Turnerians All: The Dream of a Helpful History in an Intelligible World

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> I prefer to believe that man is greater than the dangers that menace him; that education and science are powerful forces to change these tendencies and to produce a rational solution of the problems of life on a shrinking planet.
>
> Frederick Jackson Turner, 1924[1]

WHEN YOU ENTER AN ESSAY by Frederick Jackson Turner, you enter an enchanted world. In this world, abstractions are tangible and virtually animate, right on the verge of speaking for themselves. Conditions, forces, ideals, institutions, traits, types, elements, and processes inhabit the Turnerian world like the weightiest and most settled of citizens. If you bump into a social force or a pioneer ideal, it will be you who gets the bruise. You can, of course, try to refuse the impact. "Neither a 'social force' nor a 'pioneer ideal,' " you can declare, with accuracy on your side, "is a real thing. Both are intellectual constructions. Neither should have the power to bruise."

As they have for nearly a century, Turner's conditions, forces, ideals, institutions, traits, types, elements, and processes remain undissolved by such a challenge. You are free to show, at length and in detail, that these concepts exist without the support of much evidence. You will still have to walk around them. After a century of holding their ground, they are not going to disappear in response to the latest frail protest against their power.

Most enduring of all his hardy mental constructions, Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis entered its second century in remarkably good shape. First presented in 1893 as "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," the longevity of the Frontier Thesis has made it a historic relic itself, an important and instructive artifact of the American past. When John Mack Faragher referred to Turner's 1893 essay as "the classic expression of the 'frontier thesis,' " his phrasing called to mind the special provisions many states offer to owners of old cars.[2] At a certain vintage, aged automobiles receive the title of "classic" and gain an exemption from emissions tests. In a similar manner, the Frontier Thesis has become a classic, exempted from the usual tests of verification, evidence, and accuracy. While other historical models are stopped and inspected at every

[1] Frederick Jackson Turner, "Since the Foundation [of Clark University]," in Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of Sections in American History* (1932; rpt. edn., Gloucester, Mass., 1959), 234.

[2] *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: The Significance of the Frontier in American History and Other Essays*, with commentary by John Mack Faragher (New York, 1994), 1.

checkpoint and at many sites in between, the Frontier Thesis operates with a different license entirely.

If one doubts the staying power of this historic model, one has only to remember that it did not lose momentum despite a devastating set of critiques in the 1930s and 1940s.[3] Perhaps most remarkably, the Frontier Thesis kept running even when it collided with the full force of Richard Hofstadter's critical intelligence, in his book *The Progressive Historians*, in 1968. When Hofstadter was through with it, if the outcome had been governed by the usual set of historiographic rules, the Thesis would have been finished. Consider just a few items from Hofstadter's catalog of the significant elements of westward expansion that received little or none of Turner's attention in the Thesis:

> the careless, wasteful, and exploitative methods of American agriculture; . . . the general waste of resources and the desecration of natural beauty; the failure of the free lands to produce a society free of landless laborers and tenants . . . ; the rapacity and meanness so often to be found in the petty capitalism of the new towns; . . . the crudeness and disorder, the readiness to commit and willingness to tolerate violence; the frequent ruthlessness of the frontier mind, to which Indians, Spaniards, and Mexicans could testify and which had its repeated reverberations in national policies; the arrogant, flimsy, and self-righteous justifications of Manifest Destiny engendered by American expansionism.[4]

A model so riddled with holes could explain only a fraction of the "frontier" story, and Hofstadter did not hold back in sketching the scale of these omissions. Characteristic of his bluntness and refusal to pull punches was his appraisal of Turner's casting of Thomas Jefferson as a typical, democratic product of the frontier. "[A]lmost everything Turner says about Jefferson," Hofstadter wrote, "is either badly nuanced, a misleading half truth, or flatly wrong."[5] After 1968 and the publication of Hofstadter's *Progressive Historians*, there was every reason to recognize that Turner's Frontier Thesis existed in its own bewitched historiographical space, a zone in which critiques and contradictory evidence instantly lost power and force. Fighting the thesis was like fighting the Pillsbury Dough Boy; it bent momentarily to absorb challenges and then instantly resumed its previous shape.

A greater awareness of my predecessors' experience with this less-than-satisfying combat could have saved me considerable time and trouble. Ten years ago, I was convinced that the revitalization of western American history began with the recognition that the Frontier Thesis had become entirely irrelevant to the history of the Trans-Mississippi West.[6] But this campaign to reenergize western history turned out to yield a wonderfully ironic side effect. The New Western History's campaign to declare Turner irrelevant revitalized Turner's reputation. It resulted

[3] Stephen C. Sturgeon, "Where Seldom Is Heard a Discouraging Word: The Failure of the First Anti-Turner Rebellion, 1930–1945," unpublished manuscript.

[4] Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington* (New York, 1968), 147–48.

[5] Hofstadter, *Progressive Historians*, 133. See also Richard Hofstader, "Turner and the Frontier Myth," *American Scholar*, 18 (1949): 433–43.

[6] Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York, 1987); Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde A. Milner II, and Charles E. Rankin, eds., *Trails: Toward a New Western History* (Lawrence, Kan., 1991); Richard White, *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A History of the American West* (Norman, Okla., 1991); James R. Grossman, ed., *The Frontier in American Culture: Essays by Richard White and Patricia Nelson Limerick* (Berkeley, Calif., 1994).

in the name "Frederick Jackson Turner" being featured in stories in the *Washington Post,* the *New York Times, U. S. News & World Report,* the *New Republic,* and many other newspapers and magazines. It restored his celebrity. It allowed his followers and supporters to say that his argument in "The Significance of the Frontier" must be very worthwhile and important if it was still worth attacking a century later. The more forcefully one said that Turner was wrong, the more one provided in the way of well-publicized opportunities for his admirers to praise him.

If one might put this in Turnerian terms, a person who found herself placed in an environment so saturated with irony was a person who had two choices: to adapt to that environment and develop the appropriate traits for survival or to retreat to a less challenging environment. The traits of successful adaptation, in this case, were not the pioneer traits of individualism and self-reliance but the post-pioneer traits of a sense of humor and a willingness to reappraise one's relationship to Turner. The sense of humor was surprisingly easy to come by; only the congenitally humorless could have failed to be amused by the late twentieth-century dynamics of Turner's restored visibility. Without the occasion of the *American Historical Review*'s centennial, however, one could have controlled one's impulse to rethink one's assumptions and reexamine the patriarch. Given Frederick Jackson Turner's omnipresence in the early issues of the *AHR* and his central role in the shaping of the historical profession in the United States, reassessing his work became both an obligation and an opportunity. In this project, recent squabbles over the appraisal of western American history become blessedly insignificant. The issue becomes, instead, the much more consequential one of Turner's demonstration of the perils and privileges of being a historian. Central to that demonstration is this mystifying fact: in a century of challenges to the 1893 thesis, no historian put forth a more telling challenge than did Frederick Jackson Turner himself.

