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Source: *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Apr. - Jun., 1968), pp. 253-268

Published by: University of Pennsylvania Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2708579>

Accessed: 26-01-2016 18:20 UTC

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THE FRONTIER THESIS AND THE GREAT DEPRESSION

BY STEVEN KESSELMAN

There was a crisis in America at the end of the 1920's. The Crash was only part of it, though the Depression played a major rôle in its reinforcement. It was a cultural crisis, and the economic crisis served only to confirm its existence. Basically, the idea was that the American way of life had reached the end of its road, that America's uniqueness was fast disappearing. World War I not only killed progressivism as a political and social movement, it destroyed the whole notion of the inevitable progress of mankind towards a better life. The effect was delayed in America by the shaky prosperity of the 1920's, which kept alive the hope that the old order of capitalism and free enterprise were leading America towards a utopian existence free from poverty and want. There were those who saw beneath the surface, however, and many of them left the country to establish colonies in societies that were more openly decadent. Parrington, at the height of the speculative boom, characterized the modern age as one of "mechanistic pessimism." "Emersonian optimism, . . . fullest expression of the romantic faith, is giving way to Dreiserian pessimism, and the traditional doctrine of progress is being subjected to analysis by a growing skepticism. . . . [We] are in the way of repeating here the familiar history of Europe, with its coercive regimentations reproduced on a larger scale and in a more mechanical fashion. Once more a gloomy philosophy stands on the threshold of the American mind."¹ It was a basic and far-reaching change of mood, and coming at a time of great surface flamboyance it foreboded ill for the future.

Once the Depression was in full swing, the forebodings bore fruit. The twenties had proved that the end of the XIXth century was not the era of absolute plenitude; they showed that more could be expected. But now that image, too, was definitely shattered, and there was a general fear that the old way of life had outlived its usefulness. This new economic crisis was unlike its predecessors, for it seemed that not just one sector, but the whole structure, was breaking down. Despite Marx and Turner and a host of others, most people saw that American capitalism had continued to expand beyond 1900. People came to expect better conditions, higher wages, greater productivity, and more leisure. But now there were doubts. They began to wonder

¹ Vernon L. Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought* (New York, 1930), Vol. III, xix-xx. Published posthumously.

whether the Great Depression was merely a deep slump in the general course of the business cycle or whether it signaled the end of the whole system.

The Turner thesis played a major rôle in this questioning. The end of the physical frontier was the most prominent of a number of frontier-type factors that figured in observations on the present and future state of America. The other factors are of the frontier type in that they once represented areas of possible expansion for the system. Besides the land frontier, four economic "frontiers" can be distinguished.² There was, first of all, the technological frontier, the idea that the United States had been mechanized as much as it possibly could without further automation's causing greater unemployment and general economic strain. The second, the production frontier, was related to the first. It was the notion that America's productive capacity had reached the point at which it was producing too much—that the United States had moved from an economy of scarcity to an economy of abundance. The third might be called the organizational frontier, the idea that industrial and financial consolidation had passed the point at which the old governmental attitudes toward business ceased to be applicable. Finally, there was the population, or fertility, frontier. The birth rate had declined; immigration had been cut off; and the population of the United States, therefore, would level off about 1940 or 1950. Other economic frontiers could be postulated: the saturation of foreign trade, the decline in overseas credit, etc. These were frontiers only in the most tenuous sense: that they represented, when they were functioning, areas of growth and expansion for the economy. The passing of the land frontier, however, posed a more significant question: if it had determined the character of the American nation and people, what would come now that it was closed? This detachment of the past from the present and future was the most consequential portion of the frontier thesis. "The factor of time in American history," Turner asserted, "is insignificant when compared with the factors of space and social evolution."³ Discounting the time factor in history profoundly affected both historians and social critics in the crisis years of the 1930's.

The First World War and the Great Depression reinforced an earlier demand, made during the Progressive Era, for a functional historiography that would bear on current concerns. It had always been the responsibility of those familiar with the past to be skeptical about the future. Their failure in two instances when it really

² Three are suggested in Dwight W. Michener, "'Economic Repercussions' from the 'Passing of the American Frontier,'" *Annalist*, XLIV (Dec. 12, 1934), 853-854.

