Turner Thesis Discussion

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The historian Fredrick J. Turner wrote in the “ The Significance of the Frontier in American History, 1983” that the frontier was a powerful image in US history. It represents moving beyond the industrialized power structures and white men's conquering’ nature (Putnam, 1976), and once it is conquered, it’s time to move further west. Fredrick J. Turner, while writing the thesis, acted as a "safety valve" allowing unhappy people to leave more settled areas and thus contributed to the relative stability of American society; it worried him that in his lifetime the "frontier" had largely ceased to exist (Hofstadter, 1949).

The Frontier Thesis was written after the U.S.A had expanded from coast to coast. Its premise was that expansion had shaped the US and that it would continue to develop and advance as long as it maintained this expansion (Putnam, 1976). The idea being discussed here is known to students of history as Manifest Destiny. Once the coasts had been conquered, the US began looking for overseas territory, leading to intense war-mongering with Spain and the “conquest” of Cuba, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Virgin Islands (Nettels, 1934). The idea shaped American exceptionalism and was the ideological trebuchet that shot America onto the international stage (Burkhart, 1947).

Despite being such a little-known historical figure nowadays, Turner’s thesis had a huge effect on the United States’ image, both at home and abroad. Although he did not use the phrase, American exceptionalism,within the thesis, However,the concept of American Exceptionalism is deeply tied to it. And while historians have endlessly debated where the idea originated from, Turner is certainly one of the most well-documented early proponents of it. The word “exceptionalism” is used to describe how one country is better than another in modern-day, and Turner’s use of “exceptionalism” meant something very unique (Gressley, 1958). The foundation of his argument was not that the frontier made the US better than the rest of the world. However, it transformed the nation into something fundamentally different from the Old World, regardless of the largely European heritage of most Americans (Ford Jr, 1993). Independence, socialization, mobility, isolationism, and work ethics were shaped by the mass migration west, creating a culture that eventually encompassed the entire nation (Lee, 1961).

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