THE AUTHOR OF THE FRONTIER THESIS, in other words, was also the author of the Frontier Antithesis. The two bodies of ideas came with a considerable difference in form of presentation: the Thesis appeared in one dedicated essay, while the Antithesis appeared in scattered sentences and paragraphs in essays written and published before and after 1893. It is a telling fact that Turner never brought the Antithesis together into one essay; in truth, he never remarked on how thoroughly his own reflections elsewhere had eaten the ground out from under his Thesis of 1893. And yet, if one brings together these dispersed remarks, the results reveal the clear outline of a forceful Frontier Antithesis.

An appreciation of the Frontier Antithesis requires a brief review of the characteristics of the Thesis itself. In casting the frontier as the most important factor forming American character and democracy, the 1893 essay paid little attention to Indians. It stressed the individualism and self-reliance of the pioneer and had correspondingly little to say about federal aid to expansion. It concentrated on the history of the humid Middle West to the neglect of the arid West beyond the 100th meridian. Perhaps most consequentially, it provided support for

models of American exceptionalism by emphasizing the uniqueness of the American frontier experience. The following paragraphs, a composite of direct quotations with a few interludes of paraphrasing, present Turner's challenges to his own claims from 1893.

The Frontier Antithesis by Frederick Jackson Turner

with the assistance of Patricia Nelson Limerick

In the history of Indians lies fresh and important territory for exploration. Scholars are now uncovering "evidences of the rise and fall of Indian cultures, the migrations . . . , hinted at in legends and languages, dimly told in the records of mounds and artifacts, but waiting still for complete interpretation." As one indication of the natives' importance, in various areas of North America, "the Indians had burned over large tracts," creating a new landscape before European arrival. The patterns of trade between and among Indians shaped the fur trade between whites and Indians. "It was on the foundation, therefore, of an extensive intertribal trade that the white man built up the forest commerce." "Another set of problems which need study is to be found in the effect of the Indian on our political institutions." "There is needed a study of our relations to the American Indian" because this topic "is an exceedingly important one in the history of American development, and one from which rich results may be expected." "The native populations have . . . been determining factors in our development."[7]

In the Trans-Mississippi West, "the systematic slaughter of millions of buffalo . . . destroyed the economic foundation of the Indians. Henceforth they were dependent on the whites for their food supply." The Far West offered compelling evidence that the pioneers, like the Indians, found themselves in a state of dependence. When "the arid lands and the mineral resources of the Far West were reached, no conquest was possible by the old individual pioneer methods. Here expensive irrigation works must be constructed, cooperative activity was demanded in utilization of the water supply, capital beyond the reach of the small farmer was required." Individual effort and enterprise were no longer sufficient; thus "the West has been built up with borrowed capital." "Railroads, fostered by government loans and land grants, opened the way for settlement . . . ; [t]he army of the United States pushed back the Indian, rectangular Territories were carved into checkerboard States." States such as these did not arise from the usual evolutionary processes of frontier democracy; they were, instead, sudden "creations of the federal government." In many ways, "the later frontiersman leaned on the strong arm of national power." Most recently, "the government has taken to itself great areas of arid land for reclamation by costly irrigation projects . . . The government supplies the capital for huge irrigation dams and reservoirs and builds them itself." "By the conditions on which [the federal government] disposes of the land and water privileges, it preserves a parental control over the social and economic conditions of the section." In these circumstances, "the pioneer of the arid regions must be both a capitalist and the protege of the government," "adjust[ing] his life to the modern forces of capital and to complex productive processes."[8]

[7] Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Mississippi Valley in American History," in *The Frontier in American History* (1920; Tucson, Ariz., 1986), 179, 89; "The Indian Trade in Wisconsin," in *The Early Writings of Frederick Jackson Turner*, Everett E. Edwards, comp. (Madison, Wis., 1938), 93; "Problems in American History" (1892), in *Early Writings*, 77; "Problems in American History" (1904), in *Significance of Sections*, 18; "Problems in American History," *Early Writings*, 75–76.

[8] Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Middle West," in *Frontier*, 144; "Contributions of the West to

In the Trans-Mississippi West and elsewhere, international forces were clearly at work in shaping the frontier process. American history was clearly shaped by "world-wide forces of reorganization incident to the age of steam production and large-scale industry." In this case and many others, "ideas, commodities even, refuse the bounds of a nation. All are inextricably connected, so that each is needed to explain the others." Despite the claims of antiquarians, "local history can only be understood in the light of the history of the world." The historian is thus obliged to push his inquiries beyond national boundaries. "If, with our own methods of the occupation of the frontier, we should compare those of other countries which have dealt with similar problems—such as Russia, Germany, and the English colonies in Canada, Australia, and Africa—we should undoubtedly find most fruitful results."[9]

In comparison with the assertive style of the 1893 frontier essay, a number of these remarks may sound tentative—less assertions than calls for new studies and new approaches, really more an *invitation* to an Antithesis than a presentation of the Antithesis itself. And yet each proposition shines a bright light on a central weakness in the 1893 Thesis. In the attention to Indians, to federal involvement in western expansion, to the factor of aridity, and to the desirability of a comparative history that avoided the trap of national exceptionalism, the Turnerian Antithesis anticipated many of the major objections to the Thesis.

Thus the mystery: if Turner had, on his own, identified many of the principal flaws in his earlier position, why did he not say so directly? It would have been a simple matter, and to many an impressive and graceful gesture, to write a later statement like this: "In 1893," he could have said, "nine years before the passage of the Newlands Reclamation Act, I simply did not foresee the expansion of federally subsidized, irrigated agriculture. This, along with my preoccupation with the well-watered Middle West and my personal enthusiasm for the character traits of the frontiersman, led me to underestimate the role of the federal government in western development, and to underestimate, as well, the differences between the frontier process as it worked in the Mississippi Valley and as it worked in the Far West."

