Liminality and the Wild West: The frontier myth, manifest destiny and the building of the American Empire

Stephen Mennell

University College Dublin

We have all grown up on the mythology of the Wild West, depicted in a thousand Hollywood films, not to mention Spaghetti Westerns from nearer home. From the movies, and in American national mythology, the frontier appears as the boundary between ‘civilisation’ (that is, ‘us’) and something else: the ‘Indians’, the ‘Mexicanos’, and the wild men of all origins (in other words, ‘them’). In this light, it is easy to view the famous frontier as a distinct line that moved steadily westward – the advance of ‘civilisation’ – over the course of a century or two. The story of the USA’s westward expansion is historically, as well as mythologically, an interesting study in social liminality. There is, as Peter Burke notes (see Burke in this volume, some danger of over-extending the concept of liminality so that everything is made to seem liminal. Nevertheless, the advancing western frontier did constitute – both geographically and temporally – ‘a situation in which, in order to facilitate a “passage through” a particular limit … all limits were removed, [and] thus the very structure of the society was temporarily suspended’ (see Szakolczai in this volume). In this essay, I will discuss the extent to which social limits actually were suspended in the course of America’s westward expansion. But I shall also emphasise the importance of American’s later perception of westward expansion as a national rite de passage culminating in the ‘successful completion of the transition’ to a new ‘phase of the [national] life-cycle’. It can be tentatively argued that this has played a part in legitimising the USA’s pursuit of world dominance.
The Frontier

The frontier was not a steadily advancing line, even though a simple map of the expansion of the United States can make it appear so. Figure 1 shows the expansion of US sovereign territory between 1783 and 1864, and the more gradual incorporation of territory into states of the Union between 1812 and 1912. In its report on the 1890 national census, the US Bureau of the Census famously declared that the western frontier – which had moved steadily over the course of a century from the Appalachians to the Rockies, where it met the Pacific states – had been ‘closed’ by the spread of unbroken settlement from the Atlantic to the Pacific. More exactly, the Superintendent of the Census wrote

Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line.
This was a somewhat arbitrary judgement, statistically based on there being no territory that fell below a certain population per square mile.

A USA stretching from Atlantic to Pacific had seemed a far-fetched idea at the time of Independence, but Thomas Jefferson, the third President (1801–9), had advocated it and done much through the Louisiana Purchase to make it possible. He also had a clear vision of what it meant in terms of the then conventional ideas of civilisation and barbarism. Near the end of his life, he wrote:

Let a philosophic observer commence a journey from the savages of the Rocky Mountains, eastwardly towards our seacoast. These he would observe in the earliest stage of association living under no law but that of nature, subsisting and covering themselves with the flesh and skins of wild beasts. He would next find those on our frontiers in the pastoral state, raising domestic animals to supply the defects of hunting. Then succeed our own semi-barbarous citizens, the pioneers of the advance of civilization, and so in his progress he would meet the gradual shades of improving man until he would reach his, as yet, most improved state in our seaport towns. This, in fact, is equivalent to a survey, in time, of the progress of man from the infancy of creation to the present day. I am eighty-one years of age; born where I now live, in the first range of mountains in the interior of our country. And I have observed this march of civilization advancing from the seacoast, passing over us like a cloud of light, increasing our knowledge and improving our condition, insomuch as that we are at this time more advanced in civilization here than the seaports were when I was a boy. And where this progress will stop no one can say. Barbarism has, in the meantime, been receding before the steady step of amelioration; and will in time, I trust, disappear from the earth. (Letter to William Ludlow, 6 September 1824, in Jefferson 1907: XVI, 75)

By the 1840s, a USA stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific already appeared inevitable to a good many Americans. Justifying expansion into Texas, Mexico and Oregon, the journalist John L. O'Sullivan wrote in 1845 that it was ‘by right of manifest destiny’ for the United States ‘to overspread
and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us’, both for ‘the
development of the great experiment in liberty and federative self-government entrusted to us’ and
for ‘the free development of our yearly multiplying millions’.

