

THE FRONTIER HYPOTHESIS AND RELATED SPATIAL CONCEPTS

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In the period following World War II, geographers increased their utilization of information from neighboring academic disciplines. One result has been the expanded use of historical data by geographers. During the 1960's geographers began to examine seriously one of the great interpretations of history, the frontier hypothesis of Frederick Jackson Turner.¹ It was the historian Murray Kane who first suggested that many of Turner's ideas about the frontier qualify as part of the subject matter of geography rather than history.²

Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier hypothesis, unlike most hypotheses, cannot be adequately summarized in a two or three sentence statement. The Turner Thesis is comprised of as many as twenty individual propositions.³ In this paper I will briefly review only those propositions that are spatial in nature with a sampling of various views presented in the past. This review of Turner's spatial concepts is being presented not to further any particular viewpoint, but in the hope that some of Turner's ideas might be utilized in courses in cultural and historical geography.

Turner did not include all of his essential ideas in his often quoted 1893 statement,⁴ as some were added in the long series of articles that appeared subsequent to the original pronouncement.

Turner's central theme was "the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward explained American development."⁵ After 1890 the receding frontier line ceased to exist because

the remaining unsettled areas of the United States were broken up by a series of scattered settlements. At this juncture in our history the frontier as a place or zone had been closed, and the first period of American history had come to its conclusion.

Besides being depicted as the edge of settlement or free land, the frontier was also portrayed in terms of successive occupational groups migrating westward. The frontier may be understood as a combination of geography and psychology in that free land served as a gateway to opportunity and a source of hope. The frontier zone was to serve as an escape from the traditions and rules of organized society in the East and as a safety valve during times of economic stress. Turner characterized the frontier as a process of "perpetual rebirth" where civilization commenced repeatedly and as the zone of most rapid Americanization.⁶

*Economic Advancement through Space*⁷

Turner viewed American westward expansion as successive waves of economic development, with the most primitive economy in the west and the most advanced economy in the east. Each successive stage involved a more intensive use of the land. Each region was to go through a series of predetermined economic stages or frontiers. The following, from Turner's 1893 article, illustrates this phenomenon:

The Atlantic frontier was compounded of fisherman, fur-trader, miner, cattle-raiser, and farmer. Excepting the fisherman, each type of industry was on the march toward the West, impelled by an irresistible attraction. Each passed in successive waves across the continent. Stand at the Cumberland Gap and watch the procession of civilization, marching single file--the buffalo following the trail to the salt springs, the Indian, the fur-trader and hunter, the cattle-raiser, the pioneer farmer--and the frontier has passed by. Stand at

South Pass in the Rockies a century later and see the same procession with wider intervals between.⁸

Turner's economic frontiers are like the waves of the ocean, one rolling after the other with each wave to the east representing a higher economic stage. In the above quotation Turner utilized the vertical approach in describing the stages of economic development. In order to describe this economic succession horizontally, one would travel from the West to the Atlantic coast on a given day before 1890, the assumed year of the closing of the frontier. On this imaginary journey one would supposedly first encounter the Indian, then the fur trader and hunter, the cattle-raiser, the farmer, and finally the manufacturer.

The influence of Turner's concept of specific economic stages can be seen in later works on the American West. Many of Turner's "frontiers" are listed in the table of contents of such volumes on the West as Billington's *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier* and Spence's *The American West*.⁹

Turner's concept of a specific sequence of economic development was open to criticism. Alvord, in his examination of early Illinois and Kentucky, found that several of the economic stages did not occur in successive waves but instead almost simultaneously.¹⁰ Carl Sauer, who was influenced by the writings of Eduard Hahn, discredited the ancient view that human civilization develops through a series of predetermined stages. The specific stages of economic development in any given location on the frontier were determined by the local physical environment, by the previous experiences of the cultures that were brought in, and by the circumstances of that particular time in history. Sauer was opposed to any such simplistic formulas, for, as he wrote:

No groups coming from different civilizations and animated by different social ideals have reacted to frontier life in iden-

tical fashion. The kind of frontier that develops is determined by the kind of group that is found upon it.¹¹

Sauer analyzed the individual stages of frontier development as "a series of secondary culture hearths, of differing origin and composition, which there (at the frontier) began their individual evolution."¹² He did admit, however, that some of this development had been convergent, not necessarily as a result of a compelling physical environment or predetermined economic stage, but because of a desire for unity that developed from the growing common political awareness.