The reflective essay was Turner's favorite genre, and retrospect and reappraisal have always been compatible with that literary form. Turner had, moreover, laid the groundwork for this kind of reconsideration. "Generalizations . . . upon the West as a whole," Turner once wrote in a statement that seemed to leave wide maneuvering room for hindsight, "are apt to be misleading."[10] In a habit still very much in evidence among present-day practitioners of his profession, Turner built into many of his articles a number of declarations of modesty, tentativeness, and incompleteness: "Within the limits of this article, treatment of so vast a region, however, can at best afford no more than an outline sketch."[11] "I have not the

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American Democracy," in *Frontier*, 258; "The Problem of the West," in *Frontier*, 219, 218; "Pioneer Ideals and the State University," in *Frontier*, 278; "Is Sectionalism Dying Away?" in *Significance of Sections*, 310; "Pioneer Ideals," in *Frontier*, 279, 276.

[9] Frederick Jackson Turner, "Social Forces in American History," *AHR*, 16 (January 1911): 217; "The Significance of History," in *Early Writings*, 57; "Problems in American History," in *Significance of Sections*, 18–19.

[10] Frederick Jackson Turner, "The West—1876 and 1926," in *Significance of Sections*, 236.

[11] Turner, "Middle West," in *Frontier*, 127.

temerity to attempt a history of the [Ohio] Valley in the brief compass of this address. Nor am I confident of my ability even to pick out the more important features of its history in our common national life."[12] And, from the 1893 frontier essay, a firm declaration of its own limits: "This paper will make no attempt to treat the subject exhaustively; its aim is simply to call attention to the frontier as a fertile field for investigation and to suggest some of the problems which arise in connection with it."[13] In theory, these statements left their author a free man, free to reconsider and even free to confess error and second thoughts. Since he had never claimed to have figured everything out, Turner was fully licensed to rethink, reappraise, reconsider, and revise his earlier assertions.

In an essay called "The Old West," Turner made the most handsome and quotable of his humble disclaimers: "The present paper," he wrote, "is rather a reconnaissance than a conquest of the field."[14] The conqueror has to hold his ground and cannot retreat; the man conducting a reconnaissance can always go back, gain new information, and add to or modify the first impressions recorded in his initial report. The passage of time offered this particular historical explorer many chances to rethink his earlier impressions. There were opportunities beyond counting for the older Turner to engage in an instructive dialogue with the younger Turner. And yet, except in the brief and indirect suggestions of the Frontier Antithesis, Turner consistently refused those opportunities.

Why? Here we return to Turner's standing as the representative historian, a central player in the routinizing and professionalizing of the academic historian's activities. Turner's life, Richard White has reminded us, is remarkable for the very elements that now make it seem "commonplace." In a time in which professional roles were becoming defined and institutionalized, "Turner was an academic historian of middle-class origins and progressive sympathies whose professional career centered on university teaching." White's characterization underplays the degree to which Turner felt himself obligated to speak to public audiences; by Turner's definition of the role, neither the historian nor his ideas were to be locked up within the university. And yet, with a broadened definition of the historian's role, White is right in observing that Turner "never seemed to have aspired to be anything more than a professional historian and a university professor."[15]

Reading this sentence evokes an unexpected chord of solidarity. Who, one surprises oneself by thinking, would aspire to more? The ambition to be a professional historian and a university professor seems, to a surprising number of people in the 1990s, still to be an appealing and compelling goal. A walk through the mass interviewing area at the American Historical Association meetings will verify how "commonplace" Turner's once-novel ambitions have become.

[12] Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Ohio Valley in American History," in *Frontier*, 160.

[13] Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *Frontier*, 3.

[14] Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Old West," in *Frontier*, 69.

[15] Richard White, "Frederick Jackson Turner," in John R. Wunder, ed., *Historians of the American Frontier: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook* (New York, 1988), 660. White draws this characterization from the telling description of Turner's role in the professionalization of history in Ray Allen Billington, *Frederick Jackson Turner: Historian, Scholar, Teacher* (New York, 1973).

SINCE TURNER WAS, GENUINELY, A FOUNDING FATHER of the profession, the patterns of his life, the workings of his mind, and, especially, the pressures and mandates of his ambition carry lessons far beyond the individual. As a young man, Turner wanted to make an impact. Ray Allen Billington's biography as well as Allan G. Bogue's forthcoming biography make it clear that Turner, as a young man, actively solicited and pursued opportunity and recognition. As John Mack Faragher notes, when the frontier essay appeared in print in 1894, Turner "purchased hundreds of offprints and distributed them widely, not only to colleagues and associates but also to prominent members of the national intellectual elite—a practice he followed with all his publications."[16]

When all those offprints paid off and the Frontier Thesis finally became a pillar—some would say *the* pillar—of American history, Turner was triumphant. But he was also trapped: trapped, in part, by a host of impossible book-writing obligations brought to him by the success of the frontier essay, but also trapped by the fact that his career and status now rested on his identification with the 1893 thesis. In a letter in 1919, he referred to the relief he felt upon learning that another historian (who happened to be Woodrow Wilson) made no claims to the origins of the Frontier Thesis. It would have been "unpleasant," Turner said, "to contend for the parentage of my intellectual firstborn, dear as it is to me, and much as it means for my reputation."[17]

The phrase "much as it means for my reputation" captures the problem. Turner had wanted very much to succeed, and the favorable reception of the Frontier Thesis was a key part of that strategy for success. Its good standing brought many benefits: the presidency of the American Historical Association, a position at Harvard, many followers and devotees, and a happy package of status, prestige, visibility, and name recognition. But the price of success, it turned out, was a significant one: a surrender of the spirit of open-ended inquiry and forceful assertion that had clearly provided Turner with great satisfaction and pleasure as a young man.

The Originator of the Frontier Thesis had evolved into the Defender of the Frontier Thesis, and defending would offer little of the fun and adventure that came with originating.[18] One of the pleasures now off-limits to Turner was that of pointing out the short-sightedness and mistaken preoccupations of established authority in American history. When one *was* the established authority in one's field, the pleasures of rebellion were considerably diminished. Turner could not frankly discuss the flaws of the 1893 essay because it formed the foundation of his career, his prestige, and his sense of personal achievement.

His choice not to do so set a precedent from which the profession has never fully broken free. Turner was a historian of great influence, and a graceful and dignified reappraisal of his earlier claims would have set a precedent of great

[16] Faragher, *Rereading Turner*, 3.

[17] Frederick Jackson Turner to William E. Dodd, October 7, 1919, in Ray Allen Billington, ed., *The Genesis of the Frontier Thesis: A Study in Historical Creativity* (San Marino, Calif., 1971), 190.

