



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Source: *Western Historical Quarterly*, Winter, 1994, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Winter, 1994), pp. 476-481

Published by: Oxford University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/970355>

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progressive history encourages the belief that the West and the South can be easily characterized and contained, and done so in relation to the North and East. Better, it seems to me, to resist these generalizations, to make the West and South harder to think about, to be as ornery and difficult as these regions have been rumored to be.

The line I like best in Emmons's piece comes near the end: "like the South, the American West is a place. It is in the geographically western part of the United States and it includes everything in that part." That strikes me as the most fruitful way of looking at matters—not by extracting some essence, defining some key "characteristic," finding a "distinct culture," not even trying to draw clear borders. Include, do not exclude. Look for interaction, internal struggle, redefinition. In the case of the South, I am confident in saying that white and black southerners, rich and poor southerners, provincial and cosmopolitan southerners, have continually made and remade one another in their nearly four hundred years of living together. Their interaction over generations—not the Union Army, the Republican party, or northeastern corporations—has done the most to construct whatever "South" has been constructed. Progressive history lets us get at only a part of history, and not necessarily the most interesting part.

As a southern historian, I look to the exciting New Western History to help us move beyond ways of seeing things with which we have become too familiar and comfortable. We are indebted to Professor Emmons and the *Western Historical Quarterly* for renewing what I hope will be a long conversation.

THE WEST: A MOVING TARGET

WILLIAM CRONON

DAVID EMMONS HAS WRITTEN a powerful essay that is among the most intelligent and provocative of recent contributions to debates about western American history and its proper regional boundaries. Before critiquing it, I should stress how much I agree with many of its most basic and important claims. He is surely right that the West is anything but a "natural" place: it is the product of a complex cultural history, and can only be understood in the context of that history.¹

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¹ Although we are basically in agreement that nature is not the primary creator of cultural regions, I would quibble with Emmons's apparent desire to assign all agency to human actors, and none to natural forces. To say, as he does, that "settlers transform places, not the other way around" seems to me much too strong. Part of Emmons's confusion arises from his curious opposition of environment to history, as when he claims that "The environment often influences history; it seldom determines it." This formulation obscures the fact that the environment is itself

His extended comparison with the South—which he rightly regards as the defining case of American regionalism—is strikingly apt and suggestive. I very much like his argument that we should start our regional analyses not with the question, “Where is this place?” but rather, “When was this place settled?” And I wholeheartedly concur with his suggestion (in line with Richard White) that the region we know today as the West is profoundly (albeit incompletely) the product of a particular moment in time that saw the rise of the corporation and the national state in their modern institutional forms. His analysis of Republicanism as the ideological prophet and political midwife of these “big changes” is consistent with some of the best modern scholarship, and reminds western historians of how important it is always to frame their regional studies in relation to national and international movements. In all of these ways, Emmons helps lay the foundations for a more rigorous and sophisticated approach to western history. In the pages that follow, I will offer some strong criticisms of his essay, but I want there to be no doubt about my great respect and enthusiasm for the important contributions it makes.

Despite its virtues, the essay has some serious problems, largely due to Emmons’s inconsistent application of his own core arguments. Most derive from his apparent belief—shared by several others of the so-called “new western historians”—that the paradoxes and contradictions that have traditionally bedeviled western history can finally be swept away if only we agree to embrace a fixed, uncontested definition of what we mean by “the West.” Because my space is so limited, I can do no more than sketch the resulting analytical problems, which cluster into three categories: problems of boundary definition, problems of identity, and problems of myth. My main conclusion is that Emmons has not squared the circle of regional definition as successfully as he would like us to think, for in fact the concept of region is not much less problematic analytically than the frontier to which it is so often placed in counterpoint.

Emmons begins with Walter Nugent’s recent survey of western scholars and writers who were strikingly unable to agree with each other when asked to locate “the West” on their mental maps. Emmons has no patience for those whose West stops at the Sierra Nevada, since for him it is self-evident (though perhaps a bit ahistorical) that the region stretches to the Pacific and even beyond to Alaska and Hawai‘i. He is not much more sympathetic with those who believe that the West has changed its location over the course of American history. In this, he needlessly conflates the argument that American notions of “West” have shifted over time with the Turnerian argument that “western” history (meaning the history of the national frontier) ended in 1890. Movement need not entail closure. Emmons leaves little space for scholars like myself who assert that western history is the history of whatever place Americans were calling “West” at any given time in their past. The fact that that place changed

historical, caught up in the flow of time and no less a historical construction than human cultures are. When Emmons argues that his “emphasis on historical forces dooms any ecological, or ‘West as frontier,’ or ‘West as state of mind’ approach . . . and also takes care of the western border,” he sets up a series of false dichotomies by implying that these analytical approaches can somehow be separated from, or placed in opposition to, the study of “historical forces.”

its location for a while and then more or less settled down with more stable boundaries need not create the grave epistemological crisis that critics like Emmons would have us believe. But let that be: it is not my purpose here to revisit the old debate about frontier versus regional conceptions of western history.

