners. Virtually unchecked by government, large trusts, final products from a wave of great mergers, had consolidated competitors and enjoyed a free hand in administering markets.

Protected in their own marketplace from international competition, corporations fully exposed farming exports to the price-reducing forces of supply

²² Foner, 464-465.

²³ Quoted in Russel B. Nye, *This Almost Chosen People* (Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1960), 131 (SIC).

²⁴ See Martin J. Sklar, *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism 1890-1916* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), for a thorough investigation of this conversion to "supply side" corporate capitalism.

and demand. At the same time, trusts, as one observer put it in 1900, were “tired of working for the public.” No longer burdened by great internal competition, they readily established high ceilings for the cost of their goods.²⁵ “In effect,” Nye summarizes, the Midwestern farmer “sold to companies that could fix his selling price, and bought from those that could fix the price for what he bought. It was actually possible, for example, to buy an American-made reaper in Europe for less than its price in Kansas.”²⁶ Pouring insult onto this grievous situation, corporate lending houses frequently extended Midwesterners the credit to purchase such goods. Charging exorbitant interest rates, this trade locked hapless farmers into a spiraling pattern of debt and mortgage. Additionally, trusts controlled fares for the railways that transported Midwestern crops, set insurance premiums on Midwestern property, and influenced national currency policy, constricting the dollar. In each case, the Western farmer felt himself at extreme disadvantage, his livelihood lorded over by a strong and faceless power.

For the Midwesterner, these intrusive encroachments became synonymous with the East and distant centers of capital situated in despised places like Wall Street. Already suffering from periodic drought and cycles of economic depression, in tandem with economical subservience, many disillusioned farmers felt cheated by their lot. Fueled by demagogic men like Ignatius Donnelly, who delivered fiery oratory on “a vast conspiracy against mankind,” a foreboding anti-eastern sense hovered palpably in the air.²⁷ Capturing this powder keg atmosphere, one local editor wrote, “The East has placed its hands on the throat of the West and refused to afford us that measure of justice which we, as citizens of a common country, are entitled to receive.”²⁸

While continuing to recognize shared nationality, the potent forces of bitterness and resentment heralded a rising sentiment: loyalty to region. Surging through the scattered pockets of diverse communities “like a prairie fire,” the belief that the Midwest represented a unique way of life united and emboldened its people, fostering what Becker called “a community of great solidarity.”²⁹ In their minds it was a distinct place, not unlike New England or the South, with distinct needs which were being trampled by an outside region with its own agenda. Turner captured this essence in a letter to Becker, writing that their native region “has characteristic Western ideals and social traits, at the time when it especially is in the position to arrest tendencies in the industrial life and society of the East.”³⁰

²⁵ Ibid, 56. For Sklar, Populists were among the most strident critics of the shift from competitive to corporate capitalism.

²⁶ Nye, 42.

²⁷ Trachtenberg, 174. For more on Donnelly see Nye, 68-71 and Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 67-70.

²⁸ Nye, 35.

²⁹ McMath, 50 and Becker, 10.

³⁰ FJT to CLB, 21 January 1911, Jacobs, 135.

His correspondent saw it too, noting that throughout the Midwest “there is something fermenting which is best left alone- a latent energy.”³¹

More than a phenomenon of self-realization, regional identity trumpeted the clarion call for initiating the changes necessary to “arrest” industry. With corporations in firm control of the dominant Republican Party apparatus, the Midwest became a hotbed of grass roots activism. Associations like the Grangers, Greenbackers, Farmer’s Alliance, and Populists sprang from the people themselves, emanating out of what Lawrence Goodwyn described as the “sod home frontier.”³² Railing against the status quo with an evangelical energy, they organized cooperatives, supported railroad strikes, rioted, forged voting blocs, and stirred public opinion into an anti-monopoly fury with stump speeches, Chautauqua camps, and carnival-like rallies. Perhaps nowhere was the Midwest’s message of protest more clearly stated than in a popular ballad sung (to the tune of “Save a Poor Sinner Like Me”) at innumerable fairgrounds:

I was once a tool of oppression
As green as a sucker could be,
And monopolies banded together
To beat a poor hayseed like me

The railroads and old party bosses
Together did sweetly agree
And they thought there would be little trouble
In working a hayseed like me.

But now I’ve roused up a little
And their greed and corruption I see.
And the ticket I vote next November
Will be made up of hayseeds like me.³³

Zealously active, Midwesterners reapplied their agrarian-capitalist pragmatism to Populism vis-à-vis a willingness to reform politics and society by nearly any means available. Becker detected in this a pervasive spirit of resourcefulness, “a sense of power to overcome obstacles... of achieving whatever is necessary.”³⁴ Casting aside traditional reservations on intrusive government,

³¹ Becker, 10.

³² Goodwyn, 71. By “sod house frontier” Goodwyn characterizes the popular participation of ordinary Midwesterners in the protest movement. Its founders, he writes, were people who “‘habitually’ went barefoot in the summer and in winter wrapped rags around their feet.”

³³ Ibid, 65.

³⁴ Becker, 6.

the movement, while not Marxist, pushed for a radical extension of positive state power. Convening in Omaha in 1892, Populists pledged themselves to a platform of resistance against “oppression, injustice, and poverty.”³⁵ Their hope was for government regulation to meet these ends, checking the abuses of trusts and preserving democracy from “special privileges” of an eastern plutocracy.³⁶ Elevating their clamor to a high pitch in the 1890s, raising “more hell than corn” in the words of one commentator, Populism awoke the country to its cause.³⁷

By the close of the 19th century the spirit generated by Midwestern Populists spilled-over nationwide into progressivism. Throughout the country, reformers waved the banner of change, signaling their discontent with Gilded age excess. Transcending local activism, progressives brought reform to the national fore, encompassing both political parties and all geographical regions.³⁸ Muckrakers demonized factory conditions in sensational exposés; Thorstein Veblen (a Midwesterner) undercut Rockefeller’s image of the affluent as fit survivors, caricaturing the wasteful lavishness of “conspicuous consumption”; the American Political Science Association declared “Laissez-faire is dead! Long live social control!”; and Theodore Roosevelt symbolically shook a big stick in the direction of trusts and monopolies.³⁹ Shifting from an agrarian to a middle class base, the new movement transposed Populist concerns to a greater level. Though allied with the farming community, progressives sought to incorporate such urban issues as municipal reform, social welfare, and labor rights into their cause. Supported by intellectuals, progressivism assumed a sophisticated, more literary approach than the emotional raucousness of Populism; tempering the outcry for state-sponsored reform to appeal to Eastern moderates, the new wave quickly subsumed the old.⁴⁰

Observing these events from Madison, Wisconsin, William Allen White realized that a great transition had occurred. The progressive reformers, he remarked, “had caught the Populists in swimming and stolen all of their clothing.” He was right. The Populist day had ended, the Progressive era was dawning.⁴¹

³⁵ Trachtenberg, 173-175. At this convention, they further vowed to “restore the Republic to the hands of ‘Plain people.’”

