

## *A Response: Moving Beyond the Turner Thesis*

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AS MIGHT BE EXPECTED, the spectre and intellectual legacy of Frederick Jackson Turner has pervaded these proceedings. Such has been the case whenever historians have met to discuss the American West since Turner delivered his famous paper in Chicago in 1893. As powerful as Turner's argument is, however, and as compelling the Western identity it has fostered remains, the Turner thesis (like the comparable thesis of Henri Pirenne regarding the persistence of Mediterranean unity after the fall of Rome) restricts as well as liberates.

As Henry Nash Smith so brilliantly explicated in *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950), the Turner thesis is itself a mythic formulation that operates as a cumulative metaphor as well as an act of historical analysis. For Pirenne to say that the Mediterranean remained unified was not just to postulate a historical explanation, it was also to invoke the imaginative ideal of continuities through the classical, medieval, and modern eras. Turner's thesis likewise invoked an imaginatively apprehended dream-wish: namely, that what was best about the United States were its frontier values.

By frontier Turner meant to suggest the interaction of land, preferably unsettled, and people, preferably Anglo-Saxon. To use some of the staple terminology of contemporary discourse, Turner glorified the margins, which is to say the Borderlands, and those frontier folk who, by remaining on the margins, which is to say

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the frontier, practiced and preserved those virtues present at America's founding and still deemed necessary in 1893.

Each of our speakers has demonstrated how the Turner thesis lends itself to, indeed almost demands, a preoccupation with rural peoples and settings. For Turner, the American city and all that cities represent—diversity and social drama in an institutional matrix as old as civilization itself—were to be perceived strictly from the perspective of surplus population. When cities became too full, Turner argued, the best and the brightest left the city for the margins and in so doing carried on the highest legacy of the race.

That argument no longer makes sense. A generation of urban historians has established the mechanism whereby urban-centered elites as well as agriculturalists in covered wagons played a primary role in advancing the frontier. The West was settled by the prairie schooner and the homestead, but also by the city and the railroad, a railroad controlled locally by urban elites and nationally and internationally, from New York to London to Paris to Berlin, by urban-centered financial syndicates. Cities created markets, which in turn advanced the frontier along railroad routes that determined the socio-economic organization of the hinterlands. Most recently Prof. William Cronon of Yale in his path-breaking study *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (1991) has brilliantly dramatized how the most rural and remote aspects of the frontier could be, and were, Chicago-driven.

No new Frederick Jackson Turner, however, has emerged as the spokesperson for an urban-centered frontier thesis, although Professor Cronon has taken a major step in that direction. For a Californianist, such as myself, the Turner thesis proves especially inapplicable on a number of counts. The boundaries and social structures of European California, for one thing, were Hispanic, not Anglo-Saxon, in their origins. They dated to the promulgation of the Law of the Indies in the 1570s and sustained a continuity, however fragile and tenuous, with Hispanic civilization running from San Francisco to the Argentine. That is why a Texan turned

Californian, Herbert Eugene Bolton of the University of California at Berkeley, argued for a comparative, hemispheric approach to frontier studies. For Bolton, the model was not that of Turner's westward movement, but of recurrent patterns throughout the Americas.

The California experience, furthermore, was intensely urban. With very little exaggeration, it can be claimed that vast portions of agricultural California were never really settled at all; they made, rather, the transition from rancho to agribusiness with little in between or were brought into being by irrigation projects which the structure and functioning of water allotments, no matter what the founding apportionment of the land might be, soon drove towards consolidation and industrial farming. And even where smaller farms and Turnerian virtues flourished, they did so primarily as truck gardens to the mines (a temporary industrial zone), the San Francisco Bay Area, and Los Angeles, and were thus, once again, city-driven. Throughout the nineteenth century, visitors to rural California frequently commented on how so very empty it all seemed. Through water technology, the mining industry yielded to the wheat industry and, with irrigation, yielded to cotton and other crops demanding vast acreage and a minimum of permanent settlers. Only citrus and vineyards showed significant resistance to this pattern.