Yet westward expansion was not driven by ideas or ideology, but rather by people’s
hunger for land, which the government could not control. The sixth President, John Quincy
Adams (1825–9), admitted defeat: ‘My own system of administration, which was to make the
national domain the inexhaustible fund for progressive and unceasing internal improvement, had
failed.’ His successor as President, Andrew Jackson (1829–37), ‘formally recommended that all
public lands should be gratuitously given away to individual adventurers and to the States in
which the lands are situated’ (quoted by Turner 1947: 26). This largely unplanned advance of
settlement into the ‘wilderness’, ahead of the apparatus of government, administration, and the
forces of ‘law and order’, is in marked contrast with the contemporaneous eastward expansion of
Russians into Siberia or, closer to hand, the westward expansion of Canada (Mennell 2007: 196–
7). ‘A system of administration’, Turner pithily commented, ‘was not what the West demanded; it
wanted land’.

It was the announcement of the ‘closing of the frontier’ in the report of the 1890 census
that caused Frederick Jackson Turner to write his celebrated paper on ‘The significance of the
frontier in American history’, which he delivered at a meeting of the American Historical
Association in 1893 (1947: 1–38). This remarkable paper is still debated among American
historians today: I can think of no other academic essay that is still actively discussed 116 years
after it was written (though Max Weber’s The Protestant Ethic comes close among sociologists).

There is much in Turner’s vocabulary that jars in modern ears. When Turner wrote about
‘civilisation’ he used the word in the accustomed nineteenth-century sense redolent of ‘progress’,
with the implication that ‘white’, European and American society at the time represented the leading
edge of human history, and the opposite of ‘civilisation’ was ‘barbarism’. Perhaps most startling is
his assertion that ‘the most significant thing about the American frontier is that it lies at the bither
edge of free land (1947: 2–3; my emphasis). Of course, what lay beyond it at any one time was not a
desert, devoid of population. It was not ‘free land’ in that sense. Americans viewed their
hinterland in the same way that Australia, upon the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788, was
regarded as *Terra nullius*. The Australian aborigines and the American Indians, as they were then
called, didn’t count – not because they were not there, but because their occupation of the land
did not take the form of anything that Europeans or Americans could easily recognise as an
established territorial government. Turner knew that of course, but did not pay it much heed.
His own student, Herbert E. Bolton, pointed out in his 1921 book *The Spanish Borderlands* that
Turner’s model of a steadily advancing frontier certainly did not do justice to the ‘borderlands’ of
the formerly Spanish and Mexican territory of the United States. They had always been
populated by a mixed population not just of ‘native Americans’ but also of Hispanics, blacks and
others. (One thing one doesn’t see in the Western movies is the fact that historically a large
proportion of cowboys were black.)

In any case, even Turner did not think of the frontier as a single advancing line. ‘The
American frontier’, he wrote, ‘is sharply distinguished from the European frontier – a fortified
boundary line running through dense populations’ (1947: 2–3). In particular, he distinguished
various phases of the advancing frontier of European-American settlement: first came the
traders’ frontier (led by the trappers), then the miners and ranchers’ frontier, and finally the
farmers’ frontier. The battles between Cain and Abel on the Western frontier sometimes do find
their way into the Westerns, and, as in the Bible (Genesis 4:1–8), Cain won. The cowboy phase
lasted only a couple of decades or so.

When allowance is made for the passage of time and our very different vocabulary, even
Turner’s severest critics usually acknowledge there still remains something of interest and value in
his thesis. He certainly had a point about the steady advance westward of the apparatus of the
American state. Consider Figure 2:
In figure 2, the gap between the upper and lower lines represents an area and a phase of internal colonisation — or, for present purposes, a zone of potential liminality. Or, to use a later coinage by another Turner, Victor Turner (1967), it might be said to be a liminoid zone for those who had actively chosen to participate in the process.

It is entirely reasonable to consider the effect of this process of state formation on the old and the new inhabitants of the Territories and then States of the Union. It can be considered as a process of diminishing liminality. And Frederick Jackson Turner’s thesis remains an impressive starting point for considering this process.