³⁶ Nye, 44, 182.

³⁷ Ibid, 4.

³⁸ Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 133.

³⁹ Nye, *Chosen People*, 139 and Hofstader, 182. It is worth noting that while the economist Veblen and the Progressives often savaged many of the elites perched atop the system built by social Darwinism, they worked within its racist edifice. Walter Lippman later observed that a mood of suspicion had befallen the American public, predisposing their sympathies with the accusers instead of the accused.

⁴⁰ Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 133.

⁴¹ Nye, 123, 182-185. Absorbed by the Progressive movement, the term Populist fell into immediate disuse by the first years of the 20th century.

Yet for this diminishing role, the Midwestern influence was not entirely on the wane. Rising in the university system, a young generation of scholars, deeply influenced during these impressionable years, was formulating bold new thoughts on the study of history. Even before receiving formal educations, their paradigms were shaped by the raging forces of the Populist tempest: activism, conflict with Eastern industry, and pragmatism. Interwoven in their minds, these impulses cemented into permanent fixtures, forming the basis of Progressive historiography. They assured that long after the death of Populism, Midwestern regional ideas would live on well into the 20th century.

Fate placed them before the gates of academe at a propitious moment. Benefiting from the growth of state university systems and, ironically, Gospel of Wealth endowments in institutions like Stanford and University of Chicago, the Progressives found plentiful career openings in a ballooning market.⁴² Appointments carried attractive social prestige and salaries reached enticing new heights, promising an upper-middle class lifestyle at top schools. In addition, the implementation of professional standards of scholarship had democratized the professoriate, severing the stronghold of a literary patrician class. Adopted from Germany and crystallized by the establishment of the American Historical Association in 1884, the mission of objective fact-gathering, modeled on the scientific method, leveled the task of writing history.⁴³ For the first time, academic chairs were open to men of humble means. While this propelled mostly Eastern conservatives as the first wave of Ph.D.s to unseat the amateurs, offspring of the Midwest led the charge in the second generation to enter the field.⁴⁴ By 1907, their presence was strong enough, and their interests sufficiently divergent, to warrant branching off into a Midwestern organization, the Mississippi Valley Historical Association. Separate from the “eastern establishment” of the AHA, the

⁴² Novick, 169-170. This academic bubble did not burst until after the first World War when conditions worsened drastically. Career prospects for the historian recovered only once, following the surge of college enrollments on the G.I. Bill.

⁴³ The *American Historical Review* would follow the AHA in 1895. As Hofstadter observes, the early professionals “thought that they understood Ranke and... approved of what they thought he stood for.” Hofstadter, 38.

⁴⁴ Higham, 61-67, 173-174, Hofstadter, 77, and Novick, 86-108. Increasingly, the literary patrician faded completely from the academic orbit, frustrated by the loss of prestige wrought by standardization. Distancing themselves (or moving to positions as regents where they could act on their hostility), they left the classroom, preferring, as Turner noted, “to carry on in their own environment.” Higham further notes the “remarkable extent” to which the Progressives heralded from the Midwest and South while “most of the prominent conservative professors of history, on the other hand, were easterners: Adams, Andrews, Osgood, and Channing bore the indelible stamp of New England” (Higham, 174). Also, it is important to note, as Novick does, that the Progressives “remained a minority within the historical community.” But their popular ideas “were hardly marginal to the profession. Indeed, the Progressives published actively, attracted a new generation of graduate students, served on the AHR editorial board, and won terms as AHA presidents.

MHVA controlled its own archives and published a journal, *Review*, covering all fields of history.⁴⁵

Maturing in the midst of this academic declension Turner, Beard, and Becker came from middle class backgrounds, making their conversion to progressivism all the more natural. Less directly affected by the hardship that prompted revolt, they absorbed Populist ideals while remaining sufficiently insulated to transition smoothly. Contributing to the reform ethos of the Progressive era, they added their voices and considerable talents to the fray, inundating the profession with their Midwestern blend of activism, conflict-determinism, and pragmatism. Far from abandoning Populism, the Progressives transferred its message, elevating it from a regional to a national project and polishing the language to fit the new intellectual climate.

Reversing the goals of the early professionals, the Progressives accosted scientific history's founding father, Leopold von Ranke, and scoffed at the notion of history as a passive collecting of facts with no social consequence.⁴⁶ They rejected the very possibility of attaining objective truth, of detachedly recording the past for its own sake, of portraying history, like Ranke, *wie es eigentlich gewesen*.⁴⁷ Beard and Becker particularly relished assaulting the scientific "fetish of fact," denouncing it as little more than veiled conservatism, designed to obstruct involvement in contemporary affairs. Beard thundered that the Rankean foundation of the profession was "cold, factual, and apparently undisturbed by the passions of the time (and) served the cause of those who did not want to be disturbed." Becker wryly seconded this thought, noting the aloof, nonfunctional nature of purely-factual, impartial history. "No doubt the truth shall make you free. But free to do what? To sit and contemplate the truth?"⁴⁸ Antiquarian history for its own sake seemed a toothless, obsolete Eastern luxury to the Progressives; an activist view, allowing for direct involvement with the present, carried far greater appeal.

⁴⁵ Novick, 182-183.

⁴⁶ Hofstadter, 38.

⁴⁷ "As it actually was." See Lloyd R. Sorenson, "Historical Currents in America," *American Quarterly* (Autumn, 1955), 234-235, 239 and Novick, 25-31. Novick suggests that ambitious nineteenth-century American historians, trained in German universities for a lack of American doctoral programs (which they themselves would pioneer in institutions like Johns Hopkins), inadvertently misinterpreted the ideal *Wissenschaftliche Objektivität* to mean history as an empirical and natural science, ironclad goals Ranke, in truth, never advocated to this extreme. In lashing out at objective history the Progressives were not rejecting the natural sciences in their own right, but criticizing the way older historians employed its methodologies in antiquarian studies.