[18] The use of the word "originating" here should not be understood as an assertion of the Turner Thesis's "originality" as a cultural artifact. For what remains the best survey of the ways in which Turner incorporated preexisting ideas, see Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Mass., 1950).

value. At a time when the conventions, requirements, rituals, and traditions of being a historian were still fluid and up for definition, his decision to withhold public reconsideration was a consequential one.

Given Turner's repeated declarations that our understanding of the past must adapt to changes in the present, it was also a deeply ironic choice. In 1891, Turner had published an essay called "The Significance of History," a forceful and earnest declaration of the unbreakable tie between past and present. In a sentence he himself underscored, Turner declared his faith in presentism: "*Each age writes the history of the past anew with reference to the conditions uppermost in its own time.*"

> The aim of history, then, is to know the elements of the present by understanding what came into the present from the past. For the present is simply the developing past, the past the undeveloped present . . . The antiquarian strives to bring back the past for the sake of the past; the historian strives to show the present to itself by revealing its origins from the past. The goal of the antiquarian is the dead past; the goal of the historian is the living present.[19]

The true Turnerians, one could conclude from this memorable passage, were the historians who paid attention to, and put into practice, Turner's 1891 declaration of the need for writers of history to rethink and revise. The "Turnerians" who stayed loyal, instead, to the 1893 Frontier Thesis observed the letter and defied the spirit of Turnerian history. But there was the puzzle again: by this categorization, Turner was both true Turnerian and so-called Turnerian, at once a person paying attention to his times, insisting that historical models must be constantly remodeled in response to changing conditions, and a person repeating old formulae that could no longer fit those changing times.

"What endures" in Turner's legacy, John Mack Faragher has argued, "is Turner's commitment to contemporary knowledge, his understanding that debates about the past are always simultaneously debates about the present. It marks him as America's first truly modern historian."[20] It marks him, in addition, as an innocent. Orienting a historical inquiry in terms of the present, Turner assumed in 1891, added clarity to one's understanding. One could, the theory went, get a grasp on the fundamental patterns of one's own times. Figuring out the present was an undertaking much like reading the last pages of a novel; one checked to see how the plot one had been following in the earlier pages finally turned out. In examining events in one's time, one applied the same kind of pattern-finding to the present that one applied to the past; and, when one had identified the outcome, or the past's product, one was in a much improved position to trace and understand the whole story, primarily because one could now identify the path of significant change, distinguishing the consequential events from the inconsequential. It was as clear and linear a matter as if the movement from the past to the present were a railroad track. Once one had identified and inspected the point of arrival, it was an easy matter to follow the track back to its origin.

[19] Turner, "Significance of History," in *Early Writings*, 52–53. William Cronon, "Turner's First Stand: The Significance of Significance in American History," in Richard Etulain, ed., *Writing Western History: Essays on Major Western Historians* (Albuquerque, N.Mex., 1991), offers the best discussion of Turner's essay "The Significance of History."

[20] Faragher, *Rereading Turner*, 4.

But what if this destination proved difficult to identify? What if the present proved unintelligible, turning out to be even more confusing than the past? Here is where Turner's experience becomes most instructive for his successors in this profession. For reasons that every historian can empathize with, Turner betrayed the doctrine of presentism, and, in turn, the doctrine of presentism betrayed him.

How did he betray it? Like all beliefs, presentism confronts its believers with an irritating challenge: once one has declared one's faith, one is supposed to practice it. That seems easy enough, until the passage of time complicates matters. In 1891, at age thirty-one, Turner recorded his faith in presentism. In 1910, at age fifty, in his Presidential Address to the American Historical Association, he reconfirmed his 1891 declaration, but he referred now to "the familiar doctrine that each age studies its history anew and with interests determined by the spirit of the time."[21] The very phrase "familiar doctrine" should have been its own warning; "familiar doctrine" was, by definition, unlikely to represent a full reckoning with the cutting edge of the present.

In 1891, Turner had been a Young Turk, full of vigor, ready to challenge the powers-that-be. In 1910, he was president of the American Historical Association, fighting off the challenges of the next cycle's crop of Young Turks, themselves now ready to challenge the powers-of-which-Turner-had-become-one. "*Each age writes the history of the past anew, with reference to conditions uppermost in its own time,*" and 1910 clearly offered a different set of conditions from 1893. It was time for a vigorous reappraisal of the 1893 Frontier Thesis, or so one might have thought if one were not oneself the author of that much-admired and frequently cited "familiar doctrine."

Like many rebels done in by the success of their rebellion, the middle-aged Turner reneged on the proclamations of freshness and innovation he had made as a young man. But this was a two-way betrayal: if Turner had betrayed his declaration of faith in presentism, presentism had also betrayed him. The present, remember, was supposed to illuminate the past, not befog it; the present was supposed to help the historian's undertaking, not frustrate and obstruct it. The present, however, broke its half of the agreement by proving to be of no help at all in understanding the past. In the first decades of the twentieth century, the present was turning out to be *more* confusing than the past. If one could not figure out the present, and if one's project of explaining the past required one to identify the outcome that the past would then explain, then one had landed, definitively, in a muddle.

Turner knew a lot about the present; he had fulfilled his half of the bargain by keeping up with current events. In the pieces and parts of his Frontier Antithesis, Turner referred to post-1890 booms in petroleum, coal, copper, and irrigation, to the concentration of capital, and to capital's struggles with labor in the early twentieth-century West. A presentation in 1924 gave an impressive demonstration of his success in keeping up. Speaking at Clark University, Turner gave an overview of the thirty-five years since Clark's founding. "Few epochs in history," he

[21] Turner, "Social Forces," *AHR*, 225.

said, "have included such startling changes within a single generation as that between the [1880s] and the present." He called attention to the impact of the movies and radio, of the automobile and the airplane. He remarked on the change in women's work roles produced by the introduction of the typewriter to offices. He mentioned with concern the American distribution of wealth: 2 percent of the population owning three-fifths of the property, a fact that was "food for reflection on the outcome of the pioneer democracy that sought equality as well as opportunity in the American wilderness." Turner referred to revolutions in scientific understanding, mentioning the Einsteinian revolution of relativity and the exploration of the atom. He noted the shift of American action and attention to the Pacific basin. When he spoke of the problem of the planet's growing human population, he sounded as if he were writing an early draft for a late twentieth-century Earth Day rally: "Truly a shrinking earth! An earth compelled by irresistible forces to exercise restraint, to associate, agree, and adjust, or to commit suicide."[22]