Even if one overlooks Sauer's criticism of Turner's view on presumed successive development one should examine the mining frontier in relationship to this view. In the mining camps of the American West, Turner's stages did not occur in succession, but simultaneously in a six month period. The mining camp formed a kaleidoscope of all the frontiers. The mining frontier was generally an urban experience in the sense that the mining camps were market centers into which the other frontier populations came--the traders, the cattlemen, and the farmers. On his way to the mines of Virginia City, Nevada, J. Ross Browne vividly described this phenomenon in 1860:

An almost continuous string of Washoeites stretched "like a great snake dragging its slow length along" as far as the eye could reach. In the course of this day's tramp we passed parties of every description and color: Irishmen, wheeling their blankets, provisions, and mining implements on wheelbarrows; American, French, and German foot passengers,--Mexicans, driving long trains of pack mules,--whisky peddlers with their bar fixtures,--drovers, riding, raving, and tearing away frantically through the brush after droves of self-willed cattle--in short, every imaginable class, and every possible species of industry, was represented in this moving pageant.¹³

Athearn suggested that the frontier, prior to the mineral discoveries of the Far West, consisted of a slowly moving westward edge of civilization dominated by the rural ideal. Once the news of fabulous mineral wealth became widespread, the frontier no longer moved forward in its slow steady pace but in a series of irregular leaps.¹⁴

It is apparent from the above criticism that Turner's geographic proposition of economic advancement through space lacks conclusive evidence. Turner, in working with John Wesley Powell's physiographic regions, was supplied a stable framework to utilize in his studies. A good verification of Turner's economic succession concept would be to apply a sequent occupant study to one of the physiographic provinces of the West. If the concept has any validity, the study would indicate a clear succession of stages of human occupation.

The Frontier as a Cultural Hearth

The frontier writings of Frederick Jackson Turner utilized the geographic themes of cultural hearths and diffusion of ideas. Meinig suggested the idea of spatial linkages between two areas, the frontier of the West and the earlier developed East as one of the geographic elements of the Turner Thesis.¹⁵ The frontier served as a cultural hearth or center of invention from which innovations, particularly of a political nature, were disseminated to the older portions of our country and Europe. Turner in 1914 described American democracy as an innovation of the frontier:

American democracy was born of no theorist's dream; it was not carried in the Sarah Constant to Virginia, nor in the Mayflower to Plymouth. It came out of the American forest, and it gained new strength each time it touched a new frontier. Not the constitution, but free land and an abundance of natural resources open to a fit people made the democratic type of society in

America for three centuries while it occupied its empire.¹⁶

According to Turner, the frontier not only promoted democracy in the United States, but also promoted it in Europe as well.¹⁷ Turner stressed the role of the wilderness in the development of American institutions. The uniqueness of our institutions, he argued, was a result of the fact that they were compelled to adapt to the changes involved in crossing a new continent, and in conquering a new physical environment.¹⁸

Ray Allen Billington, a Turnerian, argued that the West had made a unique contribution to America's expanding culture. It was on the frontier that nineteenth century romanticism was replaced by creative realism in the various artforms. America had finally won its literary independence from Europe with the writings of Bret Harte and Mark Twain.¹⁹

A leading geographic historian, Walter Prescott Webb, was an ardent supporter of the contention that the frontier should be considered a center of invention. In his book, *The Great Plains*, he outlined various adaptations to the Great Plains environment to illustrate his thesis. Examples of the types of innovations and inventions that made the farmers' approach to the American West possible included the colt revolver, the windmill, the barbed wire fence, and adjustments in water law.²⁰

The California Gold Rush served as a center of invention for the American mining frontier. Several of the innovations that were disseminated from California to mining camps in other western states included the California stamp mill, hydraulicking, and western mining law such as the apex law dealing with claims.²¹ W. Turrentine Jackson's *Treasure Hill* reports some of the innovations that were stimulated by certain needs in the White Pine silver mining rush of Eastern Nevada. For example, experimentation was begun with reduction furnaces when the stamp mill proved inadequate in processing certain ores.²²