⁴⁸ Cushing Strout, *The Pragmatic Revolt in American History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), 5, 21; Novick, 254, 272. For Strout, the Progressive's ascension marked a radical change for Clío. "From her position as a grave, impartial goddess, above the battle, she had been thrust into the thick of the struggle as a humble warrior." Beard railing against scientific history, concluded that "Ranke, a German conservative, writing after the storm and stress of the French Revolution, was weary of history written for, or permeated by, the purposes of Revolutionary propaganda."

Pursuing this new approach aggressively, they split the profession between themselves and the detached standards of the scientific school.⁴⁹

To be activist meant declining to join early professionals like J. Franklin Jameson in the task of “making bricks,” factual case studies on primary documents prided for their lack of moralizing. Instead, the Progressives coveted the role of the historian engagé. They sought to craft an interpretation of history capable of inspiring change in the present; to answer Van Wyck Brooks’ plea for a “usable past.”⁵⁰ Becker stated their new position: “Historical thinking is a social instrument, helpful in getting the world’s work more effectively done.”⁵¹ It was, he added later, “history that influences the course of history.”⁵² His compatriots agreed, history could and should serve as an agent of reform, a weapon to be drawn on behalf of social justice. Brandished properly, it might be used both to convince the American people to support reform and, for its more ambitious advocates, to guide the state in implementing progressive programs.

Accomplishing this required a complete reorientation of the meaning of history. A new structure and rationale had to be erected in place of the scientific order they proposed to demolish. The construction process afforded the Progressives a prominent stage from which to display their deep wells of pragmatism.⁵³ Demonstrating the same willingness to test novel ideas that set the Midwest ablaze in the late 19th century, the Progressives countered Rankean objectivity with blatant strains of subjectivity. Trying to formulate a fluid ideal of scholarship, they injected history with a mixed serum of relativity and presentism, thereby denying the possibility of an objective reading and branding any such attempt undesirable. History, an interpretive art to them, could never reach an absolute, immortal truth, it was too much a product of the milieu in which it was conceived. As Beard, exercising his penchant for melodrama, phrased it, “one is more or less a guesser in this vale of tears.”⁵⁴ In their reasoning, it then followed that if perfectly accurate history was only a “Noble Dream,” why should one abstain from interpreting it in a way relevant to problems of the day? Arriving at

⁴⁹ Novick, 239.

⁵⁰ Higham, *Writing American History*, 54.

⁵¹ Quoted in Novick, 98. J.H. Robinson concurred, unleashing even stronger language: “The present has hitherto been the willing victim of the past; the time has now come when it should turn on the past and exploit it in the interests of advance.”

⁵² Becker, 252.

⁵³ Strout, 27. Pragmatism was not the exclusive property of the Midwestern historians, but a philosophy rising to dominance in early 20th century American thought through the writings of William James and John Dewey. Dewey also favored history as impetus for reform, declaring knowledge of the past “a lever for moving the present into a certain kind of future.”

⁵⁴ Novick, 257.

this point, Progressive historiography discovered its foundation: in the words of Cushing Strout, theirs was a history of “pragmatic utility.”⁵⁵

Finally, to complete their new construct, the Progressives configured a revamped framework of causality. Reared in an environment openly hostile to the East and vehemently resistant to its intrusions, they made both of these conditions pillars of their history. “To account for obvious evils,” Charles Crowe notes, “they developed a conspiratorial theory of reality and reform which placed the reformers in conflict with irresponsible capitalists and in alliance with their victims, a homogenous, united majority called “the people.”⁵⁶ Emulating the local editor who complained about the strangling of the West, they converted anti-Eastern liturgy into polarized, conflict-driven theory. For them, the annals of recorded time told the story of powerful interests aligning against the greater good of the people. In their binary worldviews, the Progressives depicted history as a dichotomy shaded almost entirely in black and white, leaving no room for intermittent strokes of gray. It was also a dualistic struggle, a series of opposing forces butting heads: capitalists vs. farmers, the people vs. the privileged few, Hamilton vs. Jefferson, Eastern greed vs. Western pioneers, good vs. evil, Yin and Yang.⁵⁷ Seen in this light, it was always clear which half operated on the side of righteousness and which acted ignobly. From there it was a very short step for the reader to understand why reform was so vitally necessary.

If the scientific professionals took neutral objectivity to an extreme, the Progressive response, alive with the same protest spirit once rampant in their native region, swung the pendulum to its opposite end. Beyond the confluence of these interlocking Midwestern traits (activism, determinism, and pragmatism) which we shall next examine in each individual, Turner, Beard, and Becker maintained a final enduring connection: regional identification. Even as the lure of elite Eastern academic posts called them away from their small town beginnings, each man remained attached to his place of birth. Above all else, Turner once penned, “I am a Western man.”⁵⁸ In their own ways, all three of these men embodied his words.

Of our Progressive trio, it was Frederick Jackson Turner (1861-1932) who most dearly embraced his native region. “I love my Middle West,” he confessed in a letter to Becker, referring to it as the “heart of the Republic.”⁵⁹ More so than either Beard or Becker, he espoused a deep belief in regional exceptionalism. Equating Eastern corporations with Europe’s Industrial Revolution, Turner extolled, “It is in the Middle West that society has formed on lines least like those

⁵⁵ Strout, 87.

⁵⁶ Charles Crowe, “The Emergence of Progressive History,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, (Jan-March, 1966), n 111.

⁵⁷ Higham, 178-179.

⁵⁸ Jacobs, 106.

⁵⁹ FJT to CLB, 10 March 1916, Jacobs, 143.

of Europe. It is here, if anywhere, that American democracy will make its stand against the tendency to adjust to a European type.”⁶⁰ His powerful attachment to the Midwest encouraged him to make Progressive historiography’s first breaks from conventional objective historicism in an effort to attract national attention to his historically-overlooked region.