"Already," Turner wrote in 1925, responding to the most recent statistical information, "the urban population exceeds the rural population of the United States." Fundamentally, Turner knew that the present of the early twentieth century meant urbanization, industrialization, and the consolidation of capital. "The world," Turner said, "has never before seen such huge fortunes exercising complete control over the economic life of a people." In his favorite region, the Middle West, this transformation was unmistakable: "The world has never seen such a consolidation of capital and so complete a systematization of economic processes."[23]

But how on earth was one to connect decentralized, rural frontier origins to centralized, industrial outcomes? The easiest option, though it removed most of the punch from the narrative, was to assert, and reassert, and assert once again, that it was the disappearance of those rural frontier conditions that generated the centralized, industrial outcomes. While this strategy carried some logic, it had the disadvantage of a fractured narrative. The first half of the story was the direct opposite of the second half of the story; the past was the frontier, and the present was the factory, and the appearance of the factory coincided with the disappearance of the frontier; Part Two followed on Part One by canceling Part One out. And yet the Turnerian theory of presentism would have required a narrative that told the origins of the factory, tracking the foreshadowings of the consolidation of capital, noticing the hints and clues of the shift from the agrarian and rural to the industrial and urban. Instead, loyalty to the 1893 thesis bound Turner to a narrative in which the frontier kept its position at center stage, and the factory thus emerged suddenly, unexplained, from the wings.

Another option was simply to assert that these two phases were connected and, somehow or other, mutually illuminating. "Seen from the vantage-ground of present developments," Turner declared with exuberance, "what new light falls upon past events!" "When we recall the titanic industrial power that has centred

[22] Turner, "Since the Foundation," *Significance of Sections*, 207, 220–21, 234.

[23] Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of Sections in American History," in *Significance of Sections*, 35; "Social Forces," *AHR*, 222; and "Middle West," in *Frontier*, 153.

at Pittsburgh," Turner offered as his illustration, "Braddock's advance to the forks of the Ohio takes on new meaning." Written more logically, the sentence might read, "When we recall the huge industrial power that has centered at Pittsburgh, Braddock's advance to the forks of the Ohio seems oddly irrelevant, strangely unrelated to the manufacturing of steel that has transformed Pittsburgh in our time." But Turner's faith in the connection between past and present required Braddock to have not a new irrelevance but a new meaning. Namely: "[e]ven in defeat, he opened a road to what is now the centre of the world's industrial energy."[24] Braddock, it is clear at this point, had not entirely benefited from the gospel of presentism; he did considerably better for himself when his wilderness battles represented an important prelude to the American Revolution than when he came to serve as the not-very-convincing advance scout for the steel industry.

The problem came to center on one of Turner's most valued terms, "ideals." The frontier had produced pioneer ideals, and pioneer ideals were the key to American character and democracy. Thus the often-noted anxiety lodged at the center of the Frontier Thesis: if the frontier had ended, as Turner said it had, then what force could keep those crucially American pioneer ideals alive and vital? "Long after the frontier period of a particular region of the United States has passed away," Turner tried to convince himself, "the conception of society, the ideals and aspirations which it produced, persist in the minds of the people." The conditions, Turner realized, had changed dramatically: "The solitary backwoodsman wielding his ax at the edge of a measureless forest is replaced by companies capitalized at millions, operating railroads, sawmills, and all the enginery of modern machinery." Somehow, the pioneer ideals of the "solitary backwoodsman" were to continue to govern the operations of heavily capitalized factories, providing continuity between two disconnected phases of history.[25]

If the persistence of these ideals, long past the disappearance of the conditions that produced them, was the good news, the bad news was that these familiar old ideals could work in support of strange new forces. The "masters of industry and capital," Turner said, "came from" frontier society "and still profess its principles." Connecting the frontier past to the industrial present were these improbable latter-day pioneer idealists: John D. Rockefeller, Marcus Hanna, Claus Spreckels, Marshall Field, Andrew Carnegie, and E. H. Harriman. The frontier, Turner had said in 1893, remakes the colonist. "It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin." "Before long," the transformed pioneer "shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion." In asserting a continuity of ideals and character between frontier conditions and industrial conditions, Turner was putting Rockefeller, Hanna, Spreckels, Field, Carnegie, and Harriman through a similar process of transformation. The historian had now supplanted the frontier as the force recostuming these pioneers

[24] Turner, "Social Forces," *AHR*, 226.

[25] Turner, "Contributions of the West," in *Frontier*, 264; and "Pioneer Ideals," in *Frontier*, 280. See David M. Wrobel, *The End of American Exceptionalism: Frontier Anxiety from the Old West to the New Deal* (Lawrence, Kan., 1993).

in hunting shirt and moccasin; it was the historian's voice that told his audience to see these magnates of power as fundamentally still shouting "the war cry" and taking "the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion."[26] While the analogy might have made some sense to those who had been run over by Rockefeller and Hanna in their drives to power, both the war cry and scalping technique had changed character considerably as they evolved into the practices of modern industry.

The mandate of presentism was, meanwhile, standing by, ready to release Turner from these interpretative contortions and stretches. "When we look at these matters in the light provided by present conditions, the frontier proved to be less the main trunk line of history, and more a side path through the forest," Turner could, logically, have admitted if he had chosen to follow the precepts he set forth in 1891. "Industry and urbanization are now clearly revealed as the outcome we are obligated to explain. Now we must re-examine the past to find the origins of these crucial forces of our present. *Each age writes the history of the past anew with reference to the conditions uppermost in its own time.* The Frontier Thesis was fine for its time, but now the times demand the Urban/Industrial Thesis. Antiquarians can try to figure out what became of those pioneer ideals, but historians have more urgent obligations." The opportunity to practice, as well as preach, the gospel of presentism was an open and obvious one, but it was an opportunity with little appeal to Turner.

I WRITE HERE with absolutely nothing in the way of smug, placid, distanced judgment of Frederick Jackson Turner. On the contrary, it would have to be said that, in matters of presentism, I have come to "share" Turner's "pain." For years, I applauded, and quoted with enthusiasm, every declaration Turner ever made on behalf of letting our knowledge of the present and our knowledge of the past illuminate each other. The first words that appeared in my book *The Legacy of Conquest* were the words I have quoted here from "The Significance of History."[27] But, like Turner, I, too, found out that presentism was a faith with an unbreakable and unappealing habit of turning on its believers.