**The Turner thesis**

Turner contended that the existence and expansion of the frontier from the earliest settlements to the 1880s had introduced a decisively different ‘evolutionary’ influence into the development of American society. The kernel of his argument runs:

we have ... a recurrence of the process of evolution in each western area reached in the process of expansion. Thus American development has exhibited not merely advance along a single line, but a return to primitive conditions on a
continually advancing frontier line, and a new development for that area. American social development has been continually beginning again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westwards with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish forces dominating American character. (1947: 2–3)

Turner distinguished three phases of the advancing frontier: the traders’ frontier, the miners’ and ranchers’ frontier, and the farmers’ frontier. He (1947: 22–38) listed a number of specific ways in which the experience of the frontier fed back into American society in the more settled east. I shall mention only the ones that are most relevant to the present context.

First, the frontier had ‘promoted the formation of a composite nationality for the American people’. It diluted the predominantly English character of the eastern seaboard. ‘In the crucible of the frontier … immigrants were Americanised, liberated, and fused into a mixed race, English in neither nationality nor characteristics. The process has gone on from early days to our own’ (1947: 22, 23). That can be translated into the terms used by Victor Turner (1967): he might have said that the frontier promoted a communitas, in which conventional differences of social class and ethnicity were played down in favour of a common quality of Americanness.

Second, the most famous of the consequences of the frontier that Turner discerned for American society was its promotion of ‘rugged individualism’:

the frontier is productive of individualism. Complex society is precipitated by the wilderness into a kind of primitive organization based on the family. The tendency is anti-social. It produces antipathy to control. The tax-gatherer is viewed as a representative of oppression. (1947: 30)

How prescient that has sounded with the rise of the extreme right in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Hostility to the tax gatherer can be seen in many facets of American politics: Republican faith in tax cuts as the universal panacea for all economic problems from boom to bust, in Proposition 13 adopted by California in 1978, which makes it impossible for any state tax to be raised without a two-thirds majority vote in both houses of the state legislature.

Third, and in Turner’s own opinion most important, frontier individualism had from the beginning promoted ‘democracy’. By that, he mainly meant the extension of the franchise. Turner, however, also entered a note of warning:
So long as free land exists, the opportunity for a competency exists, and economic power secures political power. But the democracy born of free land, strong in selfishness and individualism, intolerant of administrative experience and education, and pressing individual liberty beyond its proper bounds, has its dangers as well as its benefits. Individualism in America has allowed a laxity in regard to government affairs which has rendered possible the spoils system and all the manifest evils that follow from the lack of a highly civic spirit. (1947: 32)

If even Turner could enter such a reservation, later writers, less sympathetic than he to the romanticisation of the pioneer, underlined how individualism undermined the civic spirit. Lewis Mumford (1957 [1926]: 26), noting how on the frontier ‘social man could become an “individual”’, spelled out how that was linked to what would later be called environmental depredation: ‘uninfluenced by peasant habits or the idea of an old culture, the work of the miner, woodman, and hunter led to unmitigated destruction and pillage … backwoods America turned the European into a barbarian’.

Decivilising processes on the frontier?
A central part of Turner’s thesis was that, over a long period, elements of the American population were returning to conditions of greater autarky, to much higher levels of danger in everyday life, and thus – in Norbert Elias’s terms – to a continuous source of decivilising pressures. To quote one of Elias’s most important obiter dicta,

the armour of civilised conduct would crumble very rapidly if, through a change in society, the degree of insecurity which existed earlier were to break in upon us again, and if danger became as incalculable as once it was. Corresponding fears would burst the limits set to them today. (2012: 576)

The pattern of people’s fears responds to changes in the dangers they face. Changes in people’s fears are in turn likely to be associated with wider changes in their typical behaviour, emotions and beliefs. Elias thinks of civilising processes as involving a change in the balance between external constraints and self-constraints, the balance tilting over the generations towards the latter in the steering of behaviour in the average person. ‘External’ constraints include both natural forces and constraints imposed by interdependence with other people. The lengthening chains and more extensive networks of interdependence, through which people exert more
demanding but more indirect constraints over each other, play a principal part in the tilting of
the balance. Now, if these chains break and the networks shrink as Turner contended they did
for people on the frontier – if people are ‘precipitated … into a kind of primitive organisation
based on the family’ – the pattern of external constraints will be changed.