Born in Portage, Wisconsin, a modest-sized village still bearing traces of its frontier past during his boyhood, Turner converted his regional fondness into a passion for Western history. “The frontier was real to me,” he admitted to Becker, “and when I studied history I did not keep my personal experiences in a watertight compartment away from my studies.”⁶¹ Taking his undergraduate degree from the University of Wisconsin and receiving his graduate training with H.B. Adams at Johns Hopkins (where he was exposed to the Eastern-oriented “germ theory” of history), Turner returned to teach at Madison in 1889, poised to rewrite the history of the West.⁶²

Shattering previous historical trends, which portrayed the West either in terms of wild adventure, like Theodore Roosevelt had, or as a marginal player in the American past, Turner’s landmark frontier thesis rerouted professional scholarship.⁶³ For him, the Western frontier was not only deserving of serious treatment as a factor in U.S. history, it actually explained the unfolding of American democracy. Delivered at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, when Turner was a remarkably young 32, his essay revolutionized the study of history. In it he claimed that the restless pioneer energy behind a perpetually-expanding frontier line single-handedly carved America’s affinity for egalitarianism. In the quest to tame nature, special privilege had no place. Standing behind his podium, Turner declared:

American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its

⁶⁰ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Dover Publications, 1996), 282.

⁶¹ FJT to CLB, 16 December 1925, Billington, 243. In this long letter, Turner affectionately recalls his rugged upbringing at Portage: “I have polled down the Wisconsin in a dugout with Indian guides... through virgin forests of balsam firs, seeing deer in the river... I have seen a lynched man hanging to a tree as I came home from school... have played around old Fort Winnebago at its outskirts... have seen Indians come in on their ponies to buy paint and ornaments, and sell furs; have stumbled on their camp on the Baraboo where dried pumpkins were hung up, and cooking muskrats were on the kettle, and an Indian family were bathing in the river...”

⁶² Adams’ theory placed the seeds of American civilization from “its germinal origins in the folkmoat of the primitive Saxon forest,” traveling from Germany to England before finally reaching the shores of North America’s Atlantic coast. See Sorenson, 235-236.

⁶³ Higham, 153. In narrative indicative of amateur interpretation of the West, Henry Adams wrote: “From Lake Erie to Florida, in long, unbroken line, pioneers were at work, cutting into the forests with the energy of so many beavers, and with no more express moral purpose than the beavers they drove away.” See Adams, *The United States in 1800* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1955), 127.

continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating the American character. The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West.⁶⁴

With the frontier closed, the wellspring for democratic revitalization appeared lost to Turner. Pressure would inevitably build if the United States was hemmed in, leading to explosive situations like Midwestern agrarian revolt. A new safety valve was essential for democracy's survival. Writing in his journal some years earlier, Turner considered the changing environmental realities of the age "a turning point." "We have a new system of nature," he continued, "We must now obtain a new theory of society."⁶⁵ Reared in a region screaming for regulatory state empowerment, "Turner's answer was progressive reform," to which he hoped history might "hold the lamp."⁶⁶ Although he doubtlessly failed to grasp its monumental importance at the time, Turner had released the snowball that started the avalanche of Progressive historiography. Evaluating its profound impact years later, Page Smith proclaimed "The Turner thesis was to America what the Magna Charta was to the British, Charlemagne to the French, and the Teutonic tribes to the historians of a recently unified Germany. It appeared to explain certain aspects of the American story which were otherwise inexplicable."⁶⁷

Late 19th century Wisconsin, the birthplace of progressive government, is a wholly fitting place for the father of activist history to have originated. Enrolled at Madison alongside Robert M. La Follette, Turner absorbed heavy dosages of the "Wisconsin idea."⁶⁸ A catalyst for intellectual activism, it held that a university's staff should serve the state by interacting with legislators, facilitating debate, and suggesting reform policy. Turner brought this attitude to his field, advocating that "The value of our studies is not merely historical. If properly worked up they will be a basis for State legislation."⁶⁹ Subscribing to this philosophy during his tenure at Madison (he departed for Harvard in 1910 after repeated clashes with University trustees), Turner aided Governor La Follette's braintrust, a group of intellectuals directly leading the progressive crusade in state politics.⁷⁰

At a more abstract level, Turner's activism permeated his writings, promoting reform didactically through the lessons inherent in his history.

⁶⁴ Turner, 2-3.

⁶⁵ Quoted in, Jacobs, 10.

⁶⁶ Novick, 93.

⁶⁷ Page Smith, *The Historian and History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), 150.

⁶⁸ Nye, 148 and Lamar, 79. For more on La Follette, an important progressive political leader, see Nye, 190-209.

⁶⁹ FJT to William F. Allen, 31 December 1888, Jacobs, 132.

⁷⁰ Nye, 150. The Madison model was followed "on a less spectacular scale throughout the Midwest, providing reformers with the underpinning they needed."

Presenting the Midwest as an alternative to banal industrial society, he offered a progressive beacon for the country to follow, a model by which democracy could “make its stand.” “The West was not conservative,” Turner argued, it was bound by “ideals of equality, the exaltation of the common man... it has been, and is, preeminently a region of ideals.”⁷¹ From this tread emerged the Populist, a figure he revered (and hoped the nation would too) as the natural successor to the frontiersman, struggling to preserve democracy. A defender of pioneer values, “he must use the government to control the economy and society so that the old way of life was not smashed by the forces of industrialism and wealth.”⁷² In Turner’s reckoning, the East had a lot to learn about La Follette-style Midwestern progressivism; he wanted to be the one to teach them.

In this vein, conflict-determinism runs throughout Turnerian history. Touching on it in his 1910 AHA presidential address, Turner stated, “We may trace the contest between the capitalist and the democratic pioneer from the earliest colonial days.”⁷³ By framing history in such a way, Howard Lamar contends, his “real purpose was to explain Midwestern populism to a hostile East.”⁷⁴ Showcasing two extremes, a “witches’ kettle” industrial order ruled by capitalist elites and a Western garden bearing the fruit of democracy, his writings drew a line in the sand and demanded the nation choose sides.⁷⁵ Constantly at odds with each other, Turner finds the heart of their conflict in the backwoodsman’s refusal to brook a privileged class. Disturbed by this impulse, Eastern leaders worked ceaselessly to stifle the equalitarian spirit before it spread to their home regions. Targeting Gouverneur Morris as a guilty example in this conspiracy, Turner portrays a man who “thought the rule of representation ought to be fixed, as to secure the Atlantic States a prevalence in the national councils.”⁷⁶ Fortunately for the Midwest, a vanguard of heroes championing the people (most notably Jackson and Lincoln) always rose from the regenerative backcountry to save democracy, checking Eastern corruption when it reached an intolerable point.⁷⁷ For Turner, the Populist represented the latest link in this chain, the next savior of democracy produced by his region; through his history, he sought to make America see it too.