It was not that I wanted my own Frontier Antithesis, *The Legacy of Conquest,* to stand for the ages. The deference shown to Turner by many western historians had given me an instructive demonstration of the perils of life in a field in which one dominant set of ideas overstayed its period of usefulness. I wanted western American history to have many historians offering, as Turner had, forceful statements and interpretations. If we were lucky, these historians would show a little more flexibility in reappraising their earlier proclamations, and their successors would show a little more willingness to declare their independence of the matriarchs and patriarchs of the field. Under those terms, the best I could hope for my own model of the West was to see it become a stimulant, a provocation, the equivalent to the side of a swimming pool from which future inquiries could push off to gain momentum.

[26] Turner, "Contributions of the West," in *Frontier,* 264; and "Significance of the Frontier," in *Frontier,* 4.

[27] See Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest,* 17.

Swerving around the dilemma of wanting my work to stand for the ages, I was able to bring all the more momentum to my head-on crash with presentism's much more serious dilemma. As Turner knew and as I now know (and it seems to have caught us both equally by surprise), the present turns out to be even more complicated, more muddled, and more maddening than the past. A historian who goes around declaring that an understanding of the present will deepen our understanding of the past is a historian who will eventually have to eat crow.

The 1990s have served me a generous helping of this unattractive substance, a meal that honesty requires me to consume in public. In the mid-1980s, I was quite sure I had figured out the western American present and equally sure that I knew how to apply that understanding to history. Recent events and trends, I thought, spoke very clearly: the collapse of the most recent boom in oil and coal; the campaign to cut the federal budget and to reduce the subsidies that had supported much of the western economy; an economic downturn in the classic rural enterprises of farming, ranching, mining, and timber; the inescapable dilemma posed by the accumulation of nuclear contamination at western weapons production plants; the visibility of a number of politicians willing to talk about the inability of western resources to support an endlessly expanding population; the reassertion of Indian rights to land, water, religious freedom, and sovereignty; and the upsurge in immigration originating in Latin America and Asia. With all these changes under way, the pattern of the western present and future would simply have to be one of intelligent reckoning and reorientation. Great human diversity was an inarguable quality of the western past and present; white westerners would now have to face up to this central quality of their region. The limits of resources and the instability of traditional western rural economies were now crystal clear; westerners would have to revise their most basic strategies of water use and land use. While Turner had told us that the frontier ended in 1890, nineteenth-century attitudes toward nature and toward people of color had lasted all too vigorously into the twentieth century. But now, one hundred years after that ostensible end of the frontier, the shift was actually happening—away from short-term extraction toward long-term and permanent residence and inhabitation, away from hostile dismissals of minorities toward a recognition that we would all have to live together.

Readers are entitled to think that my effort to write a happy ending to western history makes Turner's efforts to find pioneer ideals at work in monopolistic industrialists look hardheaded and realistic. Certainly, clues began to appear immediately, indicating that presentism was not going to be any kinder to me than it had been to Turner. Of all those clues, the 1994 elections provided the body blow. The hearty vote in favor of California's Proposition 187, denying services and benefits to illegal aliens and their children, suggested that the West was not embarked on a new path of tolerance and amicable coexistence. Western voters, moreover, seemed to be saying a vigorous "NO" to the public lands reforms undertaken by President Bill Clinton's secretary of the interior, Bruce Babbitt. Babbitt earnestly pitched into the effort to reduce the powers of the "lords of yesterday," the legal scholar Charles Wilkinson's fine phrase for the federal resource policies created in the late nineteenth century and still governing the

West today.[28] Babbitt's efforts provided the best evidence I had for my theory of an approaching big change in the terms of Western life. But voters in the congressional elections of 1994 seemed to take it as a personal mission to expose my failures in prophecy. As the new Congress took office and the reenergized Republicans undertook to reinstall the lords of yesterday as the lords of today and tomorrow, I found my affection for Turner's 1891 essay, "The Significance of History," diminishing daily.

Along with disappointment, however, came relief, and a kind of relief that Turner may not have permitted himself to feel. When I contemplated my failure to figure out the present, I began to wonder how I had ever fallen into the belief that such an achievement was within my reach, or within my job description. And, happily, as disorientation with the present increased, enthusiasm for studying the past grew proportionately. Compared to the inscrutable present, the past was an open book.

Disillusionment with presentism had the happy side effect of restoring a recognition of contingency and improbability to my understanding of history. When I thought I was tracing a direct, clear line between past and present, an unhealthy fatalism crept into my thinking. Event followed event with all the drama, surprise, and spontaneity of the prearranged program of the Rose Parade. Losing control of the pattern of present events thus offered its own form of liberation; it was as if the floats of that regimented parade suddenly started taking inexplicable right, left, and U-turns, with the General Electric float suddenly slamming into the California Fruit-Growers' entry, filling the air with a rainbow of chrysanthemums and marigolds and giving the poor commentators something, at long last, to comment on. History became correspondingly more interesting as it became more chaotic.

Here, too, Turner's struggles proved to be emblematic and precedent-setting. Turner, like many of his fellow participants in the founding of his profession, wanted to establish some control over the past. He wanted to persuade the disorderly events and people of history to submit to some kind of order. The agents and devices he used to produce that order were those reified and nearly animate concepts he stayed loyal to all his life: the conditions, forces, ideals, institutions, traits, types, elements, and processes that could translate the chaos of history into patterns of clarity and manageability.

As with Turner's presentism, a familiar form of historian's hopefulness was at work here. With its powers of analysis, Turner thought, the mind could diagram the working parts of human history and then show how the parts fit together. Turner's hunger for the ideas that would hold a fragmented world together was palpable and urgent. Despite his ritual declarations of tentativeness and modesty in his essays, his heart clearly melted when in the company of a rhetorically convincing generalization, with abstractions and evidence marching together in a pleasant and ordered parade toward the present.

Success in this venture, though, carried a great price: the more effectively Turner identified and arranged the determinants of history, the more he

[28] Charles F. Wilkinson, *Crossing the Next Meridian: Land, Water, and the Future of the West* (Washington, D.C., 1992).

sacrificed drama, as well as realism. The complexity of historical evidence was silenced and squeezed in order to fit into the tight categories Turner built for it. "Each type of industry," Turner had said in one of his best-known passages of fatalistic thinking, "was on the march toward the West, impelled by an irresistible attraction." "Each passed in successive waves across the continent. Stand at Cumberland Gap and watch the procession of civilization, marching single file—the buffalo following the trail to the salt springs, the Indian, the fur-trader and hunter, the cattle-raiser, the pioneer farmer—and the frontier has passed by."[29] A historical procession led by a large herbivore in search of salt was unlikely to provide the material for a celebration of the human will and the power of individual choice. And when this parade, in the next sentence, picked itself up and reappeared to march, in identical order, through South Pass in Wyoming, a large share of the contingency, improbability, and interest of historical change seemed to have been surrendered.

