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FREDERICK JACKSON TURNER
AND THE FRONTIER DICHOTOMY

BY

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"AMERICA'S FIRST LAND REFORM"

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An event occurred during the year 1893 which marked the beginning of debate that has continued ever since among American historians. Speaking in Chicago at a conference of the American Historical Association was a 32 year old historian who, it is said, revolutionized historical thought in the United States; and indeed, has had a lasting impact on our intellectual heritage. His name was Frederick Jackson Turner and he is the acknowledged originator of what among historians has come to be known as the "frontier hypothesis." Jackson's approach to American history would stress the crucial role played by the sparsely populated interior in forging both a uniquely American democracy and a people of common national character.

Running through Turner's original presentation was an emphasis on the importance of free land and how this distinguished North America from Europe. More specifically, Turner felt that the Americanizing of European immigrants occurred not in the

established centers of commerce and government along the Atlantic coast, but at the frontier and beyond. Not until the new arrivals broke from the European-like cities of Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore or New York did a new and distinct character arise, the two most important influences on these migrants being the wilderness itself and the people who had roamed the continent before its settlement by Europeans.

My intent is neither to present detailed support for Turner nor criticize the merits of his thesis. Historians have both vehemently challenged and defended him at great length. What is apparent, and what I believe most important, is that Turner was one of the few academicians of his era to recognize the forces -- both positive and negative -- let loose by the widespread access to free or very cheap land. In his American Historical Association speech he observed:

"So long as free land exists, the opportunity for a competency exists, and economic power secures political power. But the democracy born of free land, strong in selfishness and individualism, intolerant of administrative experience and education, and pressing individual liberty beyond its proper bounds, has its dangers as well as its benefits. Individualism in America has allowed a laxity in regard to governmental affairs which has rendered possible the spoils system and all the manifest evils that follow from the lack of a highly developed civic spirit."

Yes, the frontier presented opportunity -- far greater opportunity for the unpropertied masses than had existed in Europe or even in the Atlantic coastal colonies, governed as they were by transplanted European land barons or tightly controlled charter companies. That same frontier society, unfettered by social and political arrangements constructed on a just foundation, also contributed to the subversion of republican spirit in favor of

unbridled individualism. Thus, one cannot but agree with Turner that the American frontier permitted a postponement of the day of reckoning for the oligarchies of Europe and Eurasia, by absorbing the Old World's propertyless and allowing those societies to survive beyond what natural pressures from within would have sustained.

America the safety valve, the land of hope, the world's melting pot was also the land of castoffs, of racial and ethnic hatreds, of rising conflict between classes, of religious intolerance, of violent labor strikes and capitalist retaliations, of slavery and a disregard for the environment, of ghetto tenements and child labor; and, of the near annihilation of fiercely proud but technologically inferior peoples -- at whose expense what we call the "frontier" arose, literally over the graves left behind by their defeated tribal civilization.

Turner optimistically called the frontier period "one of the wonderful chapters in the history of the human race" and concluded that "the West gave the oppressed of all lands a vision of hope." The reality held far less promise than the vision. It became so for the overwhelming majority of the Irish, after fleeing a homeland controlled by absentee-landowners whose enclosures and consolidations had produced famine; or Africans, brought to America in the chains of slavery and later given the freedom to compete for subsistence wages in the North or sharecrop under a new generation of Southern overlords; or, the Chinaman Russian, Italian, or German who experienced economic deprivation often worse than in his or her former homeland. Reality meant that despite the essentially open interior, getting there and starting a new life required both skills and money; generations of immigrants lived and died before the movement out of poverty began. For some, particularly the non-Europeans, that struggle continues. Meanwhile, the very concept of free land disappeared

in the face of land grants to the railroads and a relentless erosion of the public domain in favor of monied interests.

If, as Turner felt, the quest to conquer the frontier assured the permanence of democratic institutions, the cost in human terms was extremely high.

As a historian, Turner provides part of the picture; unfortunately, neither his contemporaries nor his successors (detractors or admirers) have offered a clear analysis of the dynamics which created our system of political economy and its history. From one historian, Steven Cord, we are told that Turner (unlike most others who pursued academic specialization) possessed the educational background of the political economist and was well acquainted with the writing of the nineteenth century's last great political economist, Henry George.

Turner had studied George's PROGRESS AND POVERTY as a graduate student at John Hopkins where he also gained exposure to the new "economics" under Richard Ely (Ely, it should be noted, was one of the few professional economists of the period to give Henry George's thesis a thorough examination). Also of interest is Turner's presence at Harvard at a time when fellow faculty member Thomas Carver offered the academic community a serious response to George's analysis of American democracy and justice. In his ESSAYS IN SOCIAL JUSTICE, Carver wrote that despite his disagreements with so-called "single taxers" as to whether allowing private interests to claim Ricardian rent was unjust, he recognized that by collecting economic rent through high land taxes, government would greatly reduce the negative effects of land speculation; and, in his words, "work well for the nation." Turner, exposed to George directly and at the center of intellectual debate over the "land question," incorporated much of George's earlier insights into his analysis of American history. As Steven Cord has observed, Turner's debt to George is clear.

What both George and Turner obviously realized was that the settlement of the frontier contributed to the dichotomy of simultaneously producing both privilege and greater equality of opportunity; equality in the short run, growing privilege over time. Because there was no serious attention given to the establishment of a just system of land tenure, a system that would preserve the benefits of private control yet distribute land's socially-created value, migration into the interior simply fostered an era of tremendous chaos, exploitation, lawlessness, warfare and monopoly. As a result, within the American system was built a certainty of gradual erosion of individual liberties under a growing body of positive law.


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