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"Connected and Unified?": A More Critical Look at Frederick Jackson Turner's America

Abstract

This article critiques Turner's view of American westward expansion, especially his assertion that Americans have a unified experience and set of characteristics.

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Megan Mondt

Frederick Jackson Turner declared in “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” his lecture to the American Historical Association at the World’s Columbian Exposition in 1893, that “the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.”¹⁵⁴ According to Turner, America is unique in that it expanded industrially while simultaneously expanding agriculturally in areas further west—America experienced a “perennial rebirth” through its various waves of advancement.¹⁵⁵ Turner’s thesis became the paradigm for explaining American historical development for over fifty years.

William Cronon and Alan Trachtenberg, among other prominent historians, have since criticized Turner’s thesis. Indeed, when one examines primary sources of the nineteenth century, one finds glaring omissions in Turner’s address. Although “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” provides a creation myth for Americans and cites many ways in which the West has shaped the course of American history, it excludes the American Industrial Revolution, social class, and many other significant factors of American development. Turner attempted to present “a connected and unified account of the progress of civilization across the continent,” but no such account ever truly existed.¹⁵⁶

Cronon convincingly argues in *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* that Turner failed to recognize that “making a landscape ‘accessible’ meant linking it to a market.”¹⁵⁷ Instead of the frontier being the first of many natural stages that culminates in an industrial city like Chicago, it was instead “the expanding edge of the boosters’ urban empire.”¹⁵⁸ In other words, the force that drove westward expansion and the rise of particular cities was not nature but human agency (modern capitalism in particular). The boosters actively promoted the development of particular places. Because industrialization and westward expansion went together, Chicago and other cities like it developed rapidly and had no pastoral stage. Turner declared that such a stage exists before the wave of capital and enterprise. Cronon reveals that Turner’s assertion—that “what is now a manufacturing State was in an earlier decade an area of intensive farming”—is incorrect.¹⁵⁹

Like Cronon, Trachtenberg sees that Turner left time, place, circumstance, and agency out of his vision of America. Additionally, Trachtenberg recognizes that Turner’s need to present a unified account must indicate that there were segments of society which were or could be divided and needed a myth to (re)unify them: Turner’s is a thesis “of uncertainty and concern over America in a time of cities, immigrants, and corporate power.”¹⁶⁰ Another main problem Trachtenberg identifies with the thesis is that it assumes all Americans share the “striking characteristics”—coarseness, strength, acuteness, inquisitiveness, pragmatism, intelligence, and

¹⁵⁴ Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” in *Bibliobase Custom Coursepack for History*, ed. Michael Bellesiles (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 188.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 13.

¹⁵⁷ William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), 48.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁵⁹ Turner, “Significance,” 190.

¹⁶⁰ Trachtenberg, *Incorporation*, 17.

energy—which are the result of encounters with the frontier.¹⁶¹ Documents of the nineteenth century prove that not all Americans were alike. Moreover, they show that Americans had different ideas about how America was or was not progressing at the close of the frontier, or “the first period of American history.”¹⁶²

Turner declared that “so long as free land exists, the opportunity for a competency exists,” but that was not true.¹⁶³ Although much land was vacant, it was generally expensive and difficult to acquire. Much of the land in the West was owned by various railroad companies and speculators, making it difficult for many Americans to purchase land of their own. This was one of the complaints stated in the platform of the Populist Party: the Populists called for reclamation of unused land held by corporations for actual settlers.¹⁶⁴ For those who managed to own and farm western lands, it was difficult to make a profit because of the railroads’ steep cargo prices. Farmers became the victims of economic change and, consequently, the Granger Movement developed. Many farmers demanded state regulation of the railroads and affirmed their belief “that railroads are public highways.”¹⁶⁵ The frontier was not exactly the “area of free land” and prosperity that Turner described it to be.¹⁶⁶

Even in households which owned profitable lands, an “opportunity for competency” did not exist because not all members of the household were allowed such opportunity. Women – a group Turner entirely ignored in his interpretation – were generally confined to the domestic sphere. Those women who sought equality with men and attempted to have careers outside of the home were chastised. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Bradwell v. The State of Illinois* that “the harmony...of interests and views which belong, or should belong, to the family institution is repugnant to the idea of a woman adopting a distinct and independent career from that of her husband.”¹⁶⁷ Essentially, women were to be subordinate to their husbands. Jane Swisshelm, a wife who yearned to be a painter, understood this all too well: “to be head, he must be superior,” she recorded.¹⁶⁸ For this reason she was confined and denied opportunities to develop and practice skills not directly related to domesticity or motherhood. Turner ignored those women who cried for help “[breaking] off the shackles which bind them” to their homes.¹⁶⁹ When he spoke of Americans, he was not speaking about women. His thesis, therefore, is selective—Turner selects only partial information to present and does not include all social groups.