Confounding Turnerian wisdom as well is the urban and suburban nature of California. By the early 1900s nearly sixty percent of the entire population of the state lived around the shores of San Francisco Bay. San Francisco barely existed as the Mexican village of Yerba Buena in 1848. By 1870 it was the tenth largest city in the nation. As early as 1849 there was a population in San Francisco sufficient to provide both the performers and the audience for the American premiere of Rossini's *Stabat Mater*. In the residential development of South Park, initiated in 1854, British-born developer George Gordon was materializing a London style of living in a site south of Market Street where, but a few years earlier, there had been only canvas tents. By the mid-1850s a Mechanics Insti-

tute and lending library, an Academy of Sciences, a network of volunteer firemen associations, each of them housed in elegant brick townhouses, gas lighting, a sophisticated water works, and other urban amenities were all in place. A few short years later, the city supported a Gothic Revival Unitarian church that seated over a thousand, a half a dozen men's clubs, a public school system modeled on the Boston Plan, two very ambitious publishing houses, the strong beginnings of an artistic culture, and a vibrant literary intelligentsia. San Francisco, in other words, had everything in common with Boston, New York, and Baltimore—and very little in common with Turner's frontier.

It also had more in common with Melbourne, Sydney, and Hong Kong, with which it maintained extensive trade relations, than it did with much of the rural Far West. The Turner thesis stops at the Pacific because it is based upon the notion of a westward movement. The Southwest, however, from Texas to Southern California, was equally influenced by the south to north movement of Hispanic peoples. In the case of California, there is also a more elusive west to east movement across the Pacific and a north to south movement down from Russia. The extensive maritime connections existing between California and the Pacific Basin in the nineteenth century serviced but did not exclusively express an extensive matrix of social, cultural, financial, and demographic influences. Bolton sought to become the Parkman of the Spanish Southwest. The saga of Americans in the Asia Pacific Basin and the impact of the Asia Pacific Basin on the Far West, California especially, still awaits its Parkman. Such a Parkman will discern and chronicle Pacific continuities. He or she would also of necessity be an urbanist, describing the great indigenous and colonial cities surrounding the Pacific by the mid- to late nineteenth century, linked to each other in patterns reminiscent of the classical civilization of the Mediterranean. Is it accidental, such a historian will ask, that the urban forms of Los Angeles, Tokyo, and Sydney are each so similar? Why do New Zealand and California have so much in common?

Notice that the pioneering bibliographers and historians of California—Alexander Taylor, Franklin Tuthill, and Hubert Howe Bancroft—immediately sensed that the history of California could not be researched and written without reference to Mexican and European archives. Taylor, of Santa Barbara, the pioneering bibliographer of California, dreamed in the early 1860s of making such an archival pilgrimage. A year or so later, Tuthill, whose *History of California* (1866) is the first mature and professional work of its sort, had the luxury of writing after a research sojourn in Europe. Bancroft, a bookseller and stationer turned historian, purchased seventy-six mule loads of archival material from the library of the Emperor Maximilian. To understand California, these pioneering historians believed and practiced, one must understand what was occurring in Mexico, France, England, and Russia as well as what was happening on the westward American frontier.

California, from this perspective, is an internationally created commonwealth as much as it is a product of westward expansion. It is also the direct product of the will of the American East, operating through the federal government and later through the financial institutions of New York. In formulating his thesis, Turner had his yeoman protagonist flee an overpopulated, opportunity-deprived East. A more complete assessment would have the East creating such western opportunities in the first place. As William Goetzmann so powerfully proves in his classic *Exploration and Empire* (1966), the federal establishment in the 1840s and 1850s, operating out of the same mindset that prompted Jefferson to send Lewis and Clark to the Pacific a generation earlier, explored the West in search of railroad routes but, more importantly, to discern and map an intellectual and imaginative realm as well. Through scientific expeditions, the federal government helped call the American West into being by asserting the West as a possibility. For nearly the first half of the nineteenth century, the interior of the continent was perceived as the Great American Desert, uncrossed and unmapped, and worse, uncrossable and