It follows that the operation of self-constraints will not remain unchanged if changes
take place in the pattern of external constraints. There are two broad reasons for this. First,
calculation of the external constraints always plays a part in the steering of conduct, and if the
calculations suddenly or gradually yield different outcomes, behaviour will change. To put it
more directly, at the margin people’s behaviour will change if they discover they can get away
with pursuing their advantage in ways that were not worth the risk before. Secondly, however,
behaviour will change still more if the calculations become more difficult, if the changes become
more ‘incalculable’, if life is lived in face of greater uncertainty and unpredictability. It is quite
likely that the greater fears corresponding to higher levels of danger will produce in some people,
or perhaps eventually all, behaviour that may be described as ‘more emotional’ or ‘more
impulsive’, in which the gradually acquired apparatus of self-constraints is undermined. On the
face of it, many of these conditions would appear to have been met for white settlers on the
frontier. They lived in scattered homesteads in relatively self-sufficient small groups. They were
more at the mercy of natural forces – fire, flood, wild beasts – than they would be in a city. Far
from medical help, minor injuries and infections were more likely to be fatal. Violence from
human enemies, white or Indian, was a greater threat outside the daily beat of the forces of ‘law
and order’ within the boundaries of an organised state. Fears rise when control of natural forces
and social events declines. Rising fears make it still more difficult to control events, notably to
stand back from an escalating and self-perpetuating cycle of violence – such as that between
whites and Indians – and, through a detour via detachment, find the means to bring it under
control. That makes people still more susceptible to wish fantasies about means of alleviating the
situation.

But is all this true of what actually happened on the frontier?

Although Turner considered that the ‘primitive conditions’ of the frontier had left their
mark on the settlers, and that in turn had made a large imprint on American culture and (what
we would now call) habitus more widely, he did not perceive any general collapse of civilised
standards on the frontier. It was not a situation of ‘liminality’ in the extreme sense that Van
Gennep was to define some years after Turner wrote his essay: it was not the case that ‘ritually
and temporally all limits were removed [and] the very structure of society … suspended’.

Turner was correct. Decivilising pressures (in Elias’s terms) were always in tension with
quite strong civilising pressures too. One reason was that those who moved west were not *tabulae
rasae*; they had, by and large, been raised in more settled and (again in Elias’s technical sense)
more civilised circumstances. They took with them a vast inheritance of knowledge, beliefs and
feelings into which they had been socialised and enculturated in the more settled East (or
Europe). In most people, most of the time, this inheritance precluded any abrupt abandonment
of ‘civilised’ self-constraints in their – usually temporary – return to ‘primitive conditions’. A
second reason is that, although the first generation of their offspring might indeed be raised amidst
a relatively high and incalculable level of danger, the process of internal pacification of territory,
accomplished by the forces of the state together with economic development of many sorts was
rarely more than a generation behind the first settlers in their movement west.

The upshot is that the more lurid manifestations of what we might call ‘frontier decivilising
processes’ did not happen on the farming frontier, or certainly not widely or for very long. Ray
Allen Billington (1903–81), one of Turner’s most distinguished students, pointed out that most of
the settlers ‘had some wealth, for the frontier was no place for the penniless’.¹ Moreover, Billington
concluded that nearly all the settlers were determined to transfer the cultural institutions of their
homelands to their new communities and that, although most were people of small learning, most
pioneer settlements contained an educated group which assumed the functions of leadership.
Nevertheless, their ambitions were rarely fully attained, since every effort to create carbon copies of
eastern seaboard or European patterns of life was doomed by social and economic conditions on
the frontier. Reiterating the central point of Turner’s thesis, Billington contended that ‘Both these
environmental conditions and the determination of the pioneers to duplicate accustomed patterns
help to explain the unique western culture that did emerge’ (1977: 56).