³ Frederick Jackson Turner, "Problems in American History," *The Significance of Sections in American History* (New York, 1932), 183.

mattered caused American historians to reevaluate their rôle in society. Reinforced by a smattering of sociology and psychology, the spokesmen for historical relativism decided that objective history was not only nonutilitarian, but impossible. No person, they argued, can divorce himself from his background or from the events uppermost in the contemporary world; and it is precisely this fact that makes the rewriting of history both necessary and worthwhile. Carl Becker called history "playing tricks on the dead." Charles Beard talked of history as "an act of faith." James Harvey Robinson, who had made the pre-war call for a New History, found that the 1930's would have a climate ripe for the fulfilling of his ideas. "Never before," he told the American Historical Association, "has the historical writer been in a position so favorable for bringing the past into such intimate relations with the present that they shall seem one, and shall flow and merge into our own personal history."⁴

The relativist position was not without its opponents. There were those who asserted that it was far more dangerous, especially in a time of crisis and uncertainty, than academic ivory-towerism. The rejection of impartiality in favor of a previously accepted philosophy of history, they argued, taking the example of Germany and the Soviet Union, transforms history from an instrument of social enlightenment into a tool for social control and propaganda.⁵

Because of his sweeping generalizations, Turner became a hero of the relativists, although he himself would probably have argued against abject surrender to that form of relativism which leads to subjectivism. It is not an author's preconceptions that make rewriting worthwhile, after all, but the changing consequences of historical events. Nevertheless, his version of the American past became a major prize in the historiographical debate.

Despite some forays into frontier criticism during the 1920's, at the beginning of the next decade the Turner thesis was still accepted by many historians. Significantly, these historians were strongly affected by the present-mindedness of the decade in general and by the functional view, at the same time being urged upon American historians, that history should be studied as relevant to current problems. It should not have been unexpected. For implicit in the Turnerian view of the past was an incipient generalization about the character of the future—that it would be different. One who accepted the Turner thesis not only subscribed to an interpretation of the

⁴ J. H. Robinson, "The Newer Ways of Historians," *American Historical Review*, XXXV (January 1930), 255.

⁵ See, for example, Theodore Clark Smith, "The Writing of American History in America from 1884 to 1934," *American Historical Review*, XL (April 1935), 439-449; and C. H. McIlwain, "The Historian's Part in a Changing World," *American Historical Review*, XLII (January 1937), 207-224.

American past, he also accepted the idea that the past was definitely over: the frontier was closed, and with it the first phase of American history had ended. If you adopted Turner's ideas, you could not avoid the implication that the present was the beginning of a new era. Indeed, the very usefulness of the Turner thesis lay in the fact that it told you something not only about the past but about the present as well.

Once the historian accepted the frontier as the determining factor in American development, he could not keep from adopting at least a quasi-functional view of history, one that made the necessary connection between past and present, but from a perspective different from that urged by the functionalists. The America of 1830 was different from that of a century later. The Turner thesis told the scholar why, and with his special knowledge he was forced to take on the added rôle of social philosopher. Thus, when Robert E. Riegel began his 1930 volume on westward expansion with the sentence, "The American frontier has been the most characteristic and vital of the forces which have distinguished the development of the United States from that of the Old World," and when he concluded, "The frontier factor has disappeared finally and absolutely," he could not avoid taking the next step. "Beneath . . . a sentimental regret for the passing of the old West, lies a very real and perplexing problem. What now happens to the restless, the discontented, the dissatisfied and the unsuccessful of the East who once moved West to start life anew?"⁶

Frederic L. Paxson went several steps further than Riegel in demonstration of the consequences of Turnerism for the historian. The current split in historical theory is evident in the opening paragraphs of a series of lectures he delivered in 1929. Pulled from both sides, he ends, as Turnerians must, in the camp of the functionalists. "The historian is not a prophet," he begins, "and has no business to act as though he were one. . . . He knows that error and ignorance and pre-conception are the stumbling blocks of prophecy; but he knows also, as a great biologist has expressed it, that all the knowledge any human may possess about the future must be derived from his knowledge of the past. And so I propose, hopefully as a human, but modestly as a historian, to face the tremendous questions of national character, of national influence, of national destiny."⁷

Paxson then applies the Turner thesis to an analysis of the American past. He finds that in the XIXth century, when the South, because

⁶ R. E. Riegel, *America Moves West* (New York, 1930), 3, 562, 564. Riegel concludes that they can find outlets on the still extant frontiers of Alaska, etc., can take up an adventurous occupation, read western novels, or become hoboes.

