ELUSIVENESS AND AMBIGUITY IN THE CONCEPT OF THE AMERICAN FRONTIER

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Abstract

The study approaches one of the key concepts of American culture, identified as the major cultural paradigm of the American space both inside the American culture and in its specific ways if rapport to the global world: the American frontier. The spatial paradigm of the frontier, ineluctably related to the concept of the West, is characterized by ambiguity due to the lack of exact referentiality. The approach starts from the original Turnerian version of the American western frontier and leads to an assimilation of the frontier with the foucaultian "heterotopia".

Keywords: American frontier, West, myth, utopia, heterotopia.

The present paper deals with the cultural concept of the American frontier in its mythical perception, one which was theorized by Richard Slotkin: "myths are stories drawn from a society's history that have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society's ideology and of dramatizing its moral consciousness – with all the complexities and contradictions that consciousness may contain."[2] In this assumption, the American frontier is the myth which became the major cultural paradigm of the American space both inside the American culture and in its specific ways of rapport to the global world.

Frederic Jackson Turner was the first who articulated the myth and gave it an ideological form, although its essence originated in the colonists' epoch. The frontier thesis, which has widespread implications for historiography, sociology, literary criticism, and politics, inaugurates the creation of the American space. Though the ideas that he put forward had been present and acting on the American spirit, Turner was the one who gave these ideas a theoretical shape. He "put into shape a good deal of thought that has been floating around rather loosely"[3]. Indeed, the ideas that Turner put forward were part of the complex of traditional beliefs which had existed since colonial times with regard to the concept of the "frontier": the concept of pioneering as the defining national mission, the vision of the "west" as a land of plenty, of democracy, of protection against tyranny and oppressions. Turner himself acknowledges this: "Since the days when the fleet of Columbus sailed into the waters of the New World, America has been another name for opportunity."[4]

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[2] Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation. The Myth Of the Frontier in the Twentieth-Century America*, Atheneum, New York, 1992, p. 5
[3] Theodore Roosevelt, cited in Richard Slotkin, Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in 20th Century America, p. 29
[4] F. J. Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History and Other Essays*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1994 p. 59

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Turner' famous thesis can be essentially rendered by: "The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession and the advance of American settlement westward explain American development"[5]. The availability of space created America, and it also created the Americans by shaping the spirit of the nation. What was primarily a physical reality – the material line separating civilization from wilderness – was transformed into an enduring myth. This myth was assimilated by people as a unifying symbol functioning as a system of beliefs which grants cultural specificity and justifies exceptionalist rhetoric. The elusiveness of the term comes from this internalization of the concept by people: from defining space in its material shape, the frontier was turned into a cultural element, into a mental representation.

Form a physical perspective, the American frontier is a common, neutral territory delimitating colonized area from non-colonized space. It is seen as the catalyst of Americanization, due to the specific conditions that the frontier life implies: "The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization."[6] On the other hand, as a mythical construct, the American frontier has special referentiality in physical reality. If prior to colonizing attempts the frontier was originally the Atlantic Ocean, it moved very quickly westward to the limits of physical places, which opened up innovative and boundless possibilities of representation of the "frontier" as "space". The difference between a "place", with well-definable physical referentiality, and "space", with a much more flexible structure, is significant. The frontier seen as "space" is a very ambiguous concept, without clear determinations, and this ambiguity was acknowledged soon after Frederick Jackson Turner's famous frontier theory: G.W. Pierson reproached Turner that he confused between the geographical frontier and the geo-social and geo-psychological component of the frontier.[7]

This very ambiguity is the source of the power of representation of the "frontier" in people's consciousness; the multitude of interpretations associated with the term is a proof of poetic charge that is compelling and which favored its internalization as myth: "Turner's vocabulary was more that of a poet than a logician, and so his word 'frontier' could mean almost anything: a line, a moving zone, a static region, a kind o society, a process of character formation, an abundance of land. His fuzzy language conferred on Turner's argument the illusion of great analytical power only because his central terms – frontier, democracy, individualism, national character – were so broad and ill-defined."[8]

In his thesis, Turner spoke of a western frontier which, in his view, was no longer a geographical place which could be historically explained. It was turned into symbolism which "***constituted*** an explanation of history", while its significance as a mythic place "began to outweigh its importance as a real place, with its own peculiar geography,

[5] ibid., p.31
[6] Ibid., p. 33
[7] George Wilson Pierson, *The Frontier and the American Institutions: a Criticism of the Turner Theory*, New England Quarterly, XV, 1942
[8] William Cronon., *Revisiting the Vanishing Frontier: The Legacy of Frederick Jackson Turner*, WHQ 17, April 1987, p. 158

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politics, and cultures."[9] Although the frontier had always been a concept full of mythic significance, until 1893 it could be identified with specific, actual geographic regions. After this date, reality no longer affected the development of the mythology identified as "the West", a mythology perceived and understood by the fictions created about it.

