



The Frontier as (Migrating) Space in American Social Thinking

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Abstract. In my paper the American frontier is described as a moving zone, a social, historical and economic as well as geographical phenomenon. The frontier experience determines American art, literature and social thinking to a large extent even today. The paper deals with the frontier as a moving space in historiography and literature. The essay consists of three parts. In the first part the concept of the frontier as a moving space is outlined. In the second part the relevant works of some American historians are – very briefly – analysed, from the aspect of the frontier as migrating space. The third part deals with a selection of literary works – novels and short stories – that show how the frontier is described by prominent and well-known American prose writers.

Keywords: frontier, regional historiography, frontier in literature

*“The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession,
and the advance of American settlement westward, explain
American development.”*

Frederick Jackson Turner

Frontier: The “Migrating” Space

The frontier experience, the slow movement of the borderland towards west, is deeply rooted in Anglo-Saxon socio-cultural myths. It is not only an American

phenomenon; Canada and Australia were also conquered by the British from the East to West.

The frontier, or borderland, is in that case the border of civilization – behind that border there is the unknown. Hostile terrain, hostile natural scene and hostile natives – all these things were supposed to be conquered, to be brought under control, in order to further extend civilization.

In the American social myth, the process of advancing civilization westward developed the heroes adequate to the task. The settler, the brave hunter, the pioneer, the cowboy, the stockman, the mountaineer, the trapper are but some of the characters that have emerged since the first days of Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607, populated the new space opened up for them, upheld and advanced civilization.

John Gast's famous painting of 1872, called "American Progress," depicts the idea of the frontier in a symbolic and condensed way. Native Americans and wild animals retreat before the civilizers, who are coming on foot, on horseback, in stagecoach and railway, and immediately begin to cultivate the land. The painting is full of dynamism and motion, the way people imagined the frontier of the new country.

The first borderland stretched along the Appalachian Mountains, partly because the wilderness of the mountains was hardly penetrable for the few settlers, and partly because the king prohibited settlement west of the mountains:

The East has always feared the result of an unregulated advance of the frontier and has tried to check and guide it. The English authorities would have checked settlement at the headwaters of the Atlantic tributaries and allowed the "savages to enjoy their deserts in quiet lest the peltry trade should decrease." (Spark 2010, 1)

At that time, the American hero was the colonizer, like John Smith, and the brave hunter, like the protagonists in James Fenimore Cooper's novels. Natty Bumppo, one of the first White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant heroes, was at home in the wilderness, used its potentials and resources skillfully, and lived in harmony with the Indians, identifying with one tribe, and took part in their own tribal wars against other tribes.

When the space between the ocean and the Appalachians was finally outgrown by the population, they ventured through the mountains, acquired new territories from the French, and realized that their own frontier was not the only one. There was the frontier of the French, a large part of which the new country acquired from Napoleon, and there was the frontier of the Spaniards, who had arrived earlier than the English. Don Juan de Oñate had organized Spanish

administration in what is today New Mexico several years before Jamestown, Virginia, was established.

With the defeat of the French in the French and Indian War, and the Louisiana purchase, the French ceased to be a rival for American expansion, but the Spanish and the American frontiers moved on collision courses: the Spaniards came from the southwest, occupying territories from the Pacific coast inwards, and the Americans were moving towards the middle of the continent from the east. The U.S. government attempted to purchase land from Mexico, but what had worked with the French did not work with the Mexicans. As the frontier moved slowly but continually westward and new space was needed for settlement and animal husbandry, war seemed to be the only way of obtaining the desired territories. After winning the Mexican War, new opportunities opened up for American settlement, new, vast spaces became available for the people who were ready to occupy them. And there were many who were ready. Immigrants from Scandinavia and Central Europe poured into the newly conquered areas, hungry for land and wishing to escape misery, religious intolerance and political oppression. The characteristic pioneer on the chuck wagon appeared, to find a land suitable for a farm. In the period after the Civil War, the areas between the Mississippi and the Pacific Ocean were virtually deprived of law and order. The saga of the Wild West began, with new heroes, such as the cowboy or the popular outlaws, like Jesse James, Billy the Kid and others.

Being a cowboy was a lot more peaceful occupation than it is often suggested by the movies and cheap pulp fiction. In popular culture the cowboy's main activity was apparently nothing else but shooting each other and fighting rustlers. The cowboy was a character in the new space acquired by America important enough without shooting with his sixgun or rifle all the time. The cowboy kept entire industries in motion – cattle breeding in the south, and meat packing in the north. The cowboy therefore moved perpendicularly *across* the line of progress of the frontier. The grazing lands were in the south, mostly in Texas, and the slaughterhouses and meat packing factories in the north – from Wichita all the way to Chicago. By driving the cattle at a slow and leisurely pace from south to north, the cowboy was the only occupant of immense areas for long periods of time. The life of the cowboy was hard, and so was the life of the settlers and planters arriving in the new west. The “migration” of the frontier zone continued at a larger scale after the Mexican War and after the Civil War as well. The process is described by Turner at the beginning of his book in the following way:

American development has exhibited not merely advance along a single line, but return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line, and a new development for that area. American social development has been continually beginning over on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity

of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character. (1986, 2)

This statement is of key importance in understanding the nature of the frontier, and also in understanding some of the basic American values. When the cowboy roamed the prairie, driving the cattle north, the personal values, competences did not include any former education – schooling was not needed. Being sturdy in the saddle, being able to ride perfectly, often under extreme circumstances was, on the other hand, indispensable. Being a marksman good enough to fight off outlaws and to kill wild animals was also required. Those who lacked these competences simply perished.

This is how Walter Prescott Webb, the outstanding historian of the prairie, lays the foundations of the romantic image of the cowboy:

In the old days the cowboys had ways... of testing courage. [He] had first to prove that he could ride; that made him useful. Then later he had to prove his courage; that made him a member of the brotherhood of strong men, a safe man to take along. (1981, 246-247)

Courage as an indispensable quality is, however, not a romantic exaggeration here; being brave was simply a matter of life and death for those who lived there. Similarly to what the cowboys needed for survival, self-reliance, resourcefulness in finding a way out of trouble, the ability to defend oneself, finding the tracks of animals and humans in the wilderness, the ability of providing basic first aid, finding medicine in nature were skills absolutely necessary for farmers and settlers, when one's nearest neighbour lived forty or fifty miles away.

As the people living along the American borderland were exposed to the "simplicity of primitive society" over and over again as the frontier proceeded, the same qualities were required regularly from time to time until American expansion reached the gold fields of the Sacramento Valley in California or the Klondike in Alaska. It is therefore not surprising that these values are deeply rooted in American thinking. In the country that possesses some of the finest technical and other universities in the world, formal school education is still not very highly esteemed. In popular culture – movies, books – physical skills, sturdiness and fighting abilities are appreciated much better than education acquired at school. What can be acquired through practice or physical exercise is more attractive than knowledge found in the books.

Discourses of the “Migrating Space” 1: the Frontier Historians

The “significance of the frontier in American history” was recognized by historiographers relatively early. Frederick Jackson Turner wrote his famous book in 1893, when most people did not even realize that a major period of American history was over, and the borderland ceased migrating any further. Some of Turner’s points are disputable, but his early recognition of the significance of the frontier and his valuable contribution to late-nineteenth century historiography make his work a very useful starting point for any analysis of the history of the American frontier.

Although Turner speaks about the availability of “an area of free land,” the land was far from being utterly unoccupied. French *voyageurs* surveyed the Mississippi Valley, opened for trading posts and lead mines. There were the Native Americans roaming the prairie and the Rocky Mountains, and the Mexicans in the southwest.

One of the first prominent American historians who dealt with the French presence in the territory of what is today the U.S. and Canada was Francis Parkman. He wrote an impressive seven-volume work on the French colonization in North America. Parkman never became as popular and well-known as Turner, because he wrote in an arid and strictly scientific style. His friends made efforts to persuade him to use a more popular and more easily digestible style, but Parkman did not seek popularity; he was a scholar first and last. His work has been an important source for generations of historians studying the colonial period of North America.

Angie Debo, white historian of the Indians, “received a long life from Manitou,” and during her 98 years she personally saw almost half of the U.S. history. In *A History of the Indians of the United States* she describes what the migrating space of the frontier meant for the Indians as follows:

With the approach of the Civil War, pressures... were building up against the Cheyennes and Arapahos. According to the Horse Creek Treaty, rip-roaring, fast-growing Denver and all the Colorado mining camps..., the ranches spreading out along the trails, were squatting on their land. Federal agents therefore called them in council at Fort Lyon and persuaded a few peace chiefs... to sign a treaty on accepting a small reservation in southeastern Colorado. (1983, 190)

As the space of the whites kept rolling westward, the space of the Indians shrunk. Debo’s other book, *And Still the Waters Run*, dealt with how the “life-long” treaties with the Indians were corrupted, by-passed and betrayed. The book was written in the 1930s, but many of the politicians who were involved in taking

away the land of the natives were still alive and active, and a strong political pressure prevented the publication of the book for several years.