Declaring that the crucible of western regionalism occurred between 1843 and 1893—the oddly precise dates he uses to bound the formation of the modern corporation and the national state—Emmons locates the eastern boundaries of his West in northern Michigan and Wisconsin. As one who has long fought to keep the Middle West within the intellectual boundaries of western history, I suppose I ought to welcome this eastward extension of a region that the large majority of Nugent's respondents placed west of the Mississippi or Missouri rivers, but I'm afraid that Emmons's new boundaries are hard to defend even against his own argument. If we define the West as the region settled after 1843, then it is not at all clear why northern Michigan—but not the Grand Prairie of northern Illinois and Indiana—is included within the region. Worse, by what logic do we exclude the Adirondacks, Appalachia, northern Maine, or southern Florida from the region? Although these latter places may seem manifestly other than West, there is nothing in Emmons's argument that explains why they should not join northern Michigan within this post-1840 region. Emmons seems absolutely right to argue that regions are powerfully shaped by certain key moments in their histories, but I worry about his impulse to derive from a single grand moment a single grand region that crystalized its boundaries and maintained them unaltered from 1843 forward. This may work for the South and the Civil War, but I doubt that it will work for the West.

The problem worsens when Emmons describes the subregions into which his West should be divided. Although I share some of his reservations about Donald Worster's dualistic division between hydraulic and pastoral Wests, at least Worster's regions are (for the most part) locatable on a map and mutually exclusive. Emmons says of his subregions that "not all of them [are] geographical," but never explains what a non-geographical region might look like. In my dictionary, at least, region is irreducibly a spatial construct whose chief analytical use is our ability to place it on a map. We can probably locate Emmons's corn belt, wheat belt, hydraulic, and cattle/sheep subregions, and we can presumably find his urban places on a map. But what are we to do with the fact that the corporate/resource extractive subregion overlaps with all of these others, and is virtually an inverted mirror image of the wageworkers' subregion? Can these be mapped in any meaningful way? How do we gain any analytical leverage by speaking of these last two things as "regions," when they characterize the entire capitalist world and are spatially omnipresent? In a related way, Emmons's Native American subregion may help us remember that Indian Country remains a place apart, but by equating Indians with reservations, it seriously obscures the degree of their involvement in non-reservation America. Not all Indians, after all, live on reservations, and some have indeed been part of what Emmons calls "a transient unskilled work force"; some have even been skilled or professional in their class identities. It does not help to define away such people tautologically, since doing so diminishes our understanding of the full range of Indian experience in American history.

The real trouble with these subregions is that they more or less reproduce the analytical problems of the infinitely extendable thematic frontiers so typical of western history in the days of Ray Allen Billington and others. How are Emmons's subregions different from the mining frontiers, farming frontiers, urban frontiers, etc., etc., that proliferated endlessly and problematically in post-Turnerian western history? Emmons may think he has located them on a map, but I was not persuaded that he had adequately explained why Iowa corn farmers, for instance, are much more "western" than corn farmers in Indiana or Ohio. Although he asserts that there is something "recognizably western" about such cities as Seattle, Phoenix, Los Angeles, and Minneapolis-St. Paul, I have no idea what it is that makes the Twin Cities—which I suspect the vast majority of Americans would label as midwestern—more western than Chicago, which Emmons excludes from his region with no explanation.

My objection here is not to subregions per se, for they can have considerable heuristic value if they focus our attention on the spatial relationships of a particular human community or activity. My problem is rather that Emmons offers these subregions as essentially western, even though most of them bear little analytical relationship to the larger region that supposedly contains them. (I'm also doubtful that these eight, and only these eight, are the key thematic subregions that define all western regional experience.) The fact that Emmons never does more than gesture at the supposed differences between western and non-western farmers, or western and non-western cities, or even western and non-western workers, is symptomatic of the problem. So too is the fact that he pays so little attention to whether the inhabitants of a given region actually think of themselves as western. I daresay that most people who live in northern Michigan or Wisconsin would require considerable persuasion before agreeing to call themselves westerners, and that most Americans would laugh at them if they tried. Throughout his essay, Emmons seems to want his West to be an analytically stable category separable from the changeable beliefs of those who use it to describe themselves. Perhaps he is nervous that doing otherwise would make the term too subjective, moving him back toward the "West as state of mind" approach that he abhors, but the odd result is to distance the category "West" from the very people who presumably created and continue to reproduce it.