Turner affirmed that “the frontier promoted the formation of a composite nationality” because “the later tides of continental immigration flowed across to the free lands,” but he did not consider that the American immigrant’s experience is different from that of Americans born in the United States.¹⁷⁰ He believed every American shares the same individualistic traits. “Memorial of the Six Chinese Companies,” however, serves as a sobering reminder that social

¹⁶¹ Turner, “Significance,” 196.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 197.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹⁶⁴ The Populist Party, “Populist Party Platform,” in *Bibliobase Custom Coursepack for History*, ed. Michael Bellesiles (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 184.

¹⁶⁵ The Illinois State Farmers’ Association, “Granger Resolutions,” in *Bibliobase Custom Coursepack for History*, ed. Michael Bellesiles (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 120.

¹⁶⁶ Turner, “Significance,” 188.

¹⁶⁷ The U.S. Supreme Court, “*Bradwell v. The State of Illinois*,” in *Bibliobase Custom Coursepack for History*, ed. Michael Bellesiles (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 116.

¹⁶⁸ Jane Swisshelm, “Jane Swisshelm’s Personal Crisis,” in (class handout), 248.

¹⁶⁹ Laura Curtis Bullard, “Laura Curtis Bullard on the Enslavement of Women,” in (class handout), 251.

¹⁷⁰ Turner, “Significance,” 193.

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inequalities existed during this period and resulted in drastically different experiences for immigrants. In their letter to President Ulysses S. Grant, the companies sought protection from racism and anti-immigration laws. They argued that their construction of the Central Pacific Railroad was invaluable to American industry and denied accusations of stealing jobs from white laborers.¹⁷¹ Turner declared that “the immigrant was attracted by the cheap lands of the frontier,” but he failed to acknowledge that such land, like everything else, was more difficult for immigrants to obtain than for native farmers.¹⁷² He likewise failed to understand that immigrants did not all come for land: many came to the cities in search of work.

Immigrants or not, the simple fact remains that many Americans were too poor to purchase land of their own. America really was (and is) an amalgam of classes and, therefore, occurrences. The class system was already entrenched in America by the time Turner delivered his address. Because class divisions were already perceptible in America, Edward Bellamy wrote *Looking Backward*, a utopian novel in which class division had been eliminated. An awareness of classes led William Graham Sumner to write “What Social Classes Owe to Each Other.”¹⁷³ Similarly, citizens of New York City rioted over the Conscription Act because they too were cognizant of class – wealthy Americans could afford exemptions from the draft by paying working class individuals, usually immigrants, to go in their stead.¹⁷⁴ Laborers formed unions such as the Mechanics’ Union of Philadelphia to protect themselves from management and the upper classes.¹⁷⁵ In “Labor’s Vision,” the great robber baron Andrew Carnegie commented that the “rapid rise in the development of America’s natural resources.... resulted in... greater wealth and power for ‘capitalists’... a deterioration in conditions for many workers; and a society repeatedly torn by class conflict.”¹⁷⁶ The stark contrast between poverty and wealth – of which even the wealthiest industrialists were aware – was left out of Turner’s history. In fact, Turner did not seem to think class conflict could emerge on a large scale until the frontier closed. These primary sources confirm that class, gender, and ethnic differences existed in America. Therefore, a single American experience was impossible.

Different and often competing ideas and values also coexisted in nineteenth-century America. Not everyone, then, saw industrial and westward expansion in the same way. Although Turner pointed out that lax financial integrity is the resulting danger of “democracy born of free land,” he assumed all people agreed that the benefits of free land and individualism outweigh the costs.¹⁷⁷ The Knights of Labor was one of many groups who disagreed with Turner. The “development and aggression of aggregated wealth,” they stated in their preamble, leads “to the pauperization and hopeless degradation of the toiling masses.”¹⁷⁸ Poet Sidney Lanier also noted the selfish aggrandizement of wealth by capitalists. “Trade! Is thy heart all dead, all dead?” he

¹⁷¹ B. E. Lloyd, “Memorial of the Six Chinese Companies,” in *Bibliobase Custom Coursepack for History*, ed. Michael Bellesiles (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 121-4.

¹⁷² Turner, “Significance,” 193.

¹⁷³ William Graham Sumner, “What Social Classes Owe to Each Other,” in *Bibliobase Custom Coursepack for History*, ed. Michael Bellesiles (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 143-8.

¹⁷⁴ H. R. Putnam, et al., “New York City Draft Riots,” in *Bibliobase Custom Coursepack for History*, ed. Michael Bellesiles (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 100-5.

¹⁷⁵ Mechanics’ Union, “The Mechanics’ Union of Philadelphia,” in *Bibliobase Custom Coursepack for History*, ed. Michael Bellesiles (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 24-7.

¹⁷⁶ Andrew Carnegie, “Labor’s Vision,” in (class handout), 6.

¹⁷⁷ Turner, “Significance,” 195.