However, not all writers accepted the Turner proposition that the frontier was a cultural hearth. Benjamin Wright argued for the diffusion of political institutions from the East to the West. He felt that very little desire existed among those who framed the early western constitutions to introduce governmental forms different from those that had been long established in the East. Slightly altered forms of the Eastern political and governmental models do not constitute a basis for suggesting that the westerners adopted innovative governmental structures.²³ Hence, the frontiersmen were noncreative in the establishment of their political institutions and, in this sense, the West exerted its influence through imitation.

John Hicks maintained that the distinctive Midwestern social theories and educational practices were imported from Europe. He also argued that the ideas brought across the Atlantic were more tenacious than those which originated in the East.²⁴ Fox, in examining the concept of the origin and dispersal of ideas in relationship to the American frontier and Europe, concluded that there was a transport of ideas in both directions.²⁵

In a recent article Meinig rejected the notion of frontier inventiveness as being overly simplistic. The West has always tended to be the imitator rather than the innovator. The basic social institutions such as churches, Meinig argued, are generally part of the larger national network of such institutions.²⁶

Turner's early views on American originality were more moderate than his later ones. In 1892 he suggested that the study of innovation on the frontier was the study of European germs developing in an American environment. His later writings placed less emphasis on importations and a greater emphasis upon originality.²⁷ In his publications Turner utilized some of the concepts of culture traits, but his later work has received little attention from scholars of this

area because of its vague and elusive nature.

The Frontier as a Region

The third spatial element of the frontier hypothesis was a dominant theme among geographers during the early decades of the present century--regionalism. Through the influential writings of Alfred Hettner and Pierre Vidal de la Blache, this approach was brought to America where it became a dominant force after World War I. It is remarkable that many of Turner's thoughts in the area were expressed when regionalism started to catch hold in American geography. In 1926 Turner expressed the need for regional study:

As the years go on and the United States becomes a settled nation, regional geography is certain to demand at least the same degree of attention here as in Europe.²⁸

The writings of Frederick Jackson Turner were devoted largely to two types of regions: the frontier and the section. Turner's early definitions of the frontier were rather vague. In 1893, he described the frontier as a boundary or line between specific types of areas such as "the meeting point between savagery and civilization" or "the margin of that settlement which has a density of two or more to the square mile."²⁹ In the same essay he pictured the frontier as being comprised of successively westward moving zones of occupational groups as discussed earlier in this paper.³⁰ His 1925 statement sustained the notion that the frontier was a unique region:

The West was a migrating region, a stage of society rather than a place. . . . The "West" was more than "the frontier" of popular speech. It included also the more populous transitional zone adjacent, which was still influenced by pioneer traditions and where economic society had more in common with the newer than with the older regions.³¹

Turner's concept of the section was largely formulated upon the physiographic regions of John Wesley Powell. The frontier advance was not into uniform space, but into a series of physiographic provinces equivalent in size to many European nations. According to Turner, when settlers of differing origins adapted themselves to new geographic environments, new societies and sections were created in the pioneering process.³² The sections formed by this process created a different type of regional entity, namely the political region. Turner asserted that it was not the individual states but a regional group of states acting in concert that exerted the greatest political muscle.

In its simplest form, Turner's classification contained four basic sections: the three static sections of the Atlantic seaboard and the moving section which could be best described at any time as the West. However, as his interest in sectionalism grew, his regional classification gained sophistication as indicated in the following 1922 statement:

So I was forced to undertake a survey of the Region in American history as well as the Frontier. I was forced to study the evolution of society and politics in the old Northwest, the Middle West, the western border states like West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, the Cotton Kingdom of the Southwest, in contrast to the tobacco planting states of the Old South; the opening of a New Southwest in Texas and its neighbors, the colonization of a New Northwest along the Columbia basin, the California empire along the Pacific coast; the conquest of the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains; the dealings with Arid America. . . .³³

According to Turner each of the above regions would influence the balance of political power and economic life of the United States. Each section of several states would act as a bloc in Congress, and Congressional compromises might be suggestive of certain agreements between European nations.

