

## Capitalism and the American Frontier

THE BILLIONS OF DOLLARS spent on farm subsidies in the last decades are a tribute to the enduring power of the Agrarian Myth in America. While family businesses are permitted to succumb to the rigors of competition, reformers of the farm program only seek to save the family farm without paying unnecessary bonuses to factories in the field. Land and farmers have long been thought of in non-economic terms by otherwise urbane thinkers: Socrates called husbandry "the mother and nurse of the other arts"; Cicero thought agriculture the occupation most becoming a free man; Franklin wrote that tilling of the soil was the only honest way to gain wealth. The family farmers, according to Jeffersonian tradition, are the chosen people of God, the most vigorous, independent and virtuous citizens, the most strongly wedded to national liberty. The country could remain praiseworthy then, as long as the presence of vacant land permitted it to remain chiefly agricultural. Therefore, good Jeffersonians were disturbed when the census of 1890 declared that there was no longer a continuous frontier in the United States.

It was in this atmosphere that Frederick Jackson Turner electrified the historical profession with his brilliant presidential address to the 1893 meeting of the American Historical Association. For the first time a major American historian postulated indigenous roots for unique American developments. Turner attributed much of American institutional development to the presence of a continuous frontier throughout our history and, as a good Jeffersonian expressed concern at its passing. Turner's excellence as a writer and a teacher inspired a generation of historians to follow in the paths that he had explored. American historiography was enriched; the focus was shifted from political developments in Washington to a closer examination of other phases of American life and development. And in later years, it was just this type of research that led scholars to question the validity of much of the Turner thesis.

For example, central to the American version of the agrarian myth is the presence of free or cheap land on the frontier; this, it was postulated, provided farms for an expanding population and gave even urban and rural wage earners an opportunity to become independent farmers. But there were many obstacles a wage earner had to overcome if he wished to become a land-owning husbandman. First, as Goodrich and Davidson have pointed out, a prospective farmer needed sufficient funds to finance the trip; second, he needed supplies until the crop was harvested. This required from \$500 to \$1000. Finally, land costs could be substantial. Wages were far too close to the margin for most workers, urban or rural, to save any considerable sum. (An urban worker would first have to master farming techniques.) In addition, if the safety valve were valid it would have to be most effective during hard times; yet, as Frederick Shannon has shown, movement to the West was sharply reduced during depressions. Land was not an insignificant cost. De-

spite the Homestead Act most of the best and most conveniently located land was privately held. From 1860 to 1890 only one-sixth of the new farms were homesteaded, and many of these were fraudulently obtained by speculators and cattle barons. When we examine population statistics, we can confirm Shannon's conclusion that the cities were safety valves for the farms. From 1790-1900 cities grew from 3.3% to 32.9% of the population. Of the estimated 31,000,000 descendants of the farmers of 1860, only 9,000,000 were on the farms in 1900. The city, then, was a safety valve for over 20,000,000 born on farms during this period; further, the cities swelled with millions of immigrants who were attracted by the myth of free land.

Although the safety-valve theory was so generally accepted in nineteenth century America that Turner incorporated it into his writings, it was not central to the frontier thesis. More essential to his conception was the role the West played in shaping American institutions and values. Yet all societies have had frontiers, and none has resembled the American. All land on the Egyptian frontier was owned and governed by the Pharaoh. Greek colonies, though independent, were patterned on the mother polis, even preserving the same hearth fire. The Romans transposed urban life, coliseums, roads, aqueducts, baths, and arches—the whole Roman way of life—to all their settlements. Medieval agricultural expansion carried with it the manorial system, lords and serfs.

Frontiers, then, have no nature of their own. They reflect the values, ethics, motivations and rewards of the society of which they are a part—Egyptian autocracy, Greek particularism, the urbanity of Rome, the custom and status conscious medieval world. Lacking vestigial institutions and traditions, frontiers are, if anything, a clearer reflection of the main thrust of the parent society. Where Roman institutions had never taken firm hold, as in Britain and northern France, medieval institutions were more completely developed than in Italy. America has always been part of the European world; its dominant characteristics reflected the spirit then coming to the fore in Europe, the spirit of burgeoning capitalism, untempered by the vestiges of a feudal past. Let us examine the frontier thesis in the light of this theory.

