

The frontier thesis

[Countries](#), [United States](#)



The emergence of western history as an important field of scholarship started with Frederick Jackson Turner's (1861-1932) famous essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American history." [1] This thesis shaped both popular and scholarly views of the West for the next two generations. In his thesis, Turner argued that the West had to be taken seriously. He felt that up to his time there had not been enough research of what he in his essay call "the fundamental, dominating fact in the U. S. history": the territorial expansion from the Atlantic to the Pacific coast. The frontier past was, according to Turner, the best way to describe the distinctive American history and character. To this day, Turner's thesis remains one of the most widely discussed interpretations of the American past and it still continues to influence historians. Even though many scholars have questioned the thesis as an acceptable theory of explaining American history and culture, the thesis has its strengths.

Turner explained what made America unique. America as a unique nation was already a belief when the first colonies were established on the East coast. And the notion that America was exceptional would continue to be recreated again and again on the frontier. The frontier was closely related to the myth that sustained the American faith, the ideals and images that represent the American Dream as well as America as an exceptional nation.

The purpose of this paper is to look at the essence of Turner's argument in his essay, as well as discuss his strongest and weakest arguments. The paper will end with a look at the West as a myth. The essence of Turner's thesis In Turner's mind, the settlement of the West by white people – "the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance

of American settlement westward” was the most important part of American history. [2] This is the major theme in Turner’s essay and the heart of the frontier thesis.

Turner did not define the West as a geographical place or region but as a process, which defined what he looked upon as uniquely American.

According to Turner, the westward expansion had transformed the savage and wild land into a modern civilization. This westward expansion could explain the American development, the national character as well as its democracy. Turner believed that this settling of a wild area of “ free land” was an important factor in shaping the American character.

American characteristics like individualism, democracy and a strong work ethic, which Turner looked upon as typical American qualities had all been developed when newcomers settled the wilderness. These special qualities would later influence the whole nation. Other historians and philosophers such as Tocqueville and Hegel have also talked about the impact of the frontier on the American experience, but the Turner thesis was the first to be accepted by other historians. Turner insisted upon the frontier as the number one “ explanation” of American history.

But it is difficult to understand what he really meant by “ explanation”. As argued by Joshua Derman, it is almost impossible for the reader of Turner’s work to deduce whether he intended the “ frontier to be the ‘ prime mover’ in American political history, the single best explanation for why American cultural and political institutions developed the way they did, or a dogmatic

rule for interpreting all events in American history. "[3] The notion that democracy arose because of the frontier is also weak.

For example, both Russia and China have vaster frontiers than America, but they lack democracy. And in his essay, Turner has not showed what made the American frontier experience different from other countries with considerable frontiers. To say that the frontier shaped American democratic institutions is vague and hard to prove. It is clear that the new land and communities in the wilderness demanded greater participation in political activities (than in Europe) and because of this ordinary people had to step in and contribute. 4] This notion that the 'common man' should contribute in civil life became an important part of American society. [5] It was not only American democracy that Turner thought had developed out of the unique frontier experience. There were also several other values that owed the frontier its striking characteristics, for example the complex nationality (later termed the melting pot), individualism and economic mobility (the American Dream). "The result", Turner concluded, was "that to the frontier the American intellect owe[d] its striking characteristics"(100).

Individualism was one of the most important and distinctive qualities created by the frontier, as stated in the essay: That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and acquisitiveness; that practical inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things.... the restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and evil, and withal the buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom –

these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier. (100)

As we can see from these lines, frontier individualism did not only promote positive things, it had negative traits as well. On the frontier, newcomers had to rely on themselves. This feeling created the traditional, individualistic feeling. Since life was so hard on the frontier one could not carry one's ancestry into the wilderness. As a consequence, Turner thought, social life became more informal ... than in the older and more settled communities. According to the frontier thesis, all the resources on the frontier as well as its lack of an established socio-political structure provided opportunities for the settlers.

They could now pursue their dreams“ of limitless wealth and self-betterment. “[6] Cheap or free land meant more opportunities for the self-made man, and provided a ‘ safety valve’ for the ‘ newcomers’: Since the day when the fleet of Columbus sailed into the waters of the New World, America has been another name for opportunity, and the people of the United States have taken their tone from the incessant expansion which has not only been open but has even been forced upon them. (100)

Free land led to new opportunities, and it was up to each individual and their desire to work hard and climb the economic and social ladder: “...each frontier did indeed furnish a new field of opportunity, a gate of escape from the bondage of the past; and freshness, and confidence, and scorn of older society...”(Turner, 100). Everything was open to the man who knew how to seize the opportunity. The self-made man became the ideal of the West, and

eventually every man in the U. S. A. should be like him. It was the work ethic of the frontier, not of the South or East, Turner thought, that had contributed the most to the American character.

