The Role of the West in the Construction of American Identity: From Frontier to Crossroads

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RÉSUMÉ

L'Ouest américain est souvent présenté comme ayant un statut à part dans la construction de l'identité américaine. Ecrivant à la fin du dix-neuvième siècle, le père fondateur de l'histoire de l'Ouest, Frederick Jackson Turner, considère que la singularité du caractère américain résulte de l'expérience de la Frontière. C'est en participant au peuplement de l'Ouest, au contact de la Frontière, loin de l'Est et de l'Europe, que l'Américain se serait construit. Cette "exception américaine" (exceptionalism) est mise à mal par les générations suivantes d'historiens. Les études de la deuxième moitié du vingtième siècle insistent, notamment, sur la diversité du peuplement et de la population de l'Ouest, nourris de vagues successives d'immigration. La conception de l'Ouest en tant que région marque alors le passage à une histoire régionale, loin de la vision turnérienne, qui assimilait l'histoire de la nation à celle de l'Ouest. Plus récemment, les spécialistes du domaine ont cherché à replacer l'Ouest dans un contexte international, en le présentant comme un carrefour où se sont croisés des peuples venus non seulement de l'Est, mais aussi du Sud, du Nord, et de l'Ouest. Véritable point de rencontre de nations et d'empires dès l'époque coloniale, région aux frontières internationales, l'Ouest semble se nourrir, aujourd'hui encore, de ces relations, contacts et interactions entre les peuples.

Keywords: American West, frontier thesis, New Western History, regionalism, exceptionalism, American identity, crossroads.

Since its settlement was the last stage in the completion of the country, thus marking the closing of a crucial period in American history, the West has had a special place in the nation’s self-image, and it has always been considered as central in the construction of American identity. Throughout the twentieth

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century, historians have tried to assess the significance of the West, regarded, by some critics, as "the most distinctively American part of America" (Bryce 315). In the late nineteenth century, Frederick Jackson Turner, the founding father of Western history, attributed the unique American character to the experience of the frontier. According to Turner, the westward movement Americanized the pioneer, shaped American institutions, and promoted democracy. It was a long time before historians started questioning Turner’s "frontier thesis", so strong was the appeal to Americans’ imagination generated by this justification of American exceptionalism. Criticism culminated in the emergence of "New Western History", in the late 1980s. Rejecting the notion of frontier altogether, New Historians suggested a rewriting of the Western past that focused on the West as a region, with geographical limits and specific characteristics distinguishing it from the other American regions. While Turner’s thesis was national in scope and glorified an American identity, the New Historians’ regionalism, stressing the uniqueness of the West, promoted a Western identity.

The aim of this article is to assess the significance given to the West at different periods. Focusing, first, on Turner’s interpretation, with its justification of American exceptionalism, it will then analyse the regionalism of the New Western History, which has resulted in the isolation of the West from the rest of the nation. Finally, as scholars have been quick in criticizing the regionalist perspective of New Western History, it will try and assess how historians have started giving Western history a new orientation over the last decade, one that aims at reconciling the concepts of region and frontier, thus giving back to the West its significance at the national level.

Frederick Jackson Turner and the frontier thesis

Considered as the founding father of Western history, Frederick Jackson Turner is famous for a lecture he gave in 1893, entitled "The Significance of the Frontier in American History". The Turner thesis has had an extremely long-lasting impact, and may be considered as one of the main documents of American historiography. According to Turner, it was the frontier that shaped American institutions, society, and culture. The experience of the frontier, the westward march of pioneers from the Atlantic to the Pacific Coast, distinguishes Americans from Europeans, and gives the American nation its exceptional character. Turner famously asserted: "The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development" (Turner 1).

The originality of the nation’s institutions, according to Turner, lay in their adaptation to the new environment encountered by the pioneers. Society is described as an organism in constant evolution, and the wilderness transforms
Old World institutions into distinctly American ones. It is also what turns pioneers into Americans, the frontier being "the line of most rapid and effective Americanization" (Turner 3). Not only does the frontier stand as the bedrock of the American nation, it also creates a new people, "a mixed race, English in neither nationality nor characteristics" (Turner 23). The pioneer experiences a "rebirth", a return to primitivism, the frontier Americanizing him by destroying his inherited culture: "The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin" (Turner 4). The "process" at the heart of the frontier experience thus redefines the newcomers’ cultural and national identity, and integrates them into a new, specifically American society. Observing that three centuries of westward expansion bred national traits that distinguish Americans from Europeans, Turner claimed that "to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics" (Turner 37), such as individualism, energy, optimism and enthusiasm.