⁷ F. L. Paxson, *When the West Is Gone* (New York, 1941), 3-4.

of cotton and slavery, and the East, because of cities and immigrants, deviated from the traditional American system of values, "the native faith, so far as it survived, lasted best in what was still the West."⁸ But Paxson, like so many orthodox Turnerians in the interwar period, does find it necessary to add an eviscerating epicycle onto the theory in order to make it relevant to the time in which he is diagnosing and prognosticating. *Two* forces have dominated American history. One—the open frontier—was peculiar to the United States and was an important, but temporary, phenomenon. Its spirit is now competing with the second force, "accommodation to the environment of the western world." Again, the historian must take the next step and consider the future. "One question for the future is not whether we may revive the simplicities and crudities of a pioneer civilization, but rather whether the residuum of our special history is to prevent a complete assimilation into the civilization of the western world or is merely to retard the extension of that civilization over the United States."⁹ In other words, will the United States be able to take its place in a world community and still resist the class warfare characteristic of comparable nations? It will, because of its frontier experience.¹⁰

Other Turnerians also display a preoccupation with present-day problems as a consequence of their use of the thesis. Curtis Nettels, a student of Turner's, found a direct causal relationship between the closing of the frontier and the rise of the New Deal. The frontier, Nettels wrote, had operated as a safety valve. "Now that this automatic adjuster does not operate, something must be put in its place. Ruthless competition must give way to an economic society so ordered as to perpetuate at least a semblance of the democracy and opportunity which were the legacy of the process of occupation of unused lands."¹¹ A. L. Burt, two years before Nettels, had lamented the end of American dynamism resulting from the passing of the frontier. But, because of the momentum of its frontier experience, the United States can now enjoy "the fullness of life on a higher plane."¹²

A 1937 volume by Walter Prescott Webb is perhaps the best example of the divergence from the function of the objective historian that acceptance of the Turner thesis, in a climate of historiographical schizophrenia, can cause.¹³ Showing all the sectionalism, anti-urban-

⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 134ff.

¹¹ C. Nettels, "Frederick Jackson Turner and the New Deal," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, XVII (March 1934), in O. Lawrence Burnette (ed.), *Wisconsin Witness to Turner* (Madison, 1961), 50.

¹² A. L. Burt, "Our Dynamic Society," *Minnesota History*, XIII (March 1932), 23.

¹³ W. P. Webb, *Divided We Stand: The Crisis of a Frontierless Democracy* (New York, 1937).

ism, and anti-industrialism that can possibly exist in a Turnerian, Webb abdicated the rôle of the historian in favor of that of the pamphleteer. He took Robinson's dictum about using history to promote reform and carried it to an extreme by writing a polemic rather than a work of history which merely points the way. Because he is dealing as much with the present and future as with the past, Webb finds it necessary to impose his own unity on recent historical events.¹⁴ He finds two forces operating in American history. The frontier worked for democracy, but the most significant thing about it is that it is no longer functioning. Historians, however, have been too wrapped up in the past to have noticed; "they have not told us, at least not emphatically, that the absence of the frontier tends as surely through undernourishment to destroy those things that its existence stimulated."¹⁵ The usefulness of the frontier theory, it will be remembered, is that it tells you something about the present: that the frontier is not around any more. Webb, therefore, has to find the force currently operating, and, as an opportunist, he wants to find it before it, too, has run its course.

This other force—an antidemocratic one—Webb finds in the rise of the modern American corporation. The growth of monopoly—that is, the *actual* abandonment of laissez-faire—has forced the government to abandon the *principle* of laissez-faire in order to preserve a democracy suitable to an industrial era. "Democracy of the frontier type must give way in both cases." "Democracy could function under [frontier] conditions, even an extreme democracy, not because it solved problems, but because it seldom had to meet them. . . . If this be true, then the closing of the frontier brought democratic America to the first test of its ability to govern, to solve problems rather than to enjoy an escape from them."¹⁶ The national domain had been, in effect, a form of relief. In 1933, the government was merely facing facts by substituting new forms of relief for the old.¹⁷

The functionalism of the Turnerians, it will be seen, is of an ambivalent variety. In the first place, it cannot be categorized as historical relativism. The Turnerians' interpretations of current problems came from their acceptance of a theory of American history, while the opposite is the case of the deliberate relativists, such as Turner's critics Charles Beard and Louis Hacker. The relativist's view of the present determines his view of the past, rather than conversely. Thus, in trying to act as a true historian, using the past to look at the future, the Turnerian is forced to act as a non-historian, reasoning from a theory which he had not bothered to test. Psychologically, too, there