The frontier culture concentrated on the dollar and it became important to make something out of your life. People were constantly moving in search of larger acreage and new opportunities. The large amount of unclaimed western land offered huge opportunities for those who were willing to take a risk. It could, if they worked hard, give them even more wealth and money. This “gospel of wealth” has continued to be a part of American society. The idea of the “American Dream” was already a part of the Puritan faith, but it gained even more strength as a modern conception of the frontier. The frontier became the American Dream.

To some extent, Turner is right when he talks about the opportunities on the frontier. Newcomers came to the U. S. A. because of new opportunities, and America letters described all the opportunities the frontier offered those who were willing to take a risk. [7] Whereas genealogy divided classes in the Old World, money from hard work divided classes on the American frontier. This became uniquely American. And this myth of America as a place of opportunity and optimism is still a part of the American character. Also, the American tradition of competition and self-betterment was born on the frontier and continues in America even today.

But a weakness of the frontier thesis is that Turner ignored the fact that many Americans have never or would never live on the frontier. The West was not a place of opportunity and freedom for everyone, as it seems in

Turner's essay. For example, to many women and minorities and of course the Indians, the West was no promised land. Life was hard. It was not as romantic and idealistic as Turner made it seem in his essay. And not all men benefited from the frontier. For example, the cost of starting a farm in West was high and few poor urban workers of the East could afford to get a second chance in the West.

Also, the largest migration was actually to the city and not to the farm. [8] Historians have concluded that the American West was not “some rough-hewn egalitarian democracy, where every man had a piece of land and the promise for prosperity, but a world quickly dominated by big money and big government.” [9] Despite shortcomings in Turner's essay, the frontier myth meant social and economic mobility. As argued by Degler, “precisely because it [the frontier] was believed to be a safety valve, regardless of what it was in fact, the western frontier worked an influence upon the attitudes of Americans.

It left its mark in the optimism, the belief in progress, the promise of the future and the second chance – all of which have been deeply embedded in the American character” (142). Turner also ignored the fact that the land was not ‘free’ (which is illustrated by all the Indian wars). And the essay does not say much about the violence and lawlessness of western expansion. Clearly, opportunities aided the development of democratic ideals in America. But the availability of opportunities should not be confused with the origination of democratic ideas (Degler, 137).

The idea of ‘starting over’ is closely connected with opportunity and an important part of the frontier thesis. As stated in the thesis: “American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnished the forces dominating American character” (Turner, 88). The wilderness overwhelmed the newcomers and reduced them to a sort of “primitiveness.” It is a reversed evolution of civilization Turner explains in his thesis.

But this step backwards was overshadowed by the hope for a new and better society. Euro-Americans turned the wilderness into civilization, and in doing so they themselves were transformed. In the ‘contest’ between nature and the colonists emerged a unique American character and a distinctive political culture – individualism and democracy. [10] Turner addressed all these new opportunities the frontier created as a “social rebirth”. America became a sign of a new start to many. People were willing to leave their past behind in search of new opportunities.

Turner also set the stage for what would later become known as the “melting pot”. He looked upon the frontier as a crucible where people with different backgrounds came together and formed a distinct American character: “In the crucible of the frontier the immigrants were Americanized, liberated and fused into a mixed race, English in neither nationality nor characteristics.” The result was “the formation of a composite nationality

for the American people” (94-95). But Turner as well as many others were wrong since the West was not as homogeneous as they thought.

Many thought the newcomers would be Americanized, but the reality was that many newcomers kept their traditions and Americanization happened much more gradually than Turner believed. For example, Germans and English colonists differed in farming methods, crops and labor systems even though they lived on the same frontier. And many ethnic groups settled in areas dominated by their own people and showed resistance to change. Another central aspect of Turner’s frontier thesis was that the frontier had made the United States different from Europe.

According to Turner, the frontier remade the Europeans who entered it: “ The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. ” The frontier “ finds him [the settler] a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel and thought ... little by little he [the settler] transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old European, not simply the development of Germanic germs...[but] a new product that is American (89). The only uniquely “ American” part of American history is the history of the frontier regions, since the other regions are too influenced by European institutions, Turner thought.

He broke away from the notion that America was an extension of European culture and the so-called “ Germ Theory” of American historical development, which stated that American institutions had their roots in ancient Teutonic forests (European roots of American institutions). [11] Turner looked upon the frontier as a powerful force. It shaped European

settlers into something different from the European character. [12] The settling of the New World, especially the American frontier, had shaped an exceptional country, different from the Old World. The United States was something new and unique, something independent of European experience.

