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Frederick Jackson Turner and Imperialism

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ALTHOUGH fifty-five years have passed since the American historian Frederick Jackson Turner first drew the attention of America to himself and to his native Middle West, the magic of his personality has not yet worn off. Three distinguished scholars, Lyman Bryson, Bernard de Voto, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., reaffirmed in a radio broadcast the lasting significance of his *Frontier in American History*. ("Invitation to Learning," Columbia Broadcasting Forum, February 1, 1948). Despite changes which have occurred since the turn of the century, despite contradictions in his writings, and despite the attacks upon the "Turner school" in the last fifteen years, Turner the man has emerged above the heat of partisan debate over the merits of his ideas as the most important writer of American history in the last two generations.

His name has been identified with the frontier, with the West, with sectionalism, and with nationalism, and yet Turner himself was scrupulously careful to avoid committing himself to any one explanation of American development. His intention was to establish a genuine philosophy of American history, which was an interpretation of the life of the nation in which the frontier and the section were means to that end, not an end in themselves. Turner's great contribution was the discovery of a peculiar American quality in our history, and the explanation of his success lies in his harnessing the old dream of America

as the promised land to the critical standards of historical scholarship. Turner with his abhorrence of dogmatism understood, however, that there was no simple answer to the question of America's uniqueness; it was the result of complex forces which had to be isolated and stated in general terms before our history could be rewritten. His interest in general tendencies helps to account for apparent contradictions among the forces that have contributed to the shaping of American life—the incompatibility between individualism and cooperation among the pioneers, between the coarseness of the American type and its idealistic dreams, between the welcome to innovation and the emphasis on conformity.

Certainly one of the most general as well as one of the most important of the forces in Turner's lexicon was that of nationalism. Just as he saw geography, economics, sociology, religion, and psychology contributing to the understanding of history, so he saw individualism, sectionalism, idealism, and materialism contributing to the making of an American nationalism which defied the usual definitions of that term. Much of the appeal of Turner's message was to partisans of causes who were willing to sacrifice the whole for the sake of a particular part, and a powerful partisan bloc in the 1890's represented imperialism. Turner, the historian of the West, has never been considered the apostle of imperialism, because his nationalism, pronounced as it was, has always been

identified with his democracy. But just as imperialism is entwined with nationalism, so Turner himself may have been seized by the same expansionist fever of his day—fever that can only be diagnosed as imperialism.

In the words of Professor Gabriel, "Turner rowed with the current of the new nationalism" (R. H. Gabriel, *The Course of American Democratic Thought*, New York, 1941, p. 257). He expressed the feeling in the last decade of the nineteenth century that America had at last come of age and was now ready to take her place in the sun with other world powers. Our problem is to determine whether imperialism was a legitimate part of the frontiersman's nationalism as understood by Turner, or whether it was a temporary aberration which was foreign to American tradition. Certainly the frontier hypothesis quickened the current that had already begun to flow more rapidly than at any other time in American history. Imperialism, in the 1890's, had become a prominent issue in the public mind, partly because of the excitement aroused by the press to stimulate newspaper circulation. At the same time public attention was attracted by Hawaii's clamor for incorporation into the Union after Hawaiian-Americans had engineered a revolution against the native monarchy with the connivance of the American minister in Honolulu. Only the disapproval of a Democratic president, Grover Cleveland, prevented the United States from acquiring the Hawaiian Islands in 1893.

However, the needs of an industrial society as well as the demands of national pride forced America to follow the expansionist policies of Europe. It was the increasing competition among industrial rivals who needed new outlets to maintain high levels of production, as well as nationalism, that led England, France, and Germany to

push into the tropical lands of Africa, into the islands of the Pacific and into the vast lands of China. Imperialism could provide markets for manufactured goods, which no tariff barrier could harm; it could provide in large measure a degree of national self-sufficiency so valuable in wartime; and it could provide for the productive employment of surplus capital in the development of backward lands.