Turner’s frontier thesis constitutes a landmark document in American historiography for several reasons. First, Turner rejects the "germ theory", which claimed that American institutions and customs had been imported from Europe, therefore stressing the continuity of institutions and de-emphasizing the significance of American experience. Second, Turner’s explanation runs counter to the Eastern Establishment, and its colonial and Atlantic coastal emphasis. Insisting that "[the] true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West" (Turner 3), the historian offers a new perspective on American history. Finally, Turner provides his contemporaries with an American history, which explains the process of Americanization whereby a unique nation was created out of diverse peoples and cultural practices. Because this process of going back to primitivism, experiencing a rebirth, being offered new opportunities, and furthering progress and expansion keeps repeating itself, the frontier makes the American past exceptional. In other words, demonstrating that it was the frontier that gave an identity to America, the Turner thesis amounts to a justification of American exceptionalism.

Discussions and debates around the idea of an "American identity" existed long before Turner penned his frontier thesis. In 1782, J. Hector St John de Crèvecoeur wondered: "What then is the American, this new man?“ (Crèvecoeur

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1 According to the "germ theory", the ancestors of the Anglo-Saxons had devised their political and social organization in the forests of medieval Germany, institutions that had then influenced the development of England, before reaching the American colonies.
Observers have traditionally highlighted the uniqueness of the nation, like, for instance, Tocqueville, who remarked: "the position of the Americans is [...] quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one" (Tocqueville 36-37). Many reasons have been put forward, over the centuries, to argue for the distinctiveness of the American nation and people, some observers pointing to the isolation from Europe, others to Puritanism, or slavery. Asserting that it is the westward movement that best defines the United States, Turner provides yet another explanation. The historian even goes as far as claiming that slavery would not be such an important subject were it not for its relation to westward expansion.

Turner’s thesis met with a huge success, and has had an extremely long-lasting impact. It remained the most convincing way to explain the American past and American identity for a very long time. Part of this success is due to Turner’s nationalistic tone, and to the fact that the historian offered his contemporaries an interpretation of American history as a whole. The frontier thesis was not local or regional history, it was American history writ large. Besides, it offered the story of the birth of a nation to a people self-conscious of the shortness of its national history since, at the time Turner published his essay, parts of the United States had not achieved statehood yet. Finally, it depicted an American past that was as glorious and noble as that of any Old World power.\(^2\) Beginning with the announcement that the frontier had gone, "[closing] the first period of American history" (Turner 38), Turner’s essay triggered Americans’ imagination, appealed to their sense of identity, and helped justify that peculiar sense of American difference and distinctiveness.

It should be no wonder, then, that criticism of the frontier thesis appeared rather late. The appeal of the frontier to popular imagination made it even harder for historians to discredit it entirely. Despite the efforts of many scholars, during the twentieth century, to point out the shortcomings and inconsistencies of Turner’s interpretation, and to call for a new paradigm to explain the American past, many historians still clung to the frontier thesis. Criticism reached its height in the late 1980s, taking the form of a "New Western History", which discarded the word "frontier", and promoted a study of the West as a region, not as a process.

**The regionalism of the New Western History**

Frederick Jackson Turner is the traditional target of the New Western

\(^2\) The final paragraph of Turner’s essay reads as follows: "What the Mediterranean Sea was to the Greeks, breaking the bond of custom, offering new experiences, calling out new institutions and activities, that, and more, the ever retreating frontier has been to the United States directly, and to the nations of Europe more remotely" (Turner 38).
Historians. Much of their revisionism consists in refuting his thesis, but the New Western History also suggests a new reading of the Western past. One of the main features of the movement is its rejection of the word "frontier", which the historians consider as racist and ethnocentric. To Turner, indeed, the frontier was "the meeting point between savagery and civilization" (Turner 3). Besides, Turner used the words "frontier" and "West" interchangeably, with the result that the historian put an end to the history of the West at the same time as he announced the closing of the frontier, in 1893. Therefore, discarding the word frontier and defining the West as a region make it possible to study its twentieth-century history, which had been completely overlooked by the "Old Western History", a label that appeared following the birth of the New Western History, to emphasize the novelty of the latter.

The New Western Historians banish the "f-word" (Limerick 1994, 72) from their vocabulary altogether, and replace it with the idea of "conquest". While Turner depicted the westward movement as a march of civilization and progress, the new historians denounce the expansionism and colonialism of the nation. As prominent New Western Historian and author of the landmark study *The Legacy of Conquest* Patricia Nelson Limerick states: "Conquest forms the historical bedrock of the whole nation, and the American West is a preeminent case study in conquest and its consequences" (Limerick 1987, 27-28). Criticizing Turner for his focus on white male pioneers, the revisionists also aim at writing the history of all the actors of the western past: men, women, families, African-Americans, Chinese, Mexicans, Native Americans, etc. The Western past is not a one-dimensional story of white men marching westward and replacing savagery by civilization, resulting in the ennoblement of the American character, but a multicultural tale highlighting ethnic and racial diversity, with people coming from the East, but also from the North, the South, and the West. Neither is it the story of the unique and exceptional subduing of an empty land, but a tale of environmental destruction and despoliation. In other words, far from the triumphalism, nationalism, and celebratory tones of Turner’s interpretation, the New Western Historians’ reading of the Western past is dark, emphasizing exploitation and conquest, and resting on moral ambiguity.3