THE UNITED STATES HAS ALWAYS been proud of American individualism. It has been considered the basis of our democracy, of our "classless" society. "The frontier is productive of individualism," Turner declared. "Complex society is precipitated by the wilderness into a kind of primitive organization based on the family," he continued in an effort to explain how frontier resistance to government led to more democratic suffrage and representation.

But did the frontier engender individualism? Individualism was more the product of competitive capitalism than the frontier itself. The individual farm replaced the manorial economy in England when market conditions led to the commercialization of agriculture. It was the individualistic European merchant capitalist who broke out of the confines of guild restrictions. Ingenious Lombard bankers evaded medieval church restrictions on usury. Individual Italian traders restored economic relations with the ancient civilizations of the East. The individual in pursuit of the main chance has always been the embodiment of the capitalist spirit. The self-made man was

the hero of capitalism before the discovery of America—Marco Polo anticipates all of the virtues of a frontier individualist. Government restraint of the economic man has long been frowned upon by capitalist theorists, and this displeasure has often been extended to restraints upon intellectual man. Classical economists glorified the individual who pursued his enlightened self interest and saw in him the agent of natural law. The frontier, then, reflected capitalist individualism.

Similarly, American individualist democracy did not find its major inspiration on the frontier. It did not come "out of the American forest" gaining "new strength each time it touched a new frontier." It grew out of the English past and our colonial heritage and was related to the development of capitalism. The seventeenth century struggle of Parliament to limit royal power was mirrored by the struggle of colonial legislators to restrain the colonial executive; and how important was the support of London and the commercial southeast of England to the ultimate victory of Parliament? How much did the New England town meeting owe to the traditions of the commercial society of ancient Athens and the practices of the incorporated medieval towns of western Europe? In addition, Western political institutions were derived from the East—constitutions, courts, state governments, and township or county organizations showed little originality. Even the broadening of the suffrage began in the East—not until 1816 did a western state match the qualifications adopted by Pennsylvania in 1776, and by then property qualifications to vote had been abandoned by New Jersey, Maryland and North Carolina. The right of citizens to participate in government did not begin on the frontier.

On the local level it began with the struggle of towns to free themselves of feudal rule and to win self determination. By 1183 the Lombard League, after the battle of Legnano, was able to obtain virtual independence for the cities of north Italy from the powerful Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick Barbarossa. By the fourteenth century the towns of the Hanseatic League had not only asserted their independence but had obtained economic privileges throughout the Baltic and North Sea area and with the Treaty of Stralsund (1370), imposed their collective will upon the Danish monarchy. On a national level it began with the admission of the bourgeoisie to representative bodies when their wealth attracted the attention of monarchs as a source of funds above and beyond traditional manorial and feudal resources. With time the bourgeoisie succeeded in wresting control of government away from the divinely appointed monarchs and the tradition-sanctified nobility; they replaced the older rationales with the right of property to govern; and property qualifications were gradually lowered until they were finally eliminated.

NOR WAS THE DEMOCRATIZATION of society a product of the American frontier. The rigid feudal class structure had been disrupted by the growth of commerce and capitalism in Europe, by the monarchical use of bourgeois administrators and the growth of new sources of wealth and power. Previous frontiers had transposed status with the movement of the society and our own Southwest saw the extension of a slave society. Indeed, social strati-

fiction was present on the American frontier, although class relations were not as rigid and the upper class was recruited from a broader base. A tradition free frontier released the fluidity inherent in early capitalism.

The right of the individual to his own religious beliefs did not grow out of the multiplicity of frontier sects. Where religion continued to be a primary concern, as in frontier Massachusetts Bay, toleration was not notable. But even in New England, as the concern for the accumulation of wealth distracted the citizens from a dedication to the purity of religious dogma, religious differences were permitted. And isn't it more than mere coincidence that the most tolerant country of western Europe during the seventeenth century—Holland—was also the most prosperous and the most commercially oriented.

And what of the secularization of American education as educators began to view schools as something more than a place to train orthodox ministers? We cannot insist upon a dominant place for the West and ignore the pioneer role of Benjamin Franklin, the colonial cosmopolitan. A capitalist society whose emphasis was no longer aristocratic and theological saw greater need for science, applied science and vocational studies than for ancient language and Bible study. The preparation of the individual for a professional career began to be considered. Often it was easier to change curriculum in the socially responsive Western state universities, and in this way, the West played a leading role in the development of American education.