⁷¹ Turner, 210, 214.

⁷² Noble, 51.

⁷³ Turner, 325.

⁷⁴ Lamar, 91.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 91-92. In contrast to the West described above, Turner’s East was a land blinded by a lust for profits, woefully connected to the problems of Europe, stagnated by its lack of “rebirth,” and governed by aristocratic influences.

⁷⁶ Turner, 207.

⁷⁷ Noble, 44-51. Turner argued that the regenerative capacity of the West facilitated its ability to constantly give rise to a new generation of “heroes” to replace older ones. Even as leaders like Jackson were passing from history’s main stage, he wrote in a passage exemplary of his nostalgia, “the young Lincoln sank his axe deep into the opposing forest.”

Paralleling the case with historical activism, Turner was also the first Progressive to seriously endorse pragmatism, though he did so tentatively, never fully expounding his thoughts on the matter. Yet Becker remembered him as a man “always occupied primarily with the present and with the past as illuminating the present.”⁷⁸ Turner himself admitted this in his letters, confiding that he “conceived of the past as an explanation of *much* of the present.”⁷⁹ Going beyond the pale of private correspondence in his AHA speech, he announced to his fellow historians that “we should rework our history from the new points of view afforded by the present.”⁸⁰ Evoking the wrath of the profession’s then-conservative majority, Turner urged a presentist perspective, a selective emphasizing of certain past events over others, as part of his desire to produce a useable past.⁸¹ Completing the break, he toyed openly with relativity, throwing behind it the weight of his considerable reputation and casting doubt on the attainability of truth. In language Beard and Becker echoed decades later, Turner wrote that “Each age writes the history of the past anew with conditions uppermost in its own times.”⁸²

Growing up in the tight-knit Quaker community of Knightstown, Indiana, the youthful experiences of Charles A. Beard (1874-1948) differed sharply from Turner’s. Rather than romping through frontier wilderness, he underwent strict prep schooling, running his father’s local printing press on the side. His real education, however, came during his student years at DePauw University. Traveling to Chicago, he lived briefly at Jane Addams’ Hull House, attended William Jennings Bryan rallies, and observed the misery of working conditions at the stockyards. Stunned by the gross inadequacies separating rich from poor, his wife Mary Beard remembered that “he was impressed by the class divisions between aristocrats and laborers; it made a deep and lasting imprint on his mind and influenced his future activities.”⁸³

Completing his doctorate at Columbia in 1904 after a sojourn in Europe, he took a professorship in political science there the same year. Moved by Turner’s frontier thesis and intrigued by the budding “New History” developing within his institution, Beard began hatching his own notions of Progressive scholarship. Once he started writing, concentrating on issues of class and economic disparity, his prolific pen never wavered. Cutting a stark contrast to Turner, a career essayist, who failed to produce the major full-bodied work expected of him, Beard

⁷⁸ Becker, 224.

⁷⁹ FJT to CLB, 16 December 1925, Billington, 243, emphasis from source.

⁸⁰ Turner, 330. In this case he was jointly referring to presentist history and on the need to incorporate the social sciences in historical writing.

⁸¹ Higham, 111.

⁸² Cited in Jacobs, 125, and originally stated in Turner’s 1891 essay “The Significance of History.”

⁸³ Mary Ritter Beard, *The Making of Charles A. Beard* (New York: Exposition Press, 1955), 14-15.

published with machine-like regularity.⁸⁴ Over the course of his life he authored 49 books of history (and 28 more on political science), calculated at 21,059 total pages in addition to a wealth of articles and reviews.⁸⁵

From this mountain of literature, it was his 1913 volume, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* that secured his reputation. A bombshell of controversy, this work launched a direct assault on the hallowed images of the Framers. Interpreting the federalism of the Founders as little more than self-serving capitalism, Beard intended to demystify America's sacred document, providing the opening for a progressive reform of old laws. Two decades after its release a colleague relived its shocking impact on the historical world:

From a critical study of the Constitution came a discovery that struck home like a submarine torpedo—the discovery that the drift towards plutocracy was not a drift away from the spirit of the Constitution but an inevitable unfolding from its premises...[not] a democratic instrument [but a force] designedly hostile to democracy.⁸⁶

Gaining celebrity status with fireworks rivaling Turner's, Beard gained instant recognition among historians and emerged as an authority in Progressive history.

Maintaining a connection to his native Midwest, Beard resigned from Columbia in 1917, moving into a fully-running dairy farm nestled in the Connecticut countryside. In quiet solace, he turned to writing history textbooks and brooded over the need for an isolationist foreign policy, a topic that consumed him relentlessly throughout the 1930s and 1940s. From his hilled enclosure, he jealously protected the economic interests of his agrarian neighbors and reemerged as the “farmboy” Hofstadter holds “was always in him.”⁸⁷ Until his dying days he continually adhered to regional quirks, avoiding stock investments, which he saw as a kind of gambling. He signed his letters “Charles Beard, Dairy Farmer,” and introduced himself as “Charles Beard, Dirt Farmer.”⁸⁸ “Life was hard,” he wrote as an older man, recalling his Midwestern childhood, “but ...it seems

⁸⁴ Hofstadter, 115 and Ellen Nore, *Charles A. Beard: An Intellectual Biography* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), 39. Nore identifies Beard's “unflagging energy” with both his passion and as a result of tinnitus, an affliction causing a ringing in his ears that prevented him from sleeping unless he was fully exhausted. He routinely worked late into the night under its torment, until he could no longer remain awake.

⁸⁵ McDonald, 110.

⁸⁶ Cited in Crowe, 118, SIC. At another extreme was the reaction of Marion (Ohio) *Star* which headlined the books release: “SCAVENGERS, HYENA-LIKE, DESECRATE THE GRAVES OF THE DEAD PATRIOTS WE REVERE.” Lambasting Beard, the newspaper found his work “libelous, vicious, and damnable.”