On the other hand, in a fine study of surviving memoirs of fur-trappers at the extreme
forward edge of the traders’ frontier in the Rockies in the period 1825–45, Billington produces some
vivid evidence of their lowered threshold of repugnance in relation to eating, drinking, sex, violence
and cruelty (1977: 19–50). This appears to be the effect of adaptation to a situation of extreme
danger and the extreme measures necessary to survival. They faced the dangers of freezing winters
in the mountains, of grizzly bears and rattlesnakes, and (even though many of them took wives
from tribes such as the Crow) especially from hostile Indians.

The mountain men had to adjust themselves completely to the wilderness world

---

¹ For further detail on the costs of setting up a farm even on cheap land in the West in the mid nineteenth
century, see Billington (1967: 10).
about them. Their primitive existence revolved about three things: beaver, buffalo, and Indians – or, as they would have phrased it, fur, meat and ha’r, or their own scalps. To secure fur and meat, they had to risk their ha’r; to keep their ha’r, they had to develop forest skills superior to those of their principal antagonists, the Indians. Of the red men with whom the trappers carried on a constant battle, the Blackfeet of the Three Forks country were most feared; it was understood in the mountains that when a trapper saw a Blackfoot or a Blackfoot saw a trapper, shooting started at once. Yet even such friendly Indians as the Crows could never be completely trusted, for few could resist stealing a carelessly watched horse or pouncing on an unwary white man. Constant vigilance and superb skill were necessary just to stay alive in such a country. (1977: 27–8)

If the term ‘decivilising process’ is considered too contentious, an alternative way of describing what was happening would be to say that such men in such an environment had to re-acquire skills that would have been ‘second nature’, essential to survival, for all human beings in the long millennia when hunter-gatherer societies were the sole form of human social organisation, but which had since been lost to most people living in the commercial, agrarian and industrial society that the USA had become by the nineteenth century. The kind of constant vigilance needed to survive in the mountains was a polar opposite to the kind of vigilance that Elias depicts as necessary for social survival by aristocrats in French court society (Elias 2006a). Both situations demanded foresight, but for the courtier an extreme curbing of the impulses was necessary, whereas for the mountain trapper (more like the medieval warrior) a capacity for the unrestrained venting of impulses was essential. Billington speaks of the trapper Edward Rose, who had joined the Crow:

A fellow trapper saw Rose lead his tribesman to victory against a Blackfoot war party in 1834 then whip his followers into a bloody frenzy as they hacked off the hands of the wounded enemy warriors, pierced their bodies with pointed sticks, and plucked out their eyes. (Billington 1977: 29–30)

‘Liminality’ hardly seems the right word to describe what was happening here: such people appear, upon leaving the kind of society in which they had grown up, to have passed through a liminal zone, and then – instead of returning through ‘rites of re-aggregation’ – exited on the far
side of the zone into something quite foreign to their earlier experience.

These accounts date from a period when the trapping frontier was nearing its end. They describe an extreme situation. But in long-term perspective they are rather interesting. The extremes of violence and cruelty in combat that they depict are reminiscent of Elias’s (2012: 186–98) account of *Angriffslust* – the ‘joy in attacking’ – among early medieval warriors in Europe. And the element common to both of these otherwise very different times and places is the very high everyday level of danger. The ability to give unrestrained vent to aggression had survival value in both instances. Equally, it became a liability on the more complex battlefields on which organised armies came to fight.

**The frontier as continuing state formation**

The classic status of ‘The significance of the Frontier’ and the other writings in which Turner elaborated his thesis is beyond dispute, although the ‘frontier hypothesis’ has remained the subject of controversy among historians for more than a century. Until the 1920s it was the dominant interpretation of American social development. Then, in the 1930s and 1940s, it was the target of extensive criticism. After a period of more evenly balanced debate and detailed research to test particular aspects of the original hypothesis, controversy flared up again in the 1980s, notably following the publication of Patricia Nelson Limerick’s brilliant book *The Legacy of Conquest* (1987).