As argued before, America as exceptional was a part of the American republic from the beginning and the frontier thesis carried this view even further. [13] The American frontier became something different and made a sharp contrast to the shadows of urban Europe. America became “ the land of European dreams. ” And this is not all, the frontier actually influenced not only America, but Europe as well: “ Steadily the frontier settlement advanced and carried with it individualism, democracy and nationalism, and powerfully affected the East and the Old World” (Turner, 99).

One weakness in Turner’s essay is that he puts too much emphasis on the effect on the frontier and because of this fails to mention other important features that have formed both the West and America as a whole. The frontier clearly contributed, but other factors are important as well, like slavery, immigration, agriculture, violence, industrialization, urbanization as well as women and ethnic minorities. For example, Indians received far too little attention. Turner considered Native Americans to be of little significance.

They were part of that wild frontier environment and posed “ a common danger and served as “ a consolidating agent in our history,” faceless obstacles to be overcome and subdued in the process of westernizing” (Milner, 213). Turner’s estimated effect of the frontier on American politics

and institutions was also exaggerated. As Turner puts it: “ The legislation which most developed the powers of the national government, and played the largest part in its activity, was conditioned on the frontier” (Turner, 95). But actually, the frontier state was not that different from eastern models in state government and legislation.

For example, the constitution of both Tennessee and Kentucky were modeled after the Pennsylvania constitution of 1790. Just some clauses had actually originated in the West (Degler, 136). In fact, regarding property qualifications for suffrage and the structure of state legislature, the western states modeled their government and legislation after older eastern States. The western states were also more reluctant than eastern states to permit black suffrage and even to allow them to enter their states both before and after the Emancipation. 14] Benjamin F. Wright, Jr. , argues that democracy had emerged in the Old World and had generally moved from east to west, rather than visa versa. Turner has also been criticized when he defines the frontier. To him, the frontier means different things. Sometimes it is an area where the civilization and wilderness meets, and other times the western part of the United States. It can even refer to a process – a way of life for those participating the settling of the land or a place full of natural resources.

Critics have argued that if the frontier is the edge of civilization, it cannot also be the western part of the USA at a stage of social evolution (Degler, 135). The Western myth The frontier has become essential to Americans' becoming who they are as a people. As argued by Faragher, " the belief that

‘ westernizing’ defines our unique national heritage, and that it amounted to the purest expression of American idealism, has been what historian Warren Susman called “ the official American ideology”(Faragher, 230).

Henry Nash Smith and other specialists in American studies demonstrated that reality did not always rule in thinking about the West and that myths, symbols, images and stereotypes developed in response to the conditions of a particular time, could become a part of American culture and be transmitted to subsequent generations (Milner, 12). It was on the western frontier that America formed its own independent identity. Americans have located their nation-building myths and heroes out west, and the west has connected America’s to a national culture through a common story.

The frontier thesis had, and continues to have, a powerful hold on popular and scholarly imagination. It reinforced the American sense of uniqueness and accomplishment, and strengthen the American nationalism (Milner, 21). The frontier played a role in endowing the people of the United States with distinguished character traits. Conclusion With his frontier thesis, Turner wanted to get away from the notion that America was just an extension of Europe. Instead, he emphasized the importance of the frontier as the promotion of distinctive American characteristics.

It was on the western frontier you could trace the uniquely American character traits like, for example, individualism, opportunity and democracy. The West would be known as a place for opportunity and success for millions of Americans throughout the frontier, eastern cities and soon rest of the world. America became the “ New Eden” and the land of opportunity. The

affluence in America made Americans unique to Europe and also the rest of the world. The frontier's work ethic and individualism spread across the country because it spoke to all Americans. And American frontier values like individualism continue to be important even today.

No other country in the world would use the word frontier as Americans do: it convey so many different things to them. Most of all it means optimism. It is not strange that people were encouraged to go West for example during the depression of 1857, where they were promised more opportunities. [15] Despite shortcomings and weaknesses in Turner's essay, the frontier thesis has a lasting appeal and the frontier idea keeps turning up in new forms, for example in everything from western movies, commercials and politics. The frontier has become an important part of American consciousness.

There is something of substantial merit at the core of Turner's views. The characteristics we think about when we hear the name America, even if it's true or just a myth is qualities Turner described in his thesis. The frontier has become a symbolic repository of American values and characteristics. Turner articulated the American 'myth' that people already thought was true and what many thought was a distinctive American characteristic. The West became an image of a mythmaker and a preserver of distinctive American values. Clearly, the West continues to live one, and it is a distinctive American characteristic.