Identifying types, forces, and conditions, Turner could write with a tone of certainty that bordered on the theological. In his historical writings, Turner virtually never referred to God. Even his discussion of religion as a factor in history never got beyond the perfunctory. And yet, in his declarations on the patterns of history, Turner nonetheless wrote in a tone of certainty that conveyed a secularized faith in destiny. A controlling and predestining God might not be visible in the picture, but forces, ideals, institutions, traits, types, elements, and processes were ably filling in for Him.

Without an explicitly religious framework of thought, Turner offered a vision of history that nonetheless seemed destined and predetermined. His unrelenting enthusiasm for hydraulic metaphors gave clear and consistent evidence of his susceptibility to deterministic thinking. Telling the story of westward expansion, one of the most dynamic and complicated stories in history, a story much twisted and inflected by variations in individual and group will, Turner habitually used metaphors that eliminated choice and decision from the picture. People moved in streams, tides, flows, currents, torrents, floods, and inundations. A southern "stream" from Virginia "flowed into Ohio," while "the main current that sought Indiana came from North Carolina"; "[b]y 1830 the Southern inundation ebbed and a different tide flowed in from the northeast"; "[t]he homestead law increased the tide of settlers."[30] Here, in these hydraulic metaphors, Turnerian determinism was at its clearest. Whatever individual participants in these movements might have thought they were doing, the historian had, with hindsight, detected and labeled the great sweeps and trends that both caused and explained these individual decisions.

And yet, just as Turner himself challenged his Frontier Thesis with a scattered Antithesis, here, too, in the matter of determinism, Turner vigorously and persuasively contradicted himself. One particular topic brought out in him a different spirit from the one he showed when tracing the workings of destiny in westward expansion. When he wrote about the contest of empires for the interior

[29] Turner, "Significance of the Frontier," in *Frontier*, 12.

[30] Frederick Jackson Turner, "Dominant Forces in Western Life," in *Frontier*, 224; "Middle Western Pioneer Democracy," in *Frontier*, 346; and "Pioneer Ideals," in *Frontier*, 276.

of North America, a very different and much more persuasive historian seemed to have taken control of his pen.

In two articles in particular, "The Origin of Genet's Projected Attack on Louisiana and Florida" and "The Policy of France toward the Mississippi Valley in the Period of Washington and Adams," contingency came back to overpower determinism. In truth, without an admission of contingency, without a recognition that events of the past did not proceed on a fated march toward the present, the story of the schemes and plans of various empires to gain control of the interior would have been killingly dull and pointless. Describing the visions of persuasion and territorial acquisition that Genet took with him to North America in 1792, Turner deliberately broke free from determinism: "A vast and startling project, indeed! sweeping into a single system the campaigns of France in Europe, the discontented frontiersmen of the Mississippi valley, and the revolutionary unrest that was before long to give independence to Spanish America. The historical possibilities of this great design are overwhelming."[31] With this remark—indeed, simply with the direct and uncharacteristic use of the word "possibilities"—Turner gave Genet's story a license for vitality. He removed, at least for the moment, everyone's hindsight knowledge that the frontiersmen would remain loyal to the new American nation and that Genet's mission would fail. In the same spirit, his article "The Policy of France toward the Mississippi Valley" restored possibility as well as complexity to the struggles for empire in the American interior. One learns from the record of French maneuverings, Turner noted, "how wide-spread were the forces of intrigue for the Mississippi valley." It was not his intention, in this article, to say that a clear American destiny would render these "forces of intrigue" inconsequential. On the contrary, his last sentence in the article deliberately asserted contingency:

> No one who has studied the evidence of long-continued menace to the connection of the west with the rest of the United States . . . can doubt that the danger was a real one, and that a European power might have arisen along the Mississippi valley and the Gulf of Mexico, dominating the interior by its naval force, and checking, if not preventing, the destiny of the United States as the arbiter of North America and the protector of an American system for the New World.[32]

With the word "destiny" at the end of this passage, Turner returned to the familiar world of a secularized, nationalistic determinism. But for a surprisingly lengthy interlude in his studies of imperial policy, Turner surrendered his usually firm explanatory structure of forces and conditions, and contemplated, instead, the muddled, complex, and open-ended possibilities of the past.

TEN YEARS AGO, I FELT SURE that Turner's weaknesses were the weaknesses of the Frontier Thesis. Both his failure to convey the contingency of history as well as his

[31] Frederick J. Turner, "The Origin of Genet's Projected Attack on Louisiana and the Floridas," *AHR*, 3 (October 1897–July 1898): 655.

[32] Frederick J. Turner, "The Policy of France toward the Mississippi Valley in the Period of Washington and Adams," *AHR*, 10 (January 1905): 273, 279.

failure to comprehend his own times and to align his historical narrative with the outcome facing him in those times, I thought, had their sources in the errors and omissions of his Frontier Thesis. In 1995, his failure seems much less distinctive and peculiar to him and much more an early example of the proposition that the present has a way of turning out to be even more bewildering than the past. Surely, the best demonstration of this proposition has appeared in our own times with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. For diplomatic historians and historians of the Soviet Union, the outcome of this plot had been very clear: the rise of Marxism, the face-off between communism and capitalism, the struggles of the superpowers. While historians might disagree in their interpretations of the historical process that brought us to the present, until 1989 the outcome that historians sought to explain was not in dispute. But, with the collapse of Soviet control over Eastern Europe, and then with the end of Russian communism itself, the narrative of history took a wild and unexpected turn. Surely, the past was still connected to the present, but the connections followed paths that were unexplored and unfamiliar, paths that would lead historians through terrain they had barely noticed in their previous efforts to explain a different, much more intelligible present.

With his faith in his conditions, forces, ideals, institutions, traits, types, elements, and processes, his objective terms of analysis, Frederick Jackson Turner believed in an intelligible world. "[A] generation that does not attempt to consider its recent past," Turner wrote, "is like the merchant who ignores his ledger, the mariner who takes no observations."[33] His assumption, of course, was that the merchant who consulted his ledger and the mariner who took observations would be a merchant and a mariner equipped to decipher their positions in life and who, understanding their recent past, could then make better and more effective plans for their future. Turner believed, as well, in progress, even though the increasingly urban and industrial character of the United States put that belief to a trying test.