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 154–155.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 164, 167–168.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 158.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 175, 216.

is an ambivalence. Turnerians do not like the postfrontier world. Riegel refers to the "dull and monotonous business of living in a machine civilization";¹⁸ Paxson, to "an increasing rigidity of life for the ordinary man . . . and a waning of the old hope that the race is growing better and that regeneration is to be anticipated."¹⁹ Burt comments that "we have become practically the slaves of a machine-controlled society."²⁰ And Webb has an entire chapter about "the Song of the Machine" and how it is used by the North to dominate the South and West. On the other hand, there is endemic to Turnerians an almost pathetic optimism that America, strengthened by its frontier heritage, will always be able to overcome its problems. Cheerful prognostications are tacked onto the gloomiest diagnoses of American society. Paxson, Burt, and Webb, all affirm that there is—there must be—a way out. While the Turner thesis played into the hands of most of those who were trying to find that way out during the 1930's, it is a demonstration of its flexibility that it proved useful to extremists from both sides of the political spectrum.

The Marxist, Anna Rochester, listed the unsettled West as the cause of delayed unionism in the United States and as the reason the U. S. was the last major power to enter imperialism, the last stage of capitalism.²¹ In 1932, some of America's most prominent literary figures signed a pamphlet urging the nation's professional workers to vote for Foster for president on the Communist ticket. This was a special crisis, they said, "characterized by other than the usual cyclical features." Western undeveloped lands "are no more, there are no new industries in sight, home markets are saturated, and the competition for foreign markets is enormously aggravated." American capitalism has at last begun to decay.²²

It is important to Marxist analysis that the American experience be made to fit into the over-all rise and fall of capitalism, and that any deviations from the prescribed course be explained by phenomena that are only incidental to the total picture. Thus, Lewis Corey notes that the American frontier was important only because it was in America and because America was capitalistic. The frontier did give class struggles a peculiarly sectional character; the struggle between industry and agriculture became a struggle between East and West.²³ But its major importance lay in its having been one of the "long-time

¹⁸ Riegel, *op. cit.*, 565.

¹⁹ Paxson, *op. cit.*, 120.

²⁰ Burt, *loc. cit.*, 13.

²¹ Anna Rochester, *Rulers of America* (New York, 1936), 18, 29ff.

²² *Culture and the Crisis* (New York: Committee of Professional Groups for Foster and Ford, 1932), 7.

²³ L. Corey, *The Decline of American Capitalism* (New York, 1934), 421-422.

factors of economic expansion. Exploitation of the inner continental areas and resources quickened the tempo and enlarged the economic basis of American capitalist development. Without this, however, the frontier would have been a totally different thing, restricted in scope and results.”²⁴

Before the Civil War, Corey asserts, the frontier had the effects Turner ascribed to it: a self-sufficing agriculture, which produced the standard version of the American dream. With the growth of industry after the war, however, agriculture took on a colonial status, life became more insecure, opportunity evaporated. But the dream persisted as “primarily a faith in mere material progress; its old cultural promise was destroyed.” Prosperity sustained it, but the final collapse in 1929 turned it into a nightmare. It is the willingness of the Turnerians to insulate themselves against the realities of the present that Corey dislikes. “The frontier contributed to the shaping of the American dream; it contributed still more to the development of capitalist agriculture and industry, which reacted against the dream. Turner and his successors were not satisfied to consider the influence of the frontier as temporary and past, but projected it into the future as a ‘spirit’ still animating American life and creating a new national unity. But the frontier and the dream passed on; monopoly capitalism remains, with its class stratification, economic decline and crisis, and reaction against the ideals of the American dream.”²⁵ Like the anti-Turnerian historians, who denounced the thesis because it produced stagnation in American historiography, Corey blames it for the stagnation in American social thought, for creating an attitude which refuses to come to terms with the present because it accepts an oversimplified, historically-based prediction about the future.

The intellectual spokesman for American fascism was less critical in his use of the frontier idea. In a 1932 volume, Lawrence Dennis proclaimed that capitalism was dying of old age and that therefore the business faith (*laissez-faire* liberalism) must be discarded. Capitalism and its faith could be sustained only in an era of national expansion. The function of the frontier, for Dennis, was to serve as a stimulus for the creation of an insatiable demand which spurred on the growth of industry. The First World War simulated the frontier in this respect, but the crash ended its momentum once and for all.²⁶ The issue for Dennis, however, is not primarily economic or political; it is moral and spiritual. The deflation of the business ideal has left a vacuum that calls for a reassertion of spiritual leadership. The need is for an expansive spirit to fill the gap. “The arts of satisfying one’s

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 519, 518n.