The New Historians’ desire to separate West and frontier, while stressing the inconsistency of the latter notion, translates into a regional approach to the Western past. According to the New Western History, the West is not some moving line advancing westward, but a region, with geographical limits and intrinsic characteristics. Interestingly, members of the movement do not agree on the limits of the region: some include Alaska and Hawaii; others consider

3 Critics have severely criticized the pessimism of the New Historians, and some, like novelist Larry McMurtry, have gone as far as calling them experts in "Failure Studies" (McMurtry 32).
that the Pacific slope does not share the same characteristics as the rest of the region; while still others disagree over the northern and southern edges of the area. While it is generally agreed that the region corresponds to the entire territory lying west of the 98th meridian, the limits of the West have long been debated. Nevertheless, the New Historians all insist on considering the West as a fixed entity, and advocate a regionalist approach. In spite of its fuzzy lines, New Historians Donald Worster or Patricia Nelson Limerick claim that the West can be marked out on a map, just like the South or the North-East. And it has characteristics all of its own, that distinguish it from the other regions of the United States. For instance, (semi)aridity, ethnic and racial diversity, and "a legacy of conquest", are considered as giving the western region its distinctiveness.

It is to be noted that this conception of the West as a region is not specific to the New Western Historians. In the 1950s, historian Walter Prescott Webb discussed the aridity of the West, and made it the main characteristic of the region. Yet, this insistence on what some critics call the "regionalizing of the West" is a distinguishing feature of the New Western History. The historians’ desire to present "the American West as a real place, as a region of significance with a serious history" (Limerick 1991, 69-70), is akin to a manifesto, with the historians, themselves proud westerners, eager to restore to favor a region whose history has long been overshadowed by the colonial past of the East and the slavery heritage of the South. The New Western Historians’ ”ferocious, regional pride" is obvious in their writings, which heavily rely on their own experiences of the West and are full of personal anecdotes, so that one often wonders whether they are scholars doing western history, or westerners studying the past of their region.

Yet, interestingly, the regionalist perspective advocated by the New Western History, along with its focus on the distinctive characteristics of the West, tends to stress the uniqueness of the region. According to Donald Worster, "regionalism is about telling differences or it has nothing to tell" (Worster 1992, 25). Ironically, then, even though Turner has been the whipping-boy of the New Western Historians, Old and New Historians have more in common than the latter would admit. The West’s uniqueness is central to both interpretations, explaining the exceptionalism of the nation at large for Turner and his followers, and the significance of the Western region, with its distinctive history, cast of characters, and environment, for the New Historians. While Turner’s outlook rested on a rejection of the "germ theory" and the proclamation of the exceptional character of the American experience, the New Western Historians

\[4\] Western historian Howard R. Lamar, cited in Bernstein. New Western Historians Limerick, White, Cronon, and Worster were Lamar’s students at Yale.
promote the affirmation of a Western identity through their emphasis on the distinctiveness and uniqueness of the region.

Aware of the flaws and shortcomings of the New Historians’ revisionism, other Western historians have suggested, over the last decade, another approach, "a newest Western history" (Aron 4), that seems to go beyond Western exceptionalism while still demonstrating the significance of the West and of the Western past.

The West as "crossroads"

Even though it gives an interesting outlook on the twentieth-century West, which had been largely ignored by the Old Western History, the geographically-bound region the New Historians are eager to study does not do full justice to the diversity of the West. So large is the area traditionally referred to as "the West" that the defining characteristics the New Historians are attached to are hardly applicable to all parts of the region. Aridity, for instance, does not characterize the Pacific Northwest as it does New Mexico or Arizona, just as ethnic diversity is probably not as central a feature of the Plains states or Oregon as it is of California or Texas. The New Historians try so hard to define and study the West as a region with distinctive characteristics that they fall into the trap of generalization. This homogenization masks subregional variations and basically suppresses one of the main characteristics of the broader region: its diversity, or lack of uniformity. Furthermore, the search for a clearly delineated region with tangible features has led the New Historians to ignore an important aspect of the West, that is, the fact that it may also have intangible characteristics, such as an undisputed place in the American imagination. Seen as "a state of mind", the West is no less significant, yet much more difficult to locate on a map. That is why historians like David Wrobel and Michael Steiner have recently called for a study of the "many Wests within the larger West" (Wrobel and Steiner 11), one that would go beyond both the old frontier paradigm and the fixed and rigid entity of New Western History.