⁸⁷ Hofstadter, 288-290. His infamous resignation occurred resulted from a long-standing grudge with the president, which came to a head during the hedging of academic freedom during World War One.

⁸⁸ Higham, 181, Nore, 91, Mary Beard, 36, and Gaido, 350-375.

beautiful against the wars, hatred and intolerance of this age; and the best of the old days I should like to recover, for America, and for the world.”⁸⁹

Surpassing the social activism of Turner and Becker combined, Beard tirelessly involved himself in the reform cause. Tackling a diverse range of issues, women’s suffrage, urban crime, and welfare programs among others, he gave regular public lectures and served on the New York Bureau of Municipal Research, steering policy proposals in a progressive direction.⁹⁰ During election seasons he campaigned for his favorite candidates, ringing doorbells in New York City’s Lower East side. In 1915 Governor Al Smith appointed him to a special advisory role in “reconstructing” state government. Taking his activism overseas in the 1920s, he accepted a personal request from the Mayor of Tokyo to assist city-planning efforts after a massive earthquake followed by a similar venture in Yugoslavia.

As an intellectual activist, Beard considered it his responsibility to “inspire” humanity by honoring the goal he set for himself as a young scholar. “The educational world is not separated from the real world,” wrote Beard the undergraduate, “and the student must stand in the very midst of social conflicts.”⁹¹ Setting his talents to work this way, Beard aspired to convince the country to join him in rejecting the perception that “law is made up of some abstract stuff known as justice.”⁹² He wanted his history to ease America into a comfortable relationship with new reform laws. Aiming for the top, Beard locked his sights on the national government, a seemingly well-guarded fortress against the progressive changes sweeping locally throughout the Midwest. Seeking to remove the myths enshrined by laissez-faire capitalists on a minimal-interventionist state, he employed an economic revisionism suggestive of a massive conspiracy: “Our fundamental law was not the product of an abstraction known as the ‘whole people,’” he willed his readers to believe, “but a group of economic interests which must have expected beneficial results from its adoption.”⁹³ Asserting that the Constitution was forced onto the American people to protect the interests of a capitalist minority, Beard invites the middle and lower classes to question its legitimacy. By taking his logic through to its natural conclusion, he hoped they

⁸⁹ Braeman, 127.

⁹⁰ Nore, 38-45.

⁹¹ Cited in Braeman, 126.

⁹² Crowe, 119.

⁹³ Charles A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1962), 17. Phrased originally as a suggestive question, Beard couched his work in belligerent but non-sensational and carefully-weighted language (his wife characterized it as “chokingly dry” writing) of professional history. In this way Beard hoped to harness the instinctive anger elicited by his charges into a respectable study. If the reading public could not dismiss it as the work of a raving crank, then perhaps they would feel its buried sting. Throughout his book he refrains from demonizing the Founders outright and even credits the Constitution with a benevolent. See Mary Beard, 33.

would then accept the righteousness of reform. Distancing himself from the Marxist credo for revolutionary class uprising, Beard favored this technique, described by his biographer as “an intensive education of people everywhere on social and economic issues.”⁹⁴

To break down the barriers of patriotism he believed to be propping up conservative practices in Washington, Beard stoked at class antagonisms, revealing his conflict-determinist side. Relying heavily on James Madison’s Federalist Paper # 10 in his analysis, he recreates America on the eve of the Constitutional convention as a land divided into two segments, creditors and debtors.⁹⁵ The former lined up overwhelmingly to support replacing the Articles of Confederation with a strong constitution, while the latter found the new document stacked against them. Its ratification process, in Beard’s terms, pitted the force of business against the Populist essence for the first time, establishing the precedent for all future conflict- a small aristocracy vs. the people, comprising mostly farmers and workers.⁹⁶ Dubiously squeezed out of the referendum to pass or decline the Constitution, the majority of Americans had a new political order, one advantageous to the capitalist, imposed upon them. Describing these circumstances to La Follette, Beard explained that the progressive reformer’s struggle was not “a question of ‘restoring’ the government to the people”; rather, it was “a question of getting possession of it for them for the first time.”⁹⁷

Like Turner before him, Beard espoused pragmatism on a twofold basis. Fitting the Progressive mold, he concurred that historical truth was fleeting, relative to the time it was written, and should therefore abandon pretensions of disinterest and equip itself for present needs. Unlike the architect of the Frontier thesis however, Beard dove unhesitatingly into pragmatic waters. In a quote very much revealing of the man he was, Beard once stated that the truly great historian, “endures only in so far as he succeeds in casting through the warp of the past the weft of the future— The future which he can behold only by prophetic discernment. It is given to but a few to walk with the gods in the dusk of ages.”⁹⁸ Counting himself part of this chosen few, he filled his histories with lessons for the present (the need to reform along progressive lines) and visions of the future. Assuming the role of Jeremiah, he outlined blueprints for a social democracy, even drawing up a “Five Year Plan for America” in 1932, making his famous proclamation that

⁹⁴ Nore, 148. Though he respected Marx and sympathized with much of his vision for the future, Beard doubted whether Marxism could ever be implemented in the United States. “Abundance, he had argued, had fostered an optimistic attitude toward the possibility of social mobility, creating a dream that weakened class consciousness.”

⁹⁵ McDonald, 113-116. For Beard, “the line of cleavage for and against the Constitution was between substantial personality interests on the one hand and the small farming and debtor interests on the other.”

⁹⁶ Gaido, 350-375.

⁹⁷ Quoted in Novick, 98.

⁹⁸ Strout, 57.

the United States should be “a national garden well tended.”⁹⁹ In this way he hoped to realize his recovery for “the best of the old days” with planned communities.