²⁶ L. Dennis, *Is Capitalism Doomed?* (New York, 1932), 9–10, 91–93.

economic wants or of expressing one's self in the creation of beauty are, in all essential respects, phenomena of the emotions and not of instruments of technique."²⁷

The decline of the frontier spirit—the bankruptcy of the American dream—seems to have interested America's extremists as much as the economic frontier did. The Marxist and fascist views of history were functionalistic ones, as the historical views of revolutionaries can only be. The frontier thesis was very useful to groups of people proposing the necessity for a new social order. An era, after all, had ended.

Less radical observers made a similar use of the thesis in advocating new departures in the American economic system. Stuart Chase, for instance, in a 1932 volume entitled *A New Deal*, argued for the overthrow of the old conception of the economic system as an instrument for personal aggrandizement and its replacement by the view that it is a social instrument to be used for the benefit of everyone. The old notion of laissez-faire and "produce, produce, produce" worked well when the United States had a continent to conquer and when excess capacity and overproduction were beyond the imaginations of most men. But now America is fully built; the western escape-hatch "shut up shop forty years ago."²⁸ Of all the factors of growth, it was the closing of the frontier and the declining birth rate that were most shattering. The frontier had "underwritten our livelihood"²⁹ and the birth rate had created the demand that was the spur to industry. "Both the implications of the current depression, and the historical position of the United States today, in respect to population and the passing of the frontier, call for a drastic change in our economic system."³⁰

Though the Malthusian formula may have inspired fear in those who read Turner at the end of the XIXth century and even in some who reckoned with it in the XXth, the juxtaposition of the two theories did not disturb Chase. While his books are studies of traditional capitalism in decay, he saw a road out. Population pressures were down—Roosevelt could even talk of redistributing it over the land—and America was now in an economy of abundance. There was no question that the United States could support its people—there were surpluses everywhere. The problem was to get them distributed. And for this, in a postfrontier world, control from the top was needed.

George Soule, unlike Chase, found that the primary significance of the frontier had been as a safety valve.³¹ When the frontier was op-

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 316–317.

²⁸ S. Chase, *A New Deal* (New York, 1932), 67.

²⁹ S. Chase, *Government in Business* (New York, 1935), 68.

³⁰ *A New Deal*, 74, 153.

³¹ G. Soule, *The Coming American Revolution* (New York, 1934), 96.

erating, opportunities for advancement did exist; but it produced an ideology which persisted after the frontier was closed and which now is hampering a realistic approach to current problems. If a frontier of opportunity persisted after 1900, it was in the metropolitan regions rather than on the farm; but now there are too many people in both places. Capitalism has run down. As the need for "calculated resiliency and balance" has become more and more imperative, the structure has become more and more rigid. The capitalist regime has outlived its usefulness, and it is time for a planned society to take its place. The haphazard planning and improvisation of the New Deal are only a prelude.

The implications of the Turner thesis were shattering for conservative thinkers. Herbert Hoover, for instance, objected strenuously to the notion that the closing of the frontier meant the end of the social usefulness of rugged individualism and the beginning of a static nation. "A declared part of the philosophy of those who object to our American system," he wrote in 1934 and reiterated several times during the decade, "is the notion that America has reached the end of the road of economic development—the end of the road of progress. We have been told that our industrial plant is built, that our last frontier has long since been reached, and that our task is now not discovery or necessarily the production of more goods, but the sober, less dramatic business of administering the resources and plants already in hand. . . . It is necessarily the philosophy of decadence."³² There are other frontiers to conquer, frontiers of intellect, of science, of invention.