By the time I entered graduate school in 1972, the historian's right to a faith in progress was greatly, and appropriately, constricted. To note just one factor, the wars of the twentieth century had knocked the pins out from under the idea of a world in which people, as time passed, learned the lessons of history and behaved with increasing wisdom and benevolence. In the graduate schools of the late twentieth century, the phrase "Whiggish history" was in common usage, deployed to indicate that the speaker or writer was too well trained to believe in the old fantasy of progress, too sophisticated to believe in a world in which the transition from past to present was a transition of improvement.

Just beneath the surface of those declarations of cynicism (and in some ways, protected and insulated by the official code of cynicism) was a faith that matched that of Frederick Jackson Turner. By this faith, historians could be *useful*, and useful in a way that might actually help to produce progress. "A just public opinion and a statesmanlike treatment of present problems," Turner wrote in 1910, "demand that [those problems] be seen in their historical relations in order

[33] Turner, "Since the Foundation," in *Significance of Sections*, 208.

that history may hold the lamp for conservative reform."[34] I myself, along with many of my contemporaries, would have preferred to "hold the lamp" for somewhat less cautious reform, but we certainly had no objection to lampholding *per se*, no objection to the notion that historical understanding might lead to wiser and more benevolent action in our own time. An effort to mock the hope that Turner invested in this proposition runs, almost immediately, into the uncomfortable recognition that many historians who are now in their forties and fifties have matched Turner in hopefulness.

On some issues, most particularly on issues of race, Turner's ideas were light years away from current thought in American historical circles. Turner was a white American historian who never questioned (indeed, never noticed) the role that his own racial and ethnic identity played in shaping his point of view, and the result was a general flatness of curiosity when it came to the histories of non-whites. Turner declared in 1904 that "a study of the negro is needed," but he himself made no move in the direction of that study. In fact, the cause of advancing the significance of the frontier seemed to require, in Turner's judgment, the reducing of the significance of slavery. "[W]hen American history comes to be rightly viewed," he remarked in the 1893 frontier essay, "it will be seen that the slavery question is an incident," and barely even that. His references to slavery were always brief, and they were almost entirely focused on slavery as a factor in American politics, as a source of tension between white Americans. The lived experience of being a slave barely registered in Turner's otherwise omnivorous historical curiosity.[35]

On an issue such as race, then, the use of the phrase "Turnerians All" to describe the common and persistent condition of historians would be absurd. Turner had, for instance, a well-established habit of referring to various ethnic and national "stocks": "By [Indian] intermarriages with the French traders the purity of the stock was destroyed and a mixed race produced"; in considering general literacy on the frontier, it was "at its worst where the Mexican stock abounded"; late nineteenth-century immigration represented "the peaceful conquest of the old stock by an international army of workers."[36] In his use of the word "stock," Turner appears as a relic of a distant era of both history and historiography, relying on a term and a pattern of thought that has little kinship with the views held by most historians writing and teaching today.

And yet, in other matters, especially in definitions of the historian's professional role and in the benefits to society of vigorous historical inquiry, "Turnerians All" is an appropriate form of professional self-description. "The story of the peopling of America has not yet been written," Turner said in one of his most quotable declarations. "We do not understand ourselves."[37] Turner's words carry undiminished, if also differently inflected, force today. Which "selves," after all, were "we" to understand? Turner's "we" in this passage was the "we" of the American

[34] Turner, "Social Forces," *AHR*, 226.

[35] Turner, "Problems in American History" (1904), in *Significance of Sections*, 18; and "Significance of the Frontier," in *Frontier*, 24.

[36] Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Fur Trade," *Early Writings*, 167; "The West—1876 and 1920," in *Significance of Sections*, 252; and "Since the Foundation," in *Significance of Sections*, 211–12.

[37] Turner, "Significance of History," in *Early Writings*, 64.

people, and not the "we" of the historical profession. The occasion of the centennial of the *AHR* is its own reminder that the self-understanding of historians is an indispensable part of the project of understanding the history of the region, the nation, and the planet. Turner's unwillingness to scrutinize himself and to put his own earlier, career-establishing ideas through a process of critical examination has become a luxury we can envy but no longer afford. Even if it strikes some traditional historians as oddly and unprofessionally self-indulgent, the project of "understanding ourselves" must include historians' self-understanding and self-disclosure.

In a widespread misreading of changes in the field of western American history, various critics have noted that Turner, as *New York Times* writer Richard Bernstein put it, "has been scrapped," dumped from the historical canon because he was "Eurocentric, making the whites the only genuine historical protagonists."[38] By this misinterpretation, then, the New Western History has eliminated Turner because he seems to be "racist" in the terms of the late twentieth century. The point here is, actually, quite different. Turner's own race, or, more accurately, his society's construction of the value and meaning of his whiteness, did shape and direct his historical attention. Being white set stern limits on his empathy and understanding. While he was an impassioned advocate of paying attention to the history of people who were not members of elites, his attention rarely strayed from the social history of white people.

Although there was nothing to stop Turner from reading, for example, W. E. B. Du Bois and getting a head start in these matters, the notion of examining the impact and consequences of his own racial identity was a completely foreign concept to him. Under these circumstances, the point cannot be to chide him for a failure of self-consciousness. The point is to learn from his example and to use it as an occasion to ask ourselves, "What are *our* blind spots? What are the elements of our social identity that limit our vision as sternly as racial assumptions limited Turner's vision?" However we answer these questions, historians of the late twentieth century have not reached a plateau of comfortable self-understanding from which we can look down smugly on Turner's struggles. In truth, a confession of solidarity—"Turnerians All"—is the place where this exploration begins and ends.

Squabbles over the validity of the Frontier Thesis have distracted us from the more compelling issue raised by Turner's example. Frederick Jackson Turner embodied the idea of historians as public servants, as scholars whose inquiries into the past could contribute directly and concretely to human well-being in the present. The familiar dispute—Was Turner right about the frontier?—has become trivial and arcane. The much less familiar question—Was Turner right about the present-day value of historical understanding?—remains the question of consequence. In everyday life, that question has been pushed to the edge of our attention by the constant round of activities of the professional historian, activities rendered normal by the careers of Turner and his contemporaries: class-preparing, lecture-giving, discussion-leading, paper-grading, student-advising, ar-

[38] Richard Bernstein, *Dictatorship of Virtue: Multiculturalism and the Battle for America's Future* (New York, 1994), 48.

chive-exploring, note-taking, book-reviewing, manuscript-evaluating, article-and-book-writing, job-search-conducting, convention-attending, paper-presenting, critic-answering, professional-association-office-holding, and turf-defending. In the midst of the business and busy-ness of professional historians, the question of the purpose and goal of these activities—a question from which Turner did not try to hide—awaits our answer.