¹⁷⁸ Terence V. Powderly, “Foundation of the Knights of Labor,” in *Bibliobase Custom Coursepack for History*, ed. Michael Bellesiles (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 136.

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asked.¹⁷⁹ Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener," in which the scrivener who leads a pathetic life resists the basic requirements of his boss, reveals the belief espoused by some that people have lost "contact with one another and with nature" due to industrialization and the westward expansion which accompanied it.¹⁸⁰ Nature had become merely a commodity in the eyes of many, and Americans were increasingly estranged from one another as classes developed and labor became specialized.

As the workforce expanded and began to include women, as in the Lowell mills, many people became concerned that morals were eroding as quickly as the frontier was receding. A debate ensued—some Americans continued to espouse the concept of republican motherhood, while others believed in the dignity of female labor outside of the home. One worker at the Lowell mills asked, "From whence originated the idea, that it was derogatory to a lady's dignity, or a blot upon the female character, to labor?"¹⁸¹ The entry of women into the workforce certainly did not go uncontested. Orestes A. Brownson compared women laborers to slaves. The "miserable pittance they receive for it, is hardly sufficient to keep soul and body together," he declared.¹⁸² Moreover, he feared that no man would marry the female factory workers because they have left the domestic sphere. Reverend Mills, who observed conditions of the boardinghouses, noted the strict rules and demands for good character: he stated in *Lowell, As It Was, and As It Is* that "it is necessary to secure *the moral protection of their characters while they are resident in Lowell.*"¹⁸³ These great cultural changes, brought about by the *industrial* developments of the century and not the move westward, sparked controversy.

In *The Pioneers*, James Fenimore Cooper wrote about a different cost of westward expansion—the decimation of the wilderness by the settlers and the unnecessary slaughter of certain animals on the frontier. The moral of his story is that "[it is] much better to kill only such as you want, without wasting your powder and lead, than to be firing into God's creatures in this wicked manner."¹⁸⁴ Cooper called attention to the great waste and even immorality that accompanied the settling of the frontier. His and others' expressions reveal that there was great concern over the future of laborers and the environment. Not everyone believed America was moving onward and upward by moving westward. In truth, many were pushed downward by the free hand of economics—the rich grew richer as the poor grew poorer.

Turner's thesis, then, is greatly flawed because it fails to account for the differences—economic, cultural, social, etc.—which coexisted in America and made for a variety of American experiences. There was neither a single set of "striking characteristics" which belonged to Americans, nor one "consolidating agent."¹⁸⁵ Not all Americans had the opportunity to move up in society. Whether "up" meant moving west to acquire a farm of one's own or moving up in the ranks of a particular corporation, many Americans were denied mobility.

¹⁷⁹ Sidney Lanier, "The Symphony," in *Bibliobase Custom Coursepack for History*, ed. Michael Bellesiles (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 151.

¹⁸⁰ Herman Melville, "Bartleby, the Scrivener," in *Bibliobase Custom Coursepack for History*, ed. Michael Bellesiles (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 76-90; Michael Bellesiles, "Introduction" to "Bartleby, the Scrivener," in *Bibliobase Custom Coursepack for History*, ed. Michael Bellesiles (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 76.

¹⁸¹ "Dignity of Female Labor," in (class handout).

¹⁸² Orestes A. Brownson, "Slave Labor Versus Free Labor," in (class handout).

¹⁸³ Reverend Henry A. Mills, "A Lowell Boardinghouse," in (class handout).

¹⁸⁴ James Fenimore Cooper, *The Pioneers*, in *Bibliobase Custom Coursepack for History*, ed. Michael Bellesiles (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 20.

¹⁸⁵ Turner, "Significance," 196; *Ibid.*, 191.

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Despite its imperfections, American historians continue to reserve a space for “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” on their bookshelves because Turner successfully crafted a creation myth for America that was embraced by historians and other intellectuals at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. Similar to Emma Lazarus’s image of America in “The New Colossus,” where America is the “Mother of exiles” who says to other countries, “Give me your tired, your poor,” Turner’s image of America is one of an exceptional nation and a land of opportunity for all who settle there.¹⁸⁶ It was a story for Americans to rally behind and accept as true: they could believe in their exceptionality because the frontier, supposedly, had made them unique.

Like all myths, however, Turner’s is an idealized misrepresentation of the truth. Turner may have spoken of a “connected and unified” America, but the nation was in actuality one where many groups did not have the opportunity to enjoy the fruits of the West. Turner’s America – which was rapidly industrializing – could not even agree that good *was* coming from the movement westward. Although Turner’s thesis has and in many ways continues to bolster morale, it is fraught with omissions and cannot be considered a correct interpretation of American development.

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¹⁸⁶ Emma Lazarus, “The New Colossus,” in *Bibliobase Custom Coursepack for History*, ed. Michael Bellesiles (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 142.