Conservatives like Hoover accepted the frontier concept in one guise and rejected it in another. They accepted its abstract, but not its concrete, sense. Thus they could argue that *the* frontier (of land) has closed, but that frontiers (in general) were still around and that therefore no substitute for them was needed. The more radical publicists took the frontier in its literal sense, as they thought Turner had meant it: an actual frontier area that afforded opportunities for individual and collective economic expansion. Since this was the only frontier they accepted, they were led to their assertions about the end of growth. Hoover thought that the acceptance of this notion was producing a "moral recession in government."³³ He thought that sur-

³² H. Hoover, *The Challenge to Liberty* (New York, 1934), 147–148. See also H. Hoover, *Addresses upon the American Road: 1933–1938* (New York, 1938), 15, 140, 342. Similar expressions of concern among business conservatives for the possible harmful effects of the belief that there were no more frontiers may be found in Ralph E. Flanders, *Platform for America* (New York, 1936), ch. 6, and Ogden L. Mills, *Liberalism Fights On* (New York, 1936), 157.

³³ *Addresses upon the American Road: 1933–1938*, 342.

rendering the notion of progress, stressing the absolute end of expansion, accepting the idea that the United States was now a static nation, amounted to nothing more than defeatism. A nation cannot move ahead, he said, unless it thinks it can.

The Turner thesis implied that the future would be different. Those who accepted the economic implications of the thesis, as we have seen above, assumed that that future had already arrived and that from now on present conditions would persist. This idea permeated not only radical social philosophers, but the major figures of the New Deal itself. Though most of them were far more utopian on paper than they were in practice, they all saw the necessity for substituting government for the frontier as the preserver of opportunity and the regulator of economic behavior in a closed system.

If it is a defeatist attitude to assume that expansion is at an end, the defeatism was counterbalanced in the New Deal by a tremendous optimism about the exciting possibilities of the new order. Henry Wallace, for example, found that the heritage of the old pioneers was a bitter one: the rugged individualism and laissez-faire of the frontier left wasted resources, mismanaged wealth, and millions of starving people. The new frontier promised to be a much more just and satisfying way of life. "What we approach is not a new continent but a new state of heart and mind resulting in new standards of accomplishment. We must invent, build, and put to work new social machinery. This machinery will carry out the Sermon on the Mount as well as the present social machinery carries out and intensifies the law of the jungle."³⁴ The end of westward expansion is one of a number of factors that have finally affected America to such an extent that a change in the rules of the economic game are needed. The government is to take an active rôle in forcing harmony and balance among the major economic groups. The old frontier gave Americans hope and unity; it forced them to cooperate. Now the social invention, the "beauty and justice and joy of spirit" of the new frontier will serve the same purpose.

Harold Ickes called for a new kind of democracy to replace the laissez-faire concepts of the frontier era: development of rational government planning for the common welfare defined as the greatest good for the greatest number. "To put it into economic language, planning should be for the consumer. . . . In the pioneer stages of our development it was only natural that the emphasis should have been on our productive activity rather than upon our interests as consumers. In those times we produced what we could and consumed

³⁴ Henry A. Wallace, *New Frontiers* (New York, 1934), 11.

what we had. But in a day when there is plenty, when production in some directions is being curtailed rather than expanded, we are in a position to live lives of greater comfort and leisure.”³⁵ The major problem of the New Deal was the distribution of the goods that the frontier produced.

This kind of thinking about the closing of the frontier, the end of economic expansion, and the consequent need for, and possibilities of, coordinated planning from above is pervasive in the thinking of the New Deal and its leader. Further examples would serve no clear purpose. The idea of the frontier played other rôles as well. Tugwell and others talked about it in reference to the wasteful extensive farming of the United States. Roosevelt continually talked about interdependence and the need for learning to live together in a closed society. The Agricultural Adjustment Administration adopted the frontier myth of the ideal independent homestead. Roosevelt’s conservation policies, his ideas about the redistribution of population, and Ickes’ and Wallace’s talk of small agricultural-industrial communities—all show a concern for the old frontier.

There is, however, a far more fundamental problem in the relation of the frontier thesis to the New Deal, and it involves the whole outlook of Roosevelt’s first administration. There were basically two parts to the Turner thesis, it will be remembered. One part dealt with its political and economic consequences; the social planners emphasized this section. The other part, stressed by the traditionalists, dealt with its effects on the American character. Whether these effects were real or imaginary, they posed a real problem, and they give a clue to what the basis of the New Deal really was.

“Legislation is taking the place of the free lands as the means of preserving the ideal of democracy,” Turner wrote in 1914. “But at the same time it is endangering the other pioneer ideal of creative and competitive individualism. Both were essential and constituted what was best in America’s contribution to history and to progress. Both must be preserved if the nation would be true to its past and would fulfill its highest destiny.”³⁶

It is the fundamental dilemma of industrial society that it wants to stay democratic. Conservatives like Hoover (they called themselves the only true liberals) maintained that the basis of democracy was liberty and that without economic liberty no other liberties were possible. The choice seemed to be only between absolute freedom and

³⁵ H. L. Ickes, *The New Democracy* (New York, 1934), 142.