At his own AHA presidential address, in 1933, Beard was still on this high. Making relativity the central theme of his speech, he insisted written history became “an act of faith” whenever it presumed “something true can be known.”¹⁰⁰ In his mind, the historian unavoidably dealt in subjective bias with each word choice and every source used or omitted. Creating a useable past, then, was a viable option if for no other reason than the sheer impossibility of achieving objective truth. Using familiar terminology, Beard wrote that history changes “from generation to generation... [and] takes on new form and content, as the interests and intellectual preoccupations of mankind change.”¹⁰¹

Carl L. Becker (1873-1945) is an odd giant in the American historical tradition. A luminary from an epistemological school made famous by its boisterous spirit, he preferred to live in quiet obscurity, shying away from the historian’s social functions when at all possible.¹⁰² Reserved in public and outwardly cold to many of his students, Becker possessed neither the buoyancy of Turner nor the magnanimity of Beard. “I am a miserable hermit,” he once wrote only half-jokingly of himself, “always sitting behind a door never opened except for a suspicious crack when any one knocks from outside.”¹⁰³ Furthermore, though he authored a number of brilliant works, he never sent shockwaves through the profession with a single thunderclap like the frontier thesis or economic interpretation. In large part, it is for this very reason that his name endures near the top of Progressive historiography. His works were of superior writing and carefully thought out; more importantly, though innovative and original, they did not overextend themselves as bluntly in order to be explosive. As a result, while the grand narratives of Turner and Beard have been thoroughly picked apart over the years, their many flaws exposed, much in Becker’s history avoided the gauntlet.¹⁰⁴ He is now generally considered outdated instead of outworn.¹⁰⁵

⁹⁹ Noble, 73-74, 126, Nore, 141, and Strout, 147. It was in defense of this plan that Beard assumed his staunch isolationist phase in the 1930s and 1940s. He advocated making the “fundamental industries” of the U.S. (transportation, communications, natural resources, etc) into “national public service enterprises.”

¹⁰⁰ Cited in Novick, 257.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 104.

¹⁰² Wilkins, 106-107.

¹⁰³ CLB to Felix Frankfurter, 10 January 1935, “*What is the Good of History?*” *Selected Letters of Carl L. Becker, 1900-1945*, Michael Kammen, Ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1973), 213. In this letter to the future Supreme Court Justice, Becker uses the above self-description as an excuse as to why he must refuse a visiting professorship at Oxford.

¹⁰⁴ Richard Nelson, “Carl Becker Revisited: Irony and Progress in History,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* (April-June, 1987), 307-308. Additionally, Nelson credits Becker’s longevity to a cultivated ambiguity which he holds as “far too sustained and consistent not to be deliberate.”

The son of a dirt farmer-turned-local-politico in Black Hawk County, Iowa, Becker traversed a strange path in becoming the historian once described as matching “the urbanity of Lord Chesterfield.”¹⁰⁶ Much more of a true farm boy than Beard ever was, Becker remembered his years behind the plow fondly: “I enjoyed the great pleasure of following a McCormic selfbinder about a forty acre oat field for ten hours a day, in the humble capacity of a ‘shucker.’” This experience, he went on, instilled in his mind and work, “the zeal of a one time practical farmer.”¹⁰⁷

Entering Madison “a green farm boy from the sticks” as a freshman the same year Turner delivered his frontier thesis, Becker held the older man in awe, deciding at once to study history and apprentice himself to this rising great.¹⁰⁸ Encumbered by a sporadic adjunct workload at a variety of universities, he prolonged his graduate studies over ten years, 1897-1907, bouncing between Madison and Columbia for coursework. The Ph.D. uncompleted, he settled full time at the University of Kansas in 1902, remaining there until, having proven his historical talents, he received a prestigious offer from Cornell in 1917. Becker became a near-immovable fixture in Ithaca through his retirement in 1941. During his long career he published on a wide range of subjects, from Revolutionary American politics and the Declaration of Independence to the Enlightenment, maintaining in his writings a semblance of the Progressive spirit he kept shut out of his life.¹⁰⁹

A withdrawn individual, Becker demurred from open participation in the battleground of reform, serving the cause from his desk. “It goes without saying,” he wrote an acquaintance, “that the Universities should be concerned, however indirectly, with the vital problems of society.”¹¹⁰ Applying this sense in his own writings, Becker produced activist histories from a multitude of angles. Comfortable, at the early stages of his career, in imitating his old mentor’s frontier

¹⁰⁵ Cushing Strout, “Carl Becker and the Haunting of American History,” *Reviews in American History* (June, 1987), 338-343.

¹⁰⁶ Wilkins, 3.

¹⁰⁷ CLB to Reuben Gold Thwaites, 25 April 1909, Kammen, 11.

¹⁰⁸ See Becker’s humorous account of these years in his essay “Frederick Jackson Turner,” Becker, 191-232. CLB to Guy Stanton Ford, 10 April 1936, Kammen, 243 and Wilkins, 35-48. For the remainder of his life, Becker revered his old professor, writing him loyally and praising him publicly whenever the chance arrived.

¹⁰⁹ *The History of Political Parties in the Province of New York 1760-1776* (1909); *The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas* (1922); and *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers* (1932). Between his time at Kansas and Cornell, Becker spent one academic season at the University of Minnesota. After World War I his historical writings took a pessimistic and less Progressive form, reflecting a disillusionment of the concept of progress. However, in his considerable work on the purpose of professional history, Becker continued to be sharply critical about the conservatism of “scientific” history. In this way he aided “New history” “by pointing out the limits of detachment and by encouraging... anyone else who believed that history... could aid the social sciences and ultimately mankind.” See Wilkins, 91.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 74.

approach, he crafted an essay on the pioneering spirit of Kansas. Hoping to convince the country about the virtuous elements of its character (while admitting its flaws), he displayed, much as Turner had, a region untroubled by special privilege that the nation should aspire to. Projecting a humanitarian and egalitarian society, he observed that:

The doctrine of equality is unquestioned there, and that government exists for the purpose of securing it is the common belief... Human nature, or, at all event, Kansas nature is essentially good... 'there are no millionaires nor any paupers...No sumptuous mansions nor glittering equipages nor ostentatious display exasperates of allures'...Kansans love each other for the dangers they have passed; a unique experience has created a strong *esprit de corps*..."¹¹¹

The same author, with relative ease, could quickly turn and change tact from environmental to a class-based mode of causality. Writing on the Revolution, he encouraged present action, not unlike Beard, on behalf of the lower social orders by demonstrating how it was they, and not the elites, who were responsible for halting England when it infringed on the economic freedom of the colonies.¹¹² Connecting the dots Becker positioned for them, the people might then spot similar oppression marshaled by modern capitalists and remember why it was they rebelled the first time. For Becker then, as his critic, Robert Brown notes, in addition to projecting a model society, history served "to arouse an intelligent discontent and to foster a fruitful radicalism."¹¹³ Combining their techniques, he proved himself capable of donning both Turnerian and Beardian garb.