But Turner not only saw individualism as a product of the West; he found nationalism to be conditioned by our frontier needs and demands: Henry Clay's American System—the questions of public lands, central banking, the tariff and internal improvements—had a western derivation; "the legislation which most developed the powers of the national government and played the largest part in its activity was conditioned on the frontier;" state loyalties weakened with the movement of Easterners to the West; immigrants emerged from the "crucible of the frontier as part of an American nationality." The proposition that American nationalism was developed in the West is a questionable one. Westerners could be found on both sides of the controversy over Clay's American System, as could Easterners. The various segments of Clay's American System reflected the needs of a commercial society. Europe had central banking long before Hamilton advocated the Bank of the United States. Protective tariffs are at least as old as mercantile efforts to promote manufacturing. Internal improvements were necessary only for a frontier that was commercially oriented and producing for a market. Urban merchants and manufacturers wanted transportation to their economic hinterlands as much as commercial farmers wanted conveyance to urban outlets. European immigrants were more likely to remain in a city than to reach the West, and in both East and West national enclaves exist to this day.

Further, Turner's analysis fails to explain the separate and previous development of European nationalism. The national monarchies of Europe arose at the same time as, and in alliance with, the national bourgeoisie. The English manorial economy collapsed under the impact of commercial agriculture; the English monarchy financed its struggle for centralization with resources derived from the rise of trade. In Germany economic union pre-

ceded political union. Throughout Europe the capitalist's desire for stability and a national market led him to support centralizing tendencies and national development.

Yet even the most cohesive of nations are rent by factional strife. For these political conflicts, Turner often offered a sectional interpretation. One of the most persistent of these controversies is the contention between debtor and creditor. Turner saw this as an East-West struggle and identified areas of lax financial integrity with successive frontiers. But wasn't this really a fight between interest groups and not stages of settlement? Chicago and downstate Illinois were settled at about the same time; still, they soon developed political dissensions that exist to this day. The American farmer frequently became a debtor because of his commercial daring; he was not tradition and status oriented like the European peasant. His vision has been one of the unlimited horizons of maximum profit; he has always been a commercial producer seizing at each profitable opportunity. Many went into debt to expand their holdings, often speculatively, mortgaging today for tomorrow's killing. Mortgaged to the hilt, farmers would get caught in an economic downturn and then publically mourn the passing of the family farm. The farmer's attitude toward creditors was no different than the over-extended small business man.

CAN ANYTHING BE SALVAGED from the frontier thesis? If we recognize that capitalism had the active role, the frontier the passive role, our history may be placed in perspective. The frontier provided the wealth for the expansion of capitalism at a fantastic rate despite greedy, corrupt, and wasteful entrepreneurs. From the very beginning of our nation the West played an important role. The credit of the government under the Articles of Confederation was secured by government owned lands in the West, and the sale of this land was an important factor in the liquidation of our early national debt. The export of the agricultural products of the West and South enabled us to import capital as well as goods from Europe, and thus to expand our own industry; then the natural resources and food of the West fed the nation's industries and industrial workers. Western resources—iron, coal, furs, precious metals, lumber—created wealth that could be tapped for internal capital expansion. The presence of the West as a market internalized the American economy and made it possible for young industries to develop behind tariff barriers. Without such a market the tariff would have been meaningless. And finally, the West as a market and a source of food and raw materials precipitated a transportation expansion that served as the catalyst for the economic boom of the Jacksonian Era and the post-Civil War period. Viewed in this light the importance of the frontier becomes clear. It is a mistake to give it more credit than it is due.

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## The Stalinization of Fidel Castro

THE FIRST THING TO CLARIFY is what "Stalinization" means. We are now so distant from the Stalin period in Russia that it is easy to mistake Stalin for an earthly assistant of the Devil, for the modern reincarnation of Ivan the Terrible or for a generalized specter which haunted the Soviet Union. But the emotive use of the term will herein be eschewed. Stalinization refers to specific forms of social and political behavior and institutions.