Limerick began by very cogently undermining the image of the self-reliant and individually responsible pioneer, at any rate on the farming frontier. Even the dietary self-sufficiency of settlers had been greatly exaggerated: *The Legacy of Conquest* opens by citing the recollections of a Virginian woman, Nannie Alderson, who married and went to live in Wyoming in the 1880s. She remembered that ‘everyone lived out of cans’, and outside every farm in the 1880s stood a great mound of empty food cans, steadily growing from year to year (1987: 17). The consumption of canned food is evidence of the long chains of interdependence stretching back east (although the fact that the garbage collectors never called is a reminder that differences remained between life in west and east). Limerick also showed vividly how the supposedly self-reliant pioneers fell into the habit of blaming everyone but themselves when things went wrong. Farmers encroached on areas of semi-aridity, and felt betrayed when rains proved inadequate. Mechanised farming caused dustbowls. Where crops did not grow, weeds were introduced that did. The promoters of farming or mining on the frontier were often blamed for failure. Increasingly, so was the federal government: ‘In effect’, she writes, ‘Westerners centralised their resentments much more effectively than the federal government centralised its powers’ (1987: 44).
The rhetoric of heroic independence, says Limerick, has begun to sound anachronistic in our own complex times of global interdependence – but in fact ‘the times were always complex’. ‘There is nothing wrong with human interdependence’, she wrote in words reminiscent of Norbert Elias, ‘it is … a fact of life’ (1987: 78).

A recognition that one is not the sole captain of one’s fate is hardly an occasion for surprise. Especially in the American West, where the federal government, outside capital, and the market have always been powerful factors of change, the limits on personal autonomy do not seem like news. And yet humans have a well-established capacity to meet fact of life with disbelief. In a region where human interdependence has been self-evident, Westerners have woven a net of denial. (1987: 95–6)

Nowhere is the denial more evident than in what Limerick called ‘the idea of innocence’. One of the virtues of the ‘new Western history’ has been its capacity to deal with multiple points of view. And a characteristic of the ‘white’ point of view has been blindness to motives other than the most innocent. The dominant motives are seen as improvement and opportunity rather than to ‘ruin the natives and despoil the continent’:

personal interest in the acquisition of property coincided with national interest in the acquisition of territory, and those interests overlapped in turn with the mission to extend the domain of Christian civilisation. Innocence of intention placed the course of events in a bright and positive light … (Limerick, 1987: 36)

It is impossible to resist the parallel between the frontier story in the nineteenth century and the formation of the American Empire in the twentieth century. The ‘idea of innocence’ was deployed on all fronts, no matter how many natives were ruined and continents despoiled. So – as we saw once more after the attacks on New York and Washington on 9 September 2001 (Mennell 2007: 23–5) – was the idea of ‘civilisation’ in all its uncritical nineteenth-century European glory. Charles Jones (2007) has offered a corrective to these myths, arguing that the USA is a lot more like Latin American and a lot less like Western Europe than we are accustomed to think. To simplify a complex argument, Jones suggests that the USA and its hemispheric neighbours to the south share a number of historical experiences that give their societies certain common features and set them to some extent apart from Western Europe.
These include the legacy of conquest and of slavery (both of which have contributed to race and racism as salient traits), marked religiosity, and relatively high rates of violence. We may add a rapacious attitude to natural resources, born of the abundance that confronted settlers.

Turner and the Turnerians undoubtedly wrote their history too much from the point of view of ‘progress’ – the impact of white settlers with apparently innocent motives. It is a valuable corrective to see the process from multiple points of view, and Limerick portrays the West as not so much an advancing line of settlement along which ‘civilisation’ overcame ‘savagery’, but rather as a borderland where there was continuing cultural contact and assimilation between English-speaking Americans, the Indians, and Hispanic elements. The latter, a strong element in the history of the southwest, were especially invisible in Turner’s original essay. Limerick went too far, however, for she rejected Turner’s entire notion of the frontier process, seemingly because she believed that it – or indeed any notion of developmental process – was inseparable from outdated notions of ‘progress’ and of ‘civilisation’ versus ‘savagery’. That is to throw the baby out with the bathwater. From an Eliasian point of view one of the great virtues of Turner’s thesis – whatever its defects – was that it was very much cast in processual terms. Limerick has been criticised for portraying an almost static image of an unchanging West of timeless borderlands (Adelman and Aron 1999). That is paradoxical, for the title of her book was The Legacy of Conquest, and conquest itself is a social process. Limerick, as she herself admits, took her clues from the present, just as Turner did from his own time (1987: 31). The problem with writing history from the standpoint of whatever happen to be the dominant values of the day is that it leads to moralising, and moralising reduces the shelf life of the product (Elias 2006: 33–4). Conquest – the acquisition of territory by force – is morally less palatable to people at the turn of the twenty-first century than it was a century or two earlier, let alone in the Middle Ages. But understanding conquest as a structured social process that has occurred constantly, at least since the beginnings of agriculture about twelve thousand years ago – to the accompaniment of bloodletting that is repulsive to Western people nowadays (Goudsblom, 1996) – is not assisted by viewing it through the lens of moral judgments that have emerged relatively recently.