Herbert Eugene Bolton was a historian who believed that it was not possible to study American history in separation from the histories of other nations that had positions in North America. Bolton focused primarily on the Spanish colonies and Mexico, and discussed the geographical discoveries and explorations of the Spaniards in today's Western United States. His work was continued by John Francis Bannon, a Jesuit and a twentieth-century historian. The title of Bannon's principal work is *The Spanish Borderlands Frontier 1513-1821*. Using both the terms "borderlands" and "frontier" in the title suggests that what he talks about is more than a simple political border; it is an oscillating cultural-social-civilizational-political phenomenon as well. It is likely that being a Jesuit contributed to Bannon's interest in Catholic Spaniards and Mexicans; it is certain that few historians approached the topic with the same empathy and sensitivity. The characteristic civilizational outpost of Spanish colonization was the mission; California was colonized through a chain of missions, and Bannon describes how the Spaniards proceeded towards the interior of the continent as follows:

Not all Spanish activity in Texas during... the eighteenth century was concentrated in central and eastern areas of the province. There was some attempt after earlier exploration, to hold missionize, and civilize the rugged area on both sides of the Rio Grande southward from El Paso del Norte to San Juan Bautista. Out of this came the beginnings of the development of the La Junta country around the point of juncture of the Rio Conchos with the Rio Grande. The Presidio del Norte was established there to protect the missions on both sides of the Rio Grande. (1993, 139)

That is how the Spanish frontier moved slowly to meet the American one in the middle of the continent. The importance of the Spanish presence in the territory of what is today the U.S. was also recognised by the great historian of the prairie, Walter Prescott Webb, who also discussed the relationship of the Spanish colonizers and the native Americans: "Considering the Spanish frontier system itself, we find therein several subsidiary factors which throw much light on the problem of the relation set up between the Spaniards and the Plains Indians" (1981, 118). The space of Indians shrank from both directions. Webb also uses the term "frontier" in reference to the complex but transitory cultural-civilizational situation along the lines of Spanish civilization in North America.

Webb describes how the Anglo frontier proceeded west, after taking over the territories of the Indians and Spaniards: "the wire fences continued to creep westward. Long-headed cattlemen... began to acquire all the land they could, and

to fence all they dared and were able. Their fences often included their own land, leased land, government land which they could not lease..." (1981, 238).

Discourses of the “Migrating Space” 2: the Frontier in Literature

In the long process of the conquest of North America a set of mutual stereotypes and negative clichés developed in the competing peoples, Anglos, Mexicans, Indians, Mestizos, French and others. Here is an example from George Emery, showing how the Anglos looked upon the Mexicans: “A ragged, dirty Mexican, whose matted hair was a model of cactus-fence, whose tattered blanket served to make more evident his nakedness, an unmistakable, unredeemed ‘greaser’” (1971, 35).

Many such descriptions about dirty “greasers,” that is Mexicans, are found in Anglo literature. The Mexicans and Indians – and also some Anglo authors – condemned the greedy, ruthless, insensitive capitalism of the Anglos, who took away the land of the Natives and of the Spaniards/Mexicans as well.

But no matter what they thought about each other, there was one thing in common in the literary descriptions of the land. The frontier, the space in which people existed, is beautiful – a land of enchantment that attracted immigrants like a magnet.

Emery himself described California as an earthly paradise. Helen Hunt Jackson in her *Ramona* also provides similar descriptions about California:

Between the veranda and the river meadows [...] all was garden, orange grove, and almond orchard; the orange grove always green, never without snowy bloom or golden fruit; the garden never without flowers, summer or winter; and the almond orchard, in early spring, a fluttering canopy of pink and white petals, which [...] looked as rosy sunrise clouds had fallen, and become tangled in the tree-tops. On either hand stretched away other orchards, peach, apricot, pear, apple, pomegranate; and beyond these, vineyards. Nothing was to be seen but verdure or bloom or fruit, at whatever time of the year. (1970, 19)

The mild and pleasant climate of California, the beauty of the land surprised the newcomers who arrived from the East, and that, together with the opportunities in mining, hunting, farming, industry and recently in the service sector, continues to attract immigrants from Mexico and other countries even today. Richard Dokey in a short story describes the arrival of a Mexican immigrant to the Sierra Nevada in the following passage:

‘*Adónde vamos?*’ Eugenio had asked. ‘Where are we going?’
‘*Bellísima,*’ Juan replied. ‘Into much loveliness.’ (1971, 73)

The “loveliness” of South California was in sharp contrast with Juan Sánchez’s original home in the dry, dreary, hopeless Mexican semi-desert. It is, however, not only California that is praised in a similar manner. From the earliest descriptions the natural beauty and the vastness and the wealth offered by the new continent are admired by the traveller. John Smith talks about Virginia in his *A Description of New England*:

if an Angell should tell you [that] any place yet vnknowne can afford such fortunes; you would not beleue him, no more than Columbus was beleued there was any such Land as is now the well known abounding *America*; much lesse such large Regions as are yet vknowne, [...] where were courses for gentlemen [...] more suiting their qualities... (1990, 10)

The land of opportunities, offering a wide variety of fish, game and fruit to those who “for the most part had little but bread and vinegar” (1990, 10), and offering land to those who had never had a patch of land of their own, offering political and religious peace to those who had been persecuted in Europe, Asia or elsewhere, the stretch of land between sea and shining sea has remained the most attractive space on Earth for centuries.

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