Moreover, the New Historians’ efforts to define the West as a place, and to prove the existence of a purely western identity, tend to exaggerate the differences with other American regions, and to give Western culture an essence that it does not have or, to quote Southern historian Edward Ayers, to "totalize [that culture], to make specific features of a society’s thought or practice not only its essence but also its totality" (Ayers 65-6). In other words, the regionalism of the New Historians creates a fossilized entity, and deprives the history of the West of the dynamism that characterized Turner’s thesis.

Finally, the regionalist perspective tends to isolate the West from the rest of the nation and of the world. While Turner, in spite of his sweeping assertions
and fuzzy definitions, wrote a national history, the New Historians limit the scope of their analyses to the westernmost part of the United States. As a result, the new framework lacks the force and appeal of the old one. According to a critic, "by abandoning the idea of the frontier and making the West as place the center of [their] focus, [the New Western Historians have] drained away some of the drama of life on the edges where people and places meet" (Weber, in Worster, Armitage, Malone, Weber, and Limerick 316, italics in the text). The regionalism of the New Historians results in parochialism, and runs the risk of being regarded as irrelevant to American history at large.

It is to avoid this isolation, and to bring the West back to relevance on the national stage that historians have recently called for a history that would go beyond the place/process, or region/frontier, dichotomy. For instance, Western historians have paid more attention to colonialism over the last decade. While the regionalism of the New Historians tends to create a fixed and fossilized entity, the latest studies highlight the porosity of borders, giving back to Western history the dynamism and movement that characterized Turner’s thesis. Redefining the "frontier" as "a meeting place of peoples in which geographic and cultural borders were not clearly defined", historians Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron associate the concept with that of "borderlands", in order to study "the variegated nature of European imperialism and of indigenous reactions to colonial encroachments" (Adelman and Aron 815-6). Aware of the provincialism of their history in an era of globalization, New Western Historians themselves have called for, in the words of Patricia Nelson Limerick, "comparative studies of processes of colonialism and imperialism, [to locate] the region in the big picture of world history" (Limerick 2001, 5).

Moreover, considering the American West as a "cultural crossroads", and interpreting its past in terms of "convergence", as historian Stephen Aron has done over the last decade, opens wider perspectives. While the New Western History stressed the ethnic and racial diversity of the West, and studied its past through the prism of multiculturalism, the new emphasis on "convergence" highlights the connections, interactions, exchanges, and "the complex weave of cross-cultural connections that these interactions have generated" (Aron 4). Even though the New Western History has paved the way for this reading (especially thanks to Richard White’s concept of the "middle ground"), its focus on multiculturalism has tended to isolate the different groups. Historians now analyse the way these groups met and interacted, and the complex...

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5 Published in 1991, New Western Historian Richard White’s *The Middle Ground. Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* analyses how Europeans and Indians met in the region around the Great Lakes, and how their interactions, exchanges, and "creative misunderstandings" led to the birth of a new society (White x).
situations that emerged as a result of their connections. Gregory Nobles, for instance, studies the frontier as "an area of interaction between two or more cultures in which neither culture is assumed to have an altogether superior position. [Thus defined, the frontier] involves […] a much more complex process of mutual exchange in which neither culture, Native American or Euro-American, could remain unchanged" (Nobles 12). From the colonial period, when empires and nations converged, met and clashed in the West, to the modern-day West, which remains, with its international boundaries, a crossroads of peoples, the region has always fed on these contacts, exchanges and interactions. Therefore, through its emphasis on the notion of "convergence", the latest scholarship seems to give a more complete picture of the Western past, paying as much attention to the edges and zones of contact as to the center of the region.

Interestingly, the notion of "crossroads", or "intersection", derives from the multicultural emphasis of the New Western History and suggests a return to the Turnerian notion of a frontier, the latter being redefined to empty it of its racist and ethnocentric connotations. Besides, the openness suggested by the recent interpretations may be a way to bring the West back to relevance on the national stage. If the New Historians' emphasis on regionalism has resulted in the isolation of the West, it has also furthered the specialization of historians. As one critic observes, "[a] western history is somehow not quite fully ‘American’" (Klein 214). Indeed, Turner was an American historian, who read the westward movement as the key explanation for American history. The New Historians, on the other hand, are Westerners, who focus on the Western region, cutting it off from the rest of the nation. It should be no wonder, then, that their revisionism has not appeared as appealing as Turner’s grand synthesis. What remains to be seen is whether the attempt of the latest generation of historians to reconcile the notions of "place" and "process", while stressing the role of the West in the construction of the American nation at large, proves as complex as the New Historians’ narrative, with its focus on racial diversity and on the consequences of westward expansion, and yet as compelling as Turner’s synthesis.

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