Whatever happened through the mingling of cultures, what certainly did advance was a line of effective American conquest. The frontier process was a process of continuing state formation, using the term in its Weberian and Eliasian sense rather than in the constitutional sense of the admission of new states to the Union. Much of what is glimpsed through a silver screen darkly is in effect a folk memory of a process of internal pacification that was unfolding in the West in the decades after the Civil War. Richard Maxwell Brown (1991: 41) sets the cowboy era of the post-bellum Wild West in context as a ‘Western Civil War of Incorporation’. From the Hollywood
image, it would be difficult to see that anything more was involved than many local quarrels between gunslingers. Brown, however, argues that America was a strongly politicised nation after 1860, and the political and ideological allegiances of the gunmen were important. Many of them strongly identified with the Union or the Confederacy, with the Republicans or the Democrats. Brown distinguishes between ‘incorporation’ and ‘resister’ gunfighters. Examples of the former are Wild Bill Hickok and Wyatt Earp, and among the latter was John Wesley Hardin. The process of incorporation ‘resulted in what should at last be recognised as a civil war across the entire expanse of the West – one fought in many places and on many fronts in almost all Western territories and states from the 1860s and beyond 1900 into the 1910s’ (1991: 44). The Western Civil War of Incorporation comprised several different kinds of conflict besides this echo of the Civil War in the more familiar sense. Apart from the insurgent Indians, gradually forced by military pressure and economic encroachment into reservations, the process impinged on the traditional ways of life and livelihood of the Hispanos of the Southwest, who hit back through the activities of bandidos. Moreover, in the mines, mills and logging camps on what Brown calls the ‘wageworkers’ frontier’ of the West, conflicts between corporate industrialists and workers often resulted in strikes that culminated in violence between trade unionists and paramilitary and military forces. Government usually brought its growing strength to bear on the side of capitalism.

What, then, remains of Turner’s celebrated frontier thesis? Even his ‘sharpest critics have rarely failed to concede the core of merit to his thesis’, said Richard Hofstadter (1969: 119), and that has remained so in the most recent phase of the debate. And whatever its merits in the detailed academic historiography of expansion from the Appalachians to the Rockies and the Pacific, the frontier has, for better or worse, played a far from negligible role as a key myth of American life.

The Western myth as a form of romanticism

The long-lasting appeal of the frontier (Slotkin 1973, 1985, 1992), and its apparently greater significance for those who came later than for those who lived through it, may make sense if it is seen as one instance of a romanticism associated with the tightening of social constraints. Elias wrote at length (2006: 230–85) about ‘aristocratic romanticism’ in sixteenth to eighteenth-century France. Why did poetry evoking a past rural idyll, tales of wandering knights, and novels about nymphs and shepherds, appeal strongly to members of a court society? The feeling of estrangement from the land, of being torn from their native soil, and of longing for a vanished
world resonated with their actual experience: the growing and more effective power of the central royal government stripped all the nobility of their former territorial autonomy, and for the upper ranks their existence now centred on life at court, with its intense constraints. They had been deracinated and deprived of their former social functions. Another example is the German bourgeois romanticism of the nineteenth century, reaching its pinnacle in the Wagner’s music dramas. In Lohengrin, Tannhäuser, Tristan, and Parsifal there is again the glorification of medieval knighthood, and in Die Meistersinger of the free, autonomous medieval guilds. Again, this phase of romanticism arose precisely when the German bourgeoisie’s hopes of a greater share of power had been broken and the pressures of state integration in conjunction with those of industrialisation were increasing. It is, in other words, one of the central symptoms of romantic attitudes and ideals that their representatives see the present only as a decline from the past, and the future – as far as they see the future at all – only as the restoration of a better, purer, idealised past. (Elias, 2006: 238)