First, Stalinization historically meant the bureaucratization of the Communist Party machinery which in turn signifies severe limits to inner party disputes and the termination of the period of factionalism. In broader terms it means the subordination of society to the Party State. Second, Stalinization means the emergence of a leader and his small coterie as exclusive spokesman for the Communist Party. The nation reduces *itself* to *himself*. The Party State is subordinated to the Party Leader. Third, Stalinization means the promotion of inner political struggle as a substitute for class struggle. The politics of the purge and the passion for development displaces the politics of debate and the passion for socialist democracy. Fourth, Stalinization means the elimination or at least abandonment of all roads to socialism save one: the economic growth road determined and defined by the maximum leader. Fifth, and most characteristic of Stalinism, is a nearly exclusive concentration of energies on national rather than international problems. This might be called the domestication of the revolutionary movement under the above conditions.

This definition of Stalinism is introduced in order to make plain what appears to be a new stage in the development of the Cuban Revolution. This stage, in comparison to the first seven years, represents an utter simplification of the sociological problem; that is to say, we have the "advantage" of being able to pay attention to what the leader says and having it stand for what the nation ostensibly believes. There no longer is a problem of pluralization: alternative spokesmen, alternative newspapers, or even of alternative responses to selective problems. There no longer is an empirical problem—a world to be interpreted on the basis of information—only an ideological problem—a world to be acted upon on the basis of imaginary demands by outside forces. The task of political interpretation and analysis is remarkably simplified, since access to the ideas of the leader becomes equivalent to the national essence no less than the political truth.

WITHIN THE FIRST MONTHS OF 1966 there have been three proclamations issued by Fidel Castro which, I submit, bear out my contention that Fidel Castro has become a Stalinist. Given the ideological assumptions of the leading players in the international power game, Castro perhaps had little alternative than to become what he became: as Stalin himself claimed, must is must. But whether the deterministic framework out of which Castro operates is a consequence of social forces or personal ideology is at issue. For the assumptions he now makes about the condition of the world deserve further scrutiny.

First, there is the stated need for rapid development and the internal obstacles to such development—the counter-insurgency forces operating with United States support in Camaguey, Matanzas and Las Villas provinces, the rise of absenteeism and slower work schedules developing among even the loyal workers. These require military effort in the first instance and repressive legal measures in the second. Second, there is the belief that Cuba is surrounded by hostile forces, led by the United States. And that this ring of bases makes impossible the normalization of trade and aid agreements with the capitalist bloc generally or with other “captive” Latin American nations. Third is the growing dissatisfaction with any other “roads to socialism,” particularly those of the more extreme variety such as China; hence the continued emphasis on independent forms of political expression invariably creates the base for leadership ideology derived from within rather than from international Communist leaders such as Mao Tse Tung. In other words, the “socialism in one country” slogan is not so much a cause as a consequence of Stalinization.

It should now be said that the denunciation of the Tri-Continental Meeting (Africa, Asia and Latin America) by all member nations of the Organization of American States (including the usually recalcitrant Chileans and Mexicans) has seriously missed the vital political point. Behind the talk of hemispheric revolution is a deep transformation. The rhetoric of world revolution adopted at the Tri-Continental Meeting disguises the intense nationalism of the Castro revolution, a disguise which fails to conceal its growing criticism of other Latin American revolutionists—if not yet revolutions. The Tri-Continental Conference recently held in Havana is the debut of a new Cuba, one which no longer has confidence in hemispheric revolution and one which in fact has transformed itself from the first stage of a high-risk *Latin American* Revolution into the conduct of a low-risk *Cuban* Revolution.

This is not simply a gaming analogy. There is as major a difference between a Latin American Revolution and a Cuban Revolution in the Sixties as there was between a world revolution and the Bolshevik Revolution in the Twenties. The Lenin period was characterized by a faith not so much in a Russian Revolution but rather a Soviet Revolution. Stalin transformed its character from a working class Soviet movement to a national Russian movement. The *degree* of terrorism, if not the fact of it, is a secondary consideration, whatever its human import. Just as fascism is not defined by the number of Jews killed, Stalinism cannot be defined by the number of people in Asian concentration camps. Those are historical variations in the slaughter and blood of the innocent, but not the essence of a definition.