America had held back from the contest, which began shortly after 1870, because, at this period, America's energy and capital had been absorbed in the development of her own resources. But the census of 1890 revealed its message to others besides Turner. It pointed out to Josiah Strong, Secretary of the Evangelical Society of America, that with the closing of the frontier American capital would lose its accustomed field of investment. If the United States were to remain strong and prosperous, Strong saw no alternative but to follow Europe's example by continuing its process of expansion in overseas territories. (Strong, J., *Expansion under New World Conditions*, New York, 1900, pp. 19-21.)

Strong was speaking for the missionary interests which desired imperialism because of the benefits Anglo-Saxon culture would bring to the less fortunate peoples of the world, but his words were heeded by another group which rarely intruded itself upon the country in time of peace. This was the military class, which had always been held somewhat suspect by Americans as a foreign element that belonged to Europe rather than to the United States. One of the most articulate imperialists among the militarists was the mysterious and repellent figure of Homer Lea, a soldier and adventurer in the Far East, who wanted to awaken America to the danger of the Yellow Peril, Japan.

Employing the Darwinian language of his age, he demanded military preparedness to meet the threat from Japan: "As physical strength represents the strength of man in his struggle for existence, in the same sense military vigor constitutes the strength of nations—ideals, laws and constitutions are but temporary effulgences, and are existent only so long as the strength remains vital." (Lea, H., *The Valor of Ignorance*, New York, 1909, p. 11.) According to his experience, a nation's greatness depends upon its ability to expand, because national existence is governed by an invariable law that a state cannot remain stationary and survive. The reader was left to picture for himself the consequences attendant upon the filling up of the American continent if provisions were not made for further expansion. Dedicated as he was to the ideal of an all-powerful America, Lea refused to see in industry any more than a means to that end, and therefore, did not receive the popularity of the more practical Admiral Mahan, whose great work, *The Influence of Sea Power in History*, in 1891, made America aware of the necessity of having a large navy. Mahan was successful in linking the economic potentialities in imperialism to Lea's militarism by showing that a strong navy would protect bases such as Hawaii and the Philippines which in turn were useful stepping stones to the China trade. (Mahan, A. T., *Retrospect and Prospect*, Boston, 1902, pp. 34-35.)

Therefore, when *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* appeared in 1893, the advocates of imperial expansion had already laid the groundwork for their attack. Turner would be able to give them what they still lacked, namely, the historical justification of imperialism. If, as Turner said, America's frontier experience

had been responsible for the development of the American character, the abandonment of such an important contributing element as expansion would obviously affect adversely the national character; and expansion could only be maintained by being carried overseas. It is not difficult to see how imperialists, like the *laissez-faire* individualists, by picking out of Turner's message the parts which fitted into their own program, might claim Turner as one of their own. The Turner hypothesis affected not only jingoists, professional militarists and evangelical racists, but also eminent scholars such as A. Lawrence Lowell, who wrote in 1899: "If we look then at the past and the future, the question is . . . whether we shall shift into other channels the colonization which has lasted as long as our national existence, or whether we shall abandon it; whether we shall expand in other directions, or cease to expand into new territory at all." ("The Colonial Expansion of the United States," *Atlantic Monthly*, LXXXIII, 1899, p. 147.) There seems to be no question in Lowell's mind that the loss of free land would produce economic disorders that could only be relieved by the adoption of European expansion. But his use of the term, "colonization," was neither the Greek one of dispatching the independent parties to reproduce the parent state overseas nor the older American one of peopling free land with free men who would eventually be incorporated into the parent state as an equal. The colonization to which Lowell was referring dealt neither with free land nor with free men, and this difference distinguished the new American expansion of the Spanish-American war from the old expansion of Manifest Destiny. Free land and free men had no place in the definition of imperialism as

"... the spirit of rule, ascendancy, or predominance; the rule of the one race or people by another race of people, involving of course the subjection of the former to the latter." (Godard, J. G., "Imperialism: its Spirit and Tendency," *Westminster Review*, CLVIII, 1902, p. 16.)