Even from a geographical perspective, the American frontier as a national symbol is essentially elusive: it is a moving frontier, advancing together with new conquests of civilization, it is never static, and it can never be determined spatially. Once you touch the frontier, it is gone, it has moved westward. The concept is highly unstable; the frontier exists solely as a reference, without a physical referent. It is purely an imaginary construct, one which acts as a catalyst between people and the object of their desires, entraining qualities such as ambition, determination, and strength. It is probably this ambiguity and lack of clear spatial reference which led to the generalization of the myth: by virtue of their elusiveness, the words "frontier" and "the West" have come to signify America in the cultural imagination.

"The West" and "the frontier" are contradictory and unstable terms, just as the mythical space they denote: "To discover where the American West is supposed to be, I have been consulting major books published within the last ten or twelve years, books by scholars of stature from whom we have learned much. But having read them, I could not put my finger on the map and say 'There is the West'. The books have attached too abstract a meaning to the word, so abstract in fact that it has become bewildering. The West is 'movement', 'expansion', 'the frontier,' they all say, and apparently any kind of movement, any expansion, any frontier will do."[10]

The ambiguity of the frontier and of the "west" opens new ways of approaching these constructs. Since the frontier is so elusive a concept that physical space cannot define it, it would make sense to categorize it as a utopia, according to the definition given by Michel Foucault: "Utopias are sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces."[11]

On the other hand, Foucault also uses the term "heterotopia", which defines "real places - places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society - which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality."[12] Bearing a large spectrum of interpretations, the heterotopia adjusts to the social change, changing its role and

[9] Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, p. 61
[10] Donald Worster, *New West, True West: Interpreting the Region's History*, Western Historical Quarterly 18:2, April 1987, pp.143-4
[11] Michel Foucault, *Of Other Spaces*
[12] Ibid.

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location; it is assigned specific roles and functions for society, roles of compensation or illusion: "each heterotopia has a precise and determined function within a society."[13]

The frontier acts both as a utopia and a heterotopia in the American culture. As a heterotopia, it is the mirror which represents the national characteristics, as it is a container of American specificity and identity: the traits that the frontier experience created and exacerbated in the pioneers have become the set of norms by which belonging to the nation is measured. Its location in reality "may" be possible, according to Foucault's theory, as the frontier once defined physical space, at the end of civilization.

At the same time, the frontier acts as a utopia, as well: not only is it inexistent in reality – and has been for a long time – but even at the time when it supposedly delimitated colonized land from virgin land, the concept was unfathomable. The frontier is an illusion, a Fata Morgana; one can see it clearly from the distance, from the familiar surroundings of the civilized world, but once one goes near it, it stops existing, as it loses all referentiality. Once it is attained, the frontier is pushed forward and it can never be conquered, it turns into a utopia.

The same theory can applied to the concept of the "West": although it is a geographical coordinate, and thus it should provide more accuracy in establishing its reference in reality, the "West" as a myth, as a cultural construct, is equally delusional. At the time America was discovered, the "West" was the Atlantic Ocean. Soon after that, once colonists started coming to the New World to find opportunity and build a new nation, what was originally the West for Europe soon became the East, as the West was pushed further and further into the continent. The process has a very simple logic: I am always in the East compared to the "West" that I am facing and pursuing. Similarly, if the frontier makes the distinction between civilization and savagery, my simple presence at the limit of civilization automatically implies that the frontier is somewhere else. Neither the 'frontier', nor 'the West' are homogenous as constructs; they are formed of fluctuant components changing together with the advancement of the line of civilization. The lack of homogeneity relates these spaces to fiction, to the works of imagination rather than to analytical approaches.

The flexibility of the "frontier" seen as the major spatial paradigm of the American culture opens new perspectives to the interpretations of the role that Americanism plays in an increasingly globalized world and to the concepts of alterities, centers and margins imposed by postcolonial criticism.

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