³⁶ F. J. Turner, “The West and American Ideals,” in *Frontier and Section: Selected Essays of F. J. Turner*, ed. R. A. Billington (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1961), 111.

national regimentation. With the closing of the frontier, however, and with the industrialization of society, the emphasis in liberal circles changed from liberty, which they claimed could not exist in an era of economic integration, to equality in the form of economic security. The emphasis switched from political democracy to economic democracy, for economic democracy was assumed to be an automatic characteristic of the frontier era. The emphasis, then, switched from individual rights to social rights and individual responsibility, from independence to interdependence. With the closing of the frontier, the era of the self-made man came to an end. The question now was whether industrial man could be free, as he was on the frontier, if government increased its control of his life to make his expectations more secure.

The issue in the New Deal was the reconciliation of the "rugged individualism" characteristic of the frontier with the kind of planned and regulated society necessitated by the passing of that frontier. The New Dealers found the reconciliation not only impossible, but harmful. "Rugged individualism," wrote Ickes, "does not mean freedom for the mass of the people, but oppression. It implies the exploitation of the many by the few. . . . It stands for the denial of social responsibility, the negation of the theory that the individual owes any duty to the mass. . . . It may be said that the more civilized we become, the greater must be the restrictions imposed upon the liberty of the individual for the common good."³⁷ Donald Richberg called for "the reconstructed individualist," the one who, while standing in the American tradition, sees that a certain amount of management is necessary to preserve individualism.³⁸

Rugged individualism is largely the acquisitive and exploiting instinct characteristic of a society whose future is boundless. Our "historic" opportunity—the frontier—is gone, said Roosevelt, and something must take its place.³⁹ "Specifically," Henry Wallace wrote in 1934, "it becomes a modern duty to make individual and group interests coincide."⁴⁰ This social discipline is to remain democratic by educating people to submit to it "cheerfully and willingly." Rexford Tugwell observed that the time had come to realize that democracy and individual rights were separable.⁴¹ Individual rights are not capa-

³⁷ Ickes, *The New Democracy*, 32, 43.

³⁸ Testimony before Senate Finance Committee, quoted in C. A. Beard and G. H. E. Smith, *The Future Comes: A Study of the New Deal* (New York, 1933), 147.

³⁹ Franklin D. Roosevelt, *Looking Forward* (New York, 1933), 30.

⁴⁰ Wallace, *New Frontiers*, 254.

⁴¹ R. G. Tugwell, *The Industrial Discipline and the Governmental Arts* (New York, 1933), 114.

ble of producing a workable social program because the individual is not capable of getting along by himself. What a non-expanding culture needs is a balance of social institutions, and the ethos of competition only disrupts the balance.⁴² As George Soule argued, real freedom is not freedom from tyrannous control, but freedom from an irrational social order.⁴³

This emphasis on the uniqueness of the postfrontier world, in which problems could no longer solve themselves and in which a new set of social values had to replace the old individualistic ones, brought the New Deal close to a philosophy of moral relativism. There was a certain amount of absolutism in its ends. Tugwell, for instance, talked of the New Deal as an attempt to "rearrange social and economic environment on terms which will be satisfactory to the general ethical and moral sense." The faith of the New Deal was perhaps, he said, "the good life."⁴⁴ But generally, the ends of the New Deal were easily confused with means. Thurman Arnold gave the philosophy of opportunism its rationale. His concern is with the "real" world. "So long as preconceived principles are considered more important than practical results, the practical alleviation of human distress and the distribution of available comforts will be paralyzed," he argued in 1935.⁴⁵ And two years later: "The greatest destroyer of ideals is he who believes in them so strongly that he cannot fit them to practical needs."⁴⁶ Arnold rejected absolutes because he thought that they prevent the accommodation of political action to human needs; yet that accommodation could itself be regarded as an absolute.