Nevertheless, nationalism and imperialism were easily confused because of some basic similarities, and single-purposed imperialists could tap the imperialist qualities in Turner's nationalism to support their own position. The air of pride which he took in describing the physical greatness of America, the invidious comparisons between America and less fortunate Europe, and the many references to the "imperial domain," and to the "destiny of the United States as the arbiter of North America," all indicate an unconscious compromising of the democratic nature of his nationalism, which is found occasionally in his more grandiloquent passages. Writing after the heyday of the imperial interlude, Turner saw imperialism as a natural growth. His acceptance of the superhuman character of America's destiny seems to substantiate the charge of fatalism which Professor Pierson brought against him, in his "Frontier and American Institutions; A Criticism of the Turner Theory." (*New England Quarterly*, XV, 1942, p. 252.) A sense of predestination hangs heavily over Turner's passage: "Having colonized the Far West, having mastered its internal resources, the nation turned at the conclusion of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century to deal with the Far East, to engage in world-politics of the Pacific Ocean. . . . This extension of power . . . was, indeed, in some respects the logical outcome of the nation's march to the Pacific, the sequence of the era in which it was en-

gaged in occupying the free lands and exploiting the resources of the West." (*The Frontier in American History*, New York, 1920, p. 315.)

Turner's fatalism, however, is seriously modified by the fact that he recognized the necessity for Americans to make an active effort to preserve their democratic ideals. There is no placid acceptance of fate in his outlook. When radical changes occur in a period of American history such as the one he witnessed in his lifetime, the nation must be ready to work out for itself new social adjustments that would keep intact the distinctive features of frontier experience. The temporary success of imperialism was due to the mistaken identification of Manifest Destiny with overseas expansion. The "logical outcome" which Turner mentioned referred to the restlessness of the pioneer and his desire for more freedom and opportunity which always lay beyond the last frontier. Conquest of alien peoples, therefore, plays no part in Turner's statement on expansion: "Men moved in their single life from Vermont to New York, from New York to Ohio, from Ohio to Wisconsin, from Wisconsin to California, and longed for the Hawaiian Islands." (*The Frontier in American History*, New York, 1920, pp. 354-355.) When they arrived in Hawaii or in the Philippines, they discovered that the situation was not the same as it had been when they moved into Wisconsin or Iowa. The climate was foreign to them, but what was worse, the land contained foreign peoples who were unassimilable to American culture. Then too, the ideal of Manifest Destiny and the pride in the strength of a free and powerful nation received a jolt when insurrection in the far-off Philippines began to exact a toll of American lives. In the words of anti-imperialist William Jennings Bryan, the

American people soon began to feel that "'Destiny' was not as manifest as it was a few weeks ago." (Quoted in Albert K. Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny*, Baltimore, 1935, p. 285.)

Imperialism suddenly forced Americans to reconsider the question of the rights of man and the traditional ideas of liberty and democracy, and they felt uncomfortable in dealing with backward peoples. Fortunately, the shock resulting from the spectacle of Prussian militarism which had arisen simultaneously with American imperialism cut the imperialist element in Turner's nationalism down to manageable size. In an address delivered in May, 1918, in the midst of the World War, Turner spoke for his country when he announced that America's participation in the war was to save

her ideals, which later might be ". . . medicine for the healing of the nations. It is the best we have to give to Europe, and it is a matter of vital import that we shall safeguard and preserve our power to serve the world, and not be overwhelmed in the flood of imperialistic force that wills the death of democracy and would send freemen under the yoke." (*The Frontier in American History*, New York, 1920, p. 336.) When the democratic basis of Turner's nationalism rose to challenge its imperialistic elements, as it was forced to do by world war, imperialism was driven out. The imperialism of Turner and of his countrymen was merely an outgrowth of American nationalism which could not long endure beside the stronger forces of democracy.