Despite the fact that Turner was familiar with the work of regional geographers like Bruhnes, his work was not entirely in their tradition. Turner's regional discussions were largely dominated by the distribution of political power, and regional geography served as a background. Turner certainly would not qualify as the "life-time" regional specialist suggested by Carl Sauer.³⁴

The Frontier as a Closed World

The postulated closing of the frontier is an important component of the geographic question of closed versus open space. The heretofore mentioned geographic concepts have considered the frontier as it existed before 1890 but did not account for its passing. Turner formulated his hypothesis upon a statement in the 1890 U.S. Census Report, which asserted that the frontier line had ceased to exist because the unsettled area had been interspersed with many isolated settlements.³⁵ The frontier was to serve as a place of opportunity and an economic safety valve. In one of his most famous statements Turner noted that "never again will such gifts of free land offer themselves," and "the frontier is gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history."³⁶ According to Turner's assumption, the American frontier had undergone a transition into a world of closed space. Man had to plan his living accordingly and compete for the most valuable space and resources.

Turner's concept of "free land" was by no means new. He had been familiar with the work of the Italian economist, Achille Loria, and his *Analisi della proprieta capitalista*, which held that the relationship of man to the amount of "free land" available for cultivation provided the key to human history.³⁷ Turner was likewise indebted to Henry George and his *Progress and Poverty* for concepts relative to the public domain.³⁸

The historian James Malin interpreted the role of

Turner's closed space concept upon subsequent events in American history. During the Great Depression the idea of a closed frontier was accepted literally by many individuals. To them it meant that the "safety valve" ceased to exist as a cure for economic hard times. Under the subsequent New Deal program, a planned economy was to serve the function performed by the free land of the frontier prior to its closing about 1890.³⁹

Frederick Jackson Turner and James Malin were not the only scholars to utilize the closed world theme. The idea of closed space also had its impact upon the geographic writings of Halford Mackinder. His "heartland concept" led to the field of geopolitics, which was to explain German imperial interest in world politics. The events of World War II virtually destroyed geopolitics as a respectable field of study. In the final analysis, if one accepts literally the closing of the frontier in a spatial sense he could best be described as an adherent of what Malin calls "closed world determinism."⁴⁰

As president of the AAG in 1945, Derwent Whittlesey suggested that geography should be viewed in a broader perspective than suggested by the Turner and Mackinder doctrines of closure of the "two dimensional earth." He offered the view that geographers should not only take into account the "two dimensional earth" on which we live but also "the three dimensional earth which we are using without occupying it, and a four dimensional earth which appears to offer scope for continued regulated advance."⁴¹

Although Turner expressed himself in spatial terms, it is likely that he never intended the pessimism that later writers attributed to him. It seems probable that Turner intended the closing of the frontier to be more symbolic than real. In 1914, he stated:

In place of frontiers of wilderness, there are new frontiers of unwon fields of science, fruitful for the needs of the race;

there are frontiers of better social domains yet unexplored.⁴²

In his later writings, Turner did not dwell excessively upon the much debated question of the frontier but instead turned to a consideration of the section.

In conclusion it is evident that several of the spatial propositions that Turner advanced form an important part of the subject matter of geography. The themes of economic advancement through space, cultural origins, the region, and closed world doctrines are important ingredients in the realm of spatial study. Turner's geographic contributions were not only spatial in nature but also included the question of environmental influences.

Certain aspects of Turner's methodology, such as the use of predetermined economic stages and physiographic regions, have been employed by various geographers. Despite the strong geographical orientation of Turner's methodology, his works have not attracted the interest of a large number of geographers. Part of this situation is undoubtedly the result of Turner's vague style. Turner could best be described as a "broad brush" historian whose work was based upon flowery language and sweeping generalizations. However, Mikesell suggested in 1960 that the Turner Thesis could form a satisfactory framework in analyzing frontier advances into unsettled areas.⁴³ Admittedly, the spatial concepts presented in this paper are not plausible in certain frontier situations; nevertheless, they should serve as a starting point for a geographic study of the processes of settlement.

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⁵Turner, p. 1.

⁶Turner, p. 1.

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⁸Turner, p. 12.

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