This apotheosis of the possible was the anti-ideology that excited so many of the social scientists associated with the New Deal. In pioneer days, Tugwell observes, the traditional picture of the American character was set up. "Virtue was made of self-dependence, of patriarchalism, of handiness at all sorts of crafts; and these are still regarded as virtues in a day of collectivism, of family decay, of narrow specialization. We have not yet learned, as our ancestors did, to make a virtue of necessity. This is perhaps our chief problem. For we have freely tinkered with things and relationships; but we tolerate no tinkering with comfortable rationales we once worked out to justify

⁴² See Tugwell, *The Battle for Democracy* (New York, 1935), 37-38, 54-55, 319; and Tugwell and Leon H. Keyserling (eds.), *Redirecting Education* (New York, 1934), Vol. I, 52.

⁴³ G. Soule, *A Planned Society* (New York, 1933), 182.

⁴⁴ R. G. Tugwell, "The Progressive Tradition," *Atlantic Monthly*, CLV (April 1935), 415, 414.

⁴⁵ T. W. Arnold, *The Symbols of Government* (New Haven, 1935), 270.

⁴⁶ T. W. Arnold, *The Folklore of Capitalism* (New Haven, 1937), 393.

and contain the old institutions.”⁴⁷ Find out what you want, urges Tugwell, and then prove that it is what you should have.

The flirtation with relativism followed directly from the New Dealers' attitude toward history. Their rejection of precedent was not only a constitutional issue, but a philosophic one as well. Their attitude toward history was basically negative. The United States, they argued, has been too much concerned with the past (reconstructing it) and the present (retaining it) and has neglected planning for a future that would be different from both. “What the idea of a managed society proposes,” wrote Tugwell, “is that the future usurp the functions of past and present in our thinking. We are to turn forward instead of backward for our intellectual material. . . . The real business of the modern intelligence would be to use such of past and present as seemed relevant to the future and only that.”⁴⁸ The relation of all this to the apparent relativism and opportunism of the New Deal is obvious. “Are our plans wrong? Who knows? Can we tell from reading history? Hardly. The only way is to try and see, to test out opinion in the press of actual events.”⁴⁹ And the Turner thesis fitted it all like a glove. The New Deal rejected the past; it saw itself as a new beginning; and the Turner thesis let it, for if there was one thing that the Turner thesis told you about past American history, it was that it was over. The New Deal wanted to reject the old ideology based on frontier values; it wanted to have no ideology at all; and the Turner thesis let it, for it let you assume that nothing based on the past was relevant.

The Turner thesis had just begun to be seriously challenged when its alleged consequences were felt hard. The thesis played a major rôle in the pervasive idea that the United States had finally reached its peak, that it had stopped expanding, that the nation now had to work in a closed and bounded system, and that the only possible future growth would be in the direction of greater intensity within the present industrial set-up. The system had lost its dynamism. There was no longer a frontier to absorb all problems. There would be no new departures, no revolutionary changes, only movements along existing lines; and this kind of system required positive governmental action. Lewis Douglas's announcement in reference to the gold standard—that its abandonment signaled the end of western civilization—is understandable in this light. Changing the standard was merely a symbol—the last straw. It meant giving in, total surrender to the idea that the old way had disappeared and that a new set of values was needed.

⁴⁷ Tugwell, *Redirecting Education*, Vol. I, 5.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 71-72.

⁴⁹ Tugwell, *Battle for Democracy*, 71.

This was the key. The liberals accepted the conclusion of the Turner thesis (that the first era of American history was over), while the conservatives accepted only its body (that the frontier had created whatever was peculiar to America).⁵⁰ The New Dealers were thus put into the ambiguous position of totally rejecting history as irrelevant on the basis of their acceptance of an historical hypothesis. They had a sense of history, therefore, only in their sense that it could not be applied to the present, that everything that had been tried before had failed to stop the decline because it was based on the conception of an America that no longer existed. Those New Dealers who were concerned with an historical justification of their actions found a convenient anti-historical rationale in the Turner thesis.

Seen in this light—reduced to the historical preconceptions of its proponents—the controversy over whether the New Deal was conservative or radical seems not so difficult. In what it actually did, it may have been conservative, not only because it aimed to save the basic elements of the “American way of life,” but also because what it did just did not amount to that much: the great economic upheaval never came. In outlook, however, it was radical. Coming to terms with the present and future is strictly a radical notion, and the New Deal’s preoccupation was strictly with present and future. It used history to reject the past.

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⁵⁰ A relationship can perhaps be drawn here between the parts of the Turner thesis each side accepted and their interpretations of the causes of the Depression. The New Dealers attributed the Depression to uniquely American causes, while conservatives blamed it on international factors.