Switching gears again, Becker swung his focus to the French Enlightenment, presenting an age where an intelligentsia wrested society away from landed conservatism. "To find support for their crusade against kings, nobles, and clergy the *philosophes* had to abandon metaphysical speculation and try instead to construct a new vision of the past and the future to buttress their 'Heavenly City.'"¹¹⁴ Becker was calling the intellectual community to arms by drawing parallels between that period of liberal discourse and the Wilsonian era. "In our own day," he quipped in 1914, "...we are again, somewhat as men were in the eighteenth century, seeking a 'new freedom'... we are less intent upon stability and more insistent upon 'social justice.'"¹¹⁵ As he would make clear in other writings,

¹¹¹ Becker, 20-24.

¹¹² Noble, 77-78.

¹¹³ Brown, 71.

¹¹⁴ Strout, 76.

¹¹⁵ Cited in Wilkins, 91.

“social justice” for the 20th century required government regulation of capitalism “to assure that fundamental equality of opportunity which is indispensable to true liberty and the very essence of democracy.”¹¹⁶

In all three scenarios, Becker very clearly assumes the Progressive conflict-determinist construct. Contrasting East sharply from West in “Kansas,” he holds that the gap separating them is “the difference between those who remain at home and those who, in successive generations, venture into the unknown...tugging at the leashes of ordered life.”¹¹⁷ By the same logic, he envisioned revolutionary New York as divided between two opposites: the people (farmers and workers) and a privileged gentry. Each instance, along with the Enlightenment nobility-*philosophe* dichotomy, fits the Midwestern binary worldview and, moreover, was marked by the struggle erupting between the two sides. Less remarkable for originality in this traditional Progressive framing, Becker’s combined works are uncanny for their versatility.

During the intervals spaced between his historical writings, Becker set himself to a task he considered far more important: writing about history. Confronting the deeper significance of pragmatism, Becker, more obsessively than either Turner or Beard, unleashed his critical mind on the implications underlying the Progressives’ new subjectivist foundation. An avowed presentist, he once informed a colleague that history “teaches that this is a changing world, and that it is useless to try to keep what is good in any society by keeping everything just as it was ‘when I was a boy.’”¹¹⁸ As with his fellow Progressives, Becker used his AHA presidential address, in 1931, as a forum to air his pragmatism out to the historical guild. “The history that lies inert in unread books does no work in the world,” he impressed upon his fellows, “The history that does work in the world... is living history... that enlarges and enriches the collective specious present.”¹¹⁹ Less abrasive than Beard and more compelling than Turner, Becker based his arguments on the supposition that the profession was in the service of the public, of “Mr. Everyman,” and must therefore either create histories palatable to that taste or be ignored. These tastes change, he continued, depending on the situation of the age; in the end, only Everyman decides what sort of history he will read. In the present age, he concluded, public demand was for history to make use of the past in explaining the present, Everyman had no need for factual monographs offering the past for its own sake. Finally, his speech used relativism- the impossibility of attaining perfect truth even in endeavors supposedly committed to fact-gathering- to discredit scientific objectivists. “To select and affirm even the simplest complex

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 117.

¹¹⁷ Becker, 2-4.

¹¹⁸ CLB to Henry Johnson, 24 October 1922, Kammen, 85.

¹¹⁹ Becker, 252-253.

of facts is to give them a certain place in a certain pattern of ideas,” he reasoned, “and this alone is enough to give them a special meaning.”¹²⁰ In chorus with Turner and Beard, Becker too declared: “every generation, our own included, will, must inevitably understand the past and anticipate the future in light of its own restricted experience.”¹²¹

Discouraged in the later stages of their lives by the dangerous potential to persuade that activist history had demonstrated in the propaganda campaigns of the First World War, the Progressive’s optimistic faith in such writing dimmed. Retrospectively looking back near the twilight of their careers, they expressed a similar reluctance against spreading their legacy. Turner, writing a year before his death, declared, “I don’t want to be anybody’s patron saint! Can’t fit the bill!”¹²² Beard, for his part, advised students not to drop his name when seeking employment, warning them “it is the red tag to the historical bull.”¹²³ Becker too swore off grooming an heir. Recalling a colleague’s jovial comment that he had “few disciples,” he acknowledged, “I refuse to have any.”¹²⁴ In this quest all three succeeded. Their immediate successors within the Progressive school, such men as Arthur Schlesinger Sr. and Dixon Ryan Fox, drifted back to the objectivity standard and stirred less controversy in the profession.¹²⁵ Toning down their writing, the second generation neither moved the culture of professional history, nor matched the prestige of their teachers.

Yet this cannot be credited solely to the pledges of the original Progressives. Rather, the second generation was born in a different time and shaped by different environmental auspices. Raised in the warmth of the Progressive era instead of Populism’s furious heyday, they exhibited a more subdued complacency. The Midwestern conditions that hardened Turner, Beard, and Becker into activists, conflict-determinists, and pragmatists had passed, never to be repeated. Perhaps this lends credence to the old saying that desperate times yield great men. For indeed, influenced by the crucible of a Great Depression and a Second World War, the star of a nascent Consensus school was rising as the Progressives’ was fading. Initially drawn to history by exciting Progressive ideas, they spent their careers escaping this immense shadow, struggling to surmount its message of conflict in a tense Cold War age. Nearly three-quarters of a century after the first tremors of

¹²⁰ Ibid, 251.

¹²¹ Ibid, 253.

¹²² FJT to Joseph Shafer, 19 January 1931, Jacobs, 166.

¹²³ Novick, 97.

¹²⁴ CLB to Leo Gershoy, 20 December 1933, Kammen, 198.

¹²⁵ Novick, 179.

Populist dissent, the Midwestern voice finally fell to the background of American thought.¹²⁶

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¹²⁶ A semblance of its spirit stayed alive, returning full circle to the place where it all began, the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Its leading historian, William Appleman Williams, carried on the legacy of Beard. Studying American foreign policy as a tragedy, he favored a policy reminiscent of the old isolationist's admonition to "tend our own garden." Madison itself served as a haven for radicals and dissidents in an age of conformity, providing the locus for New Left historiography. See Paul Buhle, Ed., *History and the New Left: Madison Wisconsin, 1950-1970* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990) and Paul Buhle and Edward Rice-Maximin, *William Appleman Williams: The Tragedy of Empire* (New York: Routledge, 1995)

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