Emmons does give us a description of western regional psychology (suicidal, depressed, and mobile) and regional character ("nervous, insecure, ethnically and racially intolerant and exclusionist, and at times angry and rebellious"), which is an oddly inverted, but no less monolithic or essentialist version of Turner's famous passage on the frontier traits of American character. (Turner, at least, claimed that these were national traits, and yet Emmons never demonstrates that westerners are more nervous, insecure, intolerant, or angry than other Americans; all we know for sure from his argument is that before 1945 they killed themselves more often and may have moved more frequently than their counterparts in other regions.) For Emmons, as for Turner, the diverse peoples who underwent a common western historical process all came to share a common regional identity that then persisted well beyond the conditions that originated it. Perhaps such an identity does exist, but Emmons has not adequately described it or captured its range. His westerners may be more diverse in

their class backgrounds than Turner's, but they seem just as white, just as Euro-american, just as male.² Worse, Emmons is never clear about when precisely they shift from being conquering easterners to being conquered westerners instead. He speaks of a West that, unlike the South, "was conquered piecemeal over many generations," but never specifies whether it is the land or the people that is being conquered in this description. The distinction matters, since one would have thought that some westerners must have succeeded in their conquests while others failed or were conquered themselves. Yet for Emmons, the whole West is conquered, and the only conquerers in sight are the faceless agents of corporations and a growing national state invariably located somewhere back East. The fact that some of the capital that transformed the West originated there, and that some of the corporations and state structures (to say nothing of other cultural and environmental forces) were internal to the region, gets little acknowledgment. To be a true westerner in Emmons's tautological vision, one apparently has also to be a true victim; to be other than a victim, one apparently has to be a non-westerner.

Nowhere are the dangers of this tautology more visible than in Emmons's discussion of western mythology. The authors of the western frontier myth are for him the same outside forces that conquered the region, but they are an oddly abstract and shapeshifting lot: it is "market forces" that "created the legends," it is the "dominant classes" that used those legends "to justify themselves and the world they created," it is a non-western "power elite" that deceived westerners with a myth that "made no sense of their world at all." In short, Emmons says, "the West was what the eastern power elite and myth makers wanted it to be." Maybe this argument can be fairly applied to Teddy Roosevelt, though even his class status seems more complicated (and more interesting) than Emmons's argument might have us believe. But otherwise, this is a vision that assigns all agency to classes and forces so abstract that we never actually see how they manage to impose their will so successfully. We are left with "the world the big changes made," a weirdly disembodied vision of historical process and agency. We never know where figures like James Fenimore Cooper or Buffalo Bill or John Ford might fit in this structure, and the only role that seems left for the people in their audiences is to serve as puppets for capitalistic market forces pulling hegemonic regional strings. Although Emmons doffs his hat at the "alternative visions" of the westerners themselves, he never tells us much about those visions, nor does he

² On Turner's behalf, I cannot help noting, as Emmons does not, that the Wisconsin historian wrote his frontier thesis with no thought that it accurately described the history of what Turner would have called "the Far West." Whatever its strengths and weaknesses, Turner's work was meant most of all to describe the history of the Old Northwest, and he himself recognized how much his own arguments had to be modified when moved beyond the Mississippi. Encountering the following passage, one might almost think one was reading Patricia Limerick: "When the arid lands and the mineral resources of the Far West were reached, no conquest was possible by the old individual pioneer methods. Here expensive irrigation works must be constructed, cooperative activity was demanded in utilization of the water supply, capital beyond the reach of the small farmer was required." Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York, 1920), 258.

confront why it was that westerners (and Americans more generally) were so easily duped into believing this myth about their own pasts if it was in fact so irredeemably false. The polyvalent quality of myth—its ability to serve multiple ends and carry multiple meanings, many of them opposed to each other—nowhere surfaces in Emmons's account.

The biggest problem in all this, despite Emmons's brilliant arguments on behalf of a West that was shaped by its connections to the rest of the country, is his simultaneous and often paradoxical effort to isolate its regional identity from the forces that helped create it. His search for a real, true West that somehow crystalized between 1843 and 1893 as a place separate from other parts of the United States is at odds with the core of his own argument. Many of the problems in his essay would have disappeared had he spent less time trying to fix the identity of the West, and more time tracing its dynamic changes. Region, after all, may be a historical construction, but it is also less a thing than a relationship—or better yet, a *bundle* of relationships—and it is never static. Any region can only find its historical identity in a complex dialectic with other regions that are themselves no less in flux.

Emmons understands this, and his essay is at its best when he explores the rich lessons that flow from this profound insight. His argument soars when he links the West to the South, and when he traces the ways in which national Republican ideology shaped the growth of the region. Conversely, he gets himself into trouble at precisely those moments when he seeks to define the West as a place apart: static, crystalized, isolated from the dialectical relationships that were shaping it. By never quite acknowledging the dialogue between East and West in which neither region was a monolith and both were the products of many people in both places, he caricatures the identities of both and makes it seem that the one invented the other. By never confronting the problem of who counts as a westerner and who does not, he obscures the complex and highly changeable regional (and class and gender and ethnic) identities that real human beings have actually inhabited. By not asking the extent to which the western frontier was the founding myth of American *national* identity (whatever *that* may be) he fails to explore the intricate inter-regional, inter-class dialogue going on during precisely the period he describes.

In short, the valuable insights of Emmons's essay can in good measure be salvaged simply by applying his own core premises more consistently. Wherever it may have been located at any given moment in time, whatever the forces that may have been shaping it, the West has always existed in a complex dialogue with the rest of the nation—indeed, the rest of the world—and cannot be understood apart from that dialogue. On this central argument, which is the heart of his fine essay, Emmons and I are in complete agreement.