unmappable: a vast nothingness resistant of human association. The interior of Australia retained much of this quality well into the twentieth century. The littoral settlement and interior emptiness of Australia, one might say, was purely a matter of population and water; but that begs the question. There was neither population nor water to make the Great American Desert habitable either, but the federal government, operating through its scientific agencies, made a convincing argument that it could be done, and this argument in turn became an imaginative goal—and it was realized.

Then there is the question of ethnicity, culture, and memory. Turner's frontier people seem to come from one ethnic background and to be Protestant in religion. What about the special affinity between Reform Judaism and the urban frontiers of Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Cincinnati, and San Francisco? What of Roman Catholicism in its Hispanic, Franco-Native American, Irish, and German varieties? In her novel *Death Comes to the Archbishop* (1927), based upon the life of Bishop Lamy of Santa Fe, Willa Cather achieves a convincing portrayal of Catholicity as an imaginative and social force in the Southwest. The interior, imaginative lives of Willa Cather's other protagonists strike us also by the process in which vivid worlds of memory can either crush frontier protagonists (Mr. Shimerda in *My Ántonia*) or become externalized as cultural catalysts (Thea Kronborg in *Song of the Lark*) but, whether positive or negative, remain forces on the frontier as powerful as any described by Turner.

Speaking in Chicago in 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner said some very important things, but his thesis must be kept open-ended and supplemented from a variety of directions. Too often, Turnerians look for social experiences that are explicitly Turnerian, then proceed to transform them into written history in further testimony to the ongoing validity of the Turner thesis. The Turner mindset favors the rural and the agricultural over the urban and the industrial, one mighty Anglo-Saxon folk over a mosaic of peoples and cultures. Too often, an obsession with a

Turner-inspired myth of the West has kept western historiography wedded to persistently provincial (with a small 'p') materials. Just as cultural anthropologists write hundreds of articles on obscure South Pacific villages and neglect the rise of Orange County, so too do Turnerians frequently neglect the larger, more complicated history of the West — the rise of Los Angeles, Phoenix, Houston, Las Vegas; the West and science; the West and the fine and performing arts — in favor of cattle and agriculture-oriented sagas.

The frontier was not over in 1890. It was merely beginning. For what was of paramount importance in the American West—its cities and science, its universities and libraries, industries and technology, its literature, fine and performing arts, its environmental advocacy, its mosaic of cultural traditions—was only getting started. That other West, so complex in its contacts and affinities, has become increasingly intriguing to writers and readers of American history. More and more, historians are seeing the West not as Turner's safety valve but as a testing ground for the national experience. North and South, the nation had the West in common. What we see so vividly in California, this quality of the national experience being projected and acted out in a symbolically representative territory, is true, albeit in differing ways, of other regions of the West as well. Thomas Jefferson knew this and so did Henry David Thoreau. If America did not have a West, it would have had to invent one; for, as Thoreau suggests, in westering is tested both the integrity and the assimilativeness of American experience.

If the West offered a safety valve, it was a safety valve for spirit and imagination and for culture as well as for population. Looking west, after all, is a persistent American habit. William Bradford did it in *Of Plimoth Plantation* (1630–46). William Byrd did it in *A History of the Dividing Line* (1700). Thomas Jefferson did it in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1784–85). In considering this fact, even devoted urbanists ironically become Turnerians. While we might wish to adjust Turner's perspective from an exclusively rural and

agricultural base and deflect the obsession of his followers with picturesque, nomadic peoples, even those who wish to qualify Frederick Jackson Turner wind up agreeing with the most central point of his thesis: namely, that looking west, moving west, being in the West, building and creating from a western perspective, brings us close, very close, to the inner meaning of our national experience. And this insight, I suppose, makes us all Turnerians.

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