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1. Carl Becker on Progress

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1. Carl Becker on Progress

Abstract

The first selection was written by Carl L. Becker (1873-1945), for many years professor of history at Cornell University (1917-1941), and one of the most highly respected members of his profession. One of his particular interests was the Enlightenment, about which he wrote a famous book: *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers* (1932). But while he clung to his fascination with the Enlightenment, Becker was in revolt against the "scientific history" which it had largely fostered. The ideal of scientific history, he thought, was noble enough, but unattainable and useless. Influenced by pragmatism, Becker asked the question: Can there be anything like objectively written history? Is the raw material from which it is to be derived a string of "pure" facts that the historian himself so deeply involved in his own cultural milieu that he reads into the past his own presuppositions (whether he wants to or not) and to a considerable extent finds what he wants there, both facts and interpretations? [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Carl Becker, Enlightenment, Objectivity, Bias, History

Disciplines

History | Intellectual History

Comments

This is a part of [Section XXIV: Historical Meaning](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

Authors

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1. Carl Becker on Progress

The first selection was written by Carl L. Becker (1873-1945), for many years professor of history at Cornell University (1917-1941), and one of the most highly respected members of his profession. One of his particular interests was the Enlightenment, about which he wrote a famous book: The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers (1932). But while he clung to his fascination with the Enlightenment, Becker was in revolt against the "scientific history" which it had largely fostered. The ideal of scientific history, he thought, was noble enough, but unattainable and useless. Influenced by pragmatism, Becker asked the question: Can there be anything like objectively written history? Is the raw material from which it is to be derived a string of "pure" facts that the historian can isolate and serve up? Or is not the historian himself so deeply involved in his own cultural milieu that he reads into the past his own presuppositions (whether he wants to or not) and to a considerable extent finds what he wants there, both facts and interpretations?

Becker believed that no one could ever hope to be detached and impartial enough to tell the story -- the whole story -- as it actually happened. Nor for that matter could he be thorough enough ever to assemble all of the necessary evidence for such a purpose. And even if he did, he could not hope to be profound enough to put the evidence together to reconstruct the past perfectly. The historian, instead, tells his story in a way which tends to vindicate his vision of what the future should be. And so it must remain. In his famous presidential address before the American Historical Association (1931), entitled "Everyman His Own Historian," Becker declared that history is something which every generation must rewrite for itself, guided by its own experience and perspectives. If it is a pack of tricks played on the dead, it is legerdemain undertaken for the living generation's "peace of mind." In his sparkling account of the Declaration of Independence (1922) Becker was, of course, as accurate factually as it was possible to be. He arrived at his interpretation only after exercising his best judgments. But he did not believe that either he or anyone else could ever write the truly definitive account of this subject. Becker was not alone in raising these questions, with their implications for meaning in history. They have long enlivened American historical debate, and it is safe to say that they will continue to do so.

The selection which follows is taken from a series of three lectures on the general theme of "Progress and Power," delivered by Professor Becker during the depression years of the thirties, at a time when the vision of Condorcet about man's future seemed particularly empty or, at any rate, very remote. Setting before himself the task of measuring simply what man has done, he sought to gain the necessary perspective of time and distance by taking a long-range view of human activities. He selected the Olympian heights, where lived the Greek gods, as the site from which to view the course of human activity in the capacity, he hoped, of a relatively detached observer. He devised a useful time-scale of 506,000 years, within which span man had appeared on the earth and had reached the present -- a convenient 500,000 of preliterate human history and 6,000 years of civilized history. Becker divided the sweep of time thus displayed before the Olympian observer into four periods. The first, which was by far the longest, began with Java man, described by archeologists as an erect ape-man who was differentiated from the anthropoids. The second began with the Neolithic Revolution and the third with what has been defined in this book as civilization. The fourth period began in the twelfth century, about the time Western Civilization began to gather strength for its phenomenal advance.

Becker was certain that during all of these four periods man's material progress was associated with his increasing use of power. "Without power no progress," he wrote. By power he meant such things as fire, water, steam, and electricity which man

through his intelligence has harnessed to his own use. These "instruments and helps" he described as "extras" which are not part of man's own "f.o.b. equipment," which is itself a source of power. The danger arises if reason does not guide the use of this power and effect the social adjustments which it demands. It was at this point that Becker called into question the widely accepted idea of progress.

The third lecture in the series, entitled "Instruments of Precision," deals with the fourth period of the time-scale, the period in which undreamed-of sources of power are tapped and harnessed, first, and for many years only, by the West. In this selection Becker, who always believed that history as philosophy should help illuminate man's way, examined some of the implications of this new surge of power for the future of mankind. The series of lectures was delivered in 1935.

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