It is no accident that, on a lower plane of cultural creation than Wagner, the Wild West novels of Karl May were immensely popular in late nineteenth-century Germany (Ridley 1983: 30–41). In America itself, the beginnings of romanticism can be seen in Jefferson’s hatred of the cities and dream of an agrarian republic (White and White 1962). But, if Elias’s interpretation of romanticism is valid, the social basis of the appeal of the myth of the frontier may better be sought – as well as in the more pacified and administered West after the closing of the frontier – in the vast migration into the fast-growing cities and in the imposition of industrial and bureaucratic discipline.

Conclusion

I have tentatively suggested that the long-discussed story of the American western frontier can in certain respects be viewed as a complex phase of liminality. The whole point of such episodes, however, is that they change things. People do not emerge from them unchanged. Liminality has lasting consequences, and the experience of the frontier is no exception.

One major consequence of the frontier – and of its associated myths – was the American Empire. It was not an accident that the ‘closing’ of the internal frontier was followed smoothly
and immediately by the acquisition of the first United States Empire in 1899 (Zimmerman 2002), from the war with Spain and with the annexation of Hawaii (among other territories) seen as essential for the security of American trade routes, and as part of the wider struggles among the world powers of the time. The United States invaded the Philippines, with British support – the American fleet sailed from Hong Kong – because both powers feared that either Germany or Japan would do so if the USA did not. About the acquisition of the second and larger United States Empire after the Second World War it is not necessary to say very much. But one point is important: Americans’ mythic belief in their essential character as a force for good in the world, with the myth of Western ‘civilisation’ triumphing over barbarism, has continued to play an essential part.

The myth is sustained by the central historical experience of Americans, and experience that has left its mark upon the national habitus more than many other factors that are more often discussed: the experience that from the very earliest European settlements until the present era, the USA has steadily become more powerful vis-à-vis its neighbours. The most dramatic recent phase of this process was the end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989–91. It has been argued that, as long as the Cold War continued, Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) served as a functional alternative to a world state, providing a highly stable equivalent to a world monopoly of violence (Van Benthem van den Bergh, 1992, 2008). When that source of external constraint upon the USA diminished, there was at first only intellectual triumphalism, such as Fukuyama’s infamous ‘end of history’ thesis (1992). I would argue that the (urban) myth of the frontier played, at a deep and unconscious level, a part in sustaining that sense of triumph and of national mission. It also buttresses the pernicious assumption that America is axiomatically a force for good in the world, and therefore whatever it does represents the same ‘manifest destiny’ as westward expansion once did. In the course of the 1990s and the early 2000s, the USA might be said to have entered another liminal phase. American governments – rather like individual people from early childhood onwards – began to explore the limits of what they could get away with, and the result was the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The result of that, and of the financial collapse that began in 2008, is that the USA – virtually for the first time in its history – is entering a phase when power ratios between it and other major players in world affairs are becoming more equal, not less. It will be interesting to see – probably over many decades – what effect that will have on the myth of the frontier and associated elements in the national self-image.
Bibliography


In the 1840s, America was struck with the idea of manifest destiny: the belief that the country should span from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. Two areas stood in America's way of achieving this: the Oregon Territory which was occupied by both Great Britain and the US and western and southwestern lands which were owned by Mexico. Early in 1846, President Polk sent General Zachary Taylor and American troops to protect the disputed area between the two rivers. On April 25, 1846, a Mexican cavalry unit of 2000 men crossed the Rio Grande and ambushed an American unit of 70 men led by Captain Seth Thornton. Sixteen men were killed, and five were injured. 50 men were taken prisoner. Polk took this as an opportunity to ask Congress to declare war against Mexico.