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THE TURNER THESIS IN THE LIGHT OF
RECENT RESEARCH IN ECONOMIC HISTORY/1

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Introduction

The writings of Frederick Jackson Turner represented the first attempt by an American historian to develop a "grand theory" of the development of American society. The value of many of Turner's insights is conceded. It is the contention of the present writer, however, that (1) events since Turner's death in the mid-1920's and (2) forward strides in research in economic history make it desirable to reexamine the Turner Thesis and incorporate his insights into a revised framework which takes these events and this research into account./2

The Turner or Frontier Thesis asserts that the presence of free land and the process of occupying successive frontiers shaped the American character and created a unique society, a classless, isolationist democracy. As the continent was occupied, sectional economic and political interests emerged from the diverse geographic conditions of the various regions; in the twentieth century, with the frontier gone, sectionalism remained the dominant motif in the nation's politics, the national government acting as an arbiter between sections.

The Turner Thesis has been challenged by earlier writers on a number of grounds. Some writers have asserted that it overemphasizes the contribution of agriculture and the farming population to our developing society.

/1 This paper is an abridged version of that given at the joint WEA-WFEA meetings. The complete version may be found in the Proceedings of the Western Economic Association.

/2 A complete list of references is included with the unabridged version of this paper published in the 1957 Proceedings of the Western Economic Association. Recent contributions which have influenced the writer in preparing this paper include: Douglass C. North, "International Capital Flows and the Development of the American West," Journal of Economic History, XVI, 4 (December, 1956), pp. 493-505, and "Location Theory and Regional Economic Growth," Journal of Political Economy, LXIII, 3 (June, 1955), pp. 243-58; Ragnar Nurkse, "International Investment Today in the Light of Nineteenth Century Experience," Economic Journal, LXIV, 256 (December, 1954), pp. 744-58; James Duxsenberry, "Some Aspects of the Theory of Economic Growth," Explorations in Entrepreneurial History, III, 2 (December, 1950); W. W. Rostow, The Process of Economic Growth (New York: 1952), pp. 107-42; Brinley Thomas, Migration and Economic Growth (Cambridge: 1954); Louis F. Hartz, Economic Policy and Democratic Thought: Pennsylvania, 1776-1860 (Cambridge: 1948); Bray Hammond, "Public Policy and National Banks," Journal of Economic History, VI (May, 1946), pp. 79-84; Grant T. McConnell, The Decline of Agrarian Democracy (Berkeley: 1953); and M. L. Hansen, "Immigration and Democracy," Chapter IV of The Immigrant in American History (Cambridge: 1940).

Turner's correlation of frontier areas with democratic institutions has been sharply challenged by drawing attention to other frontier societies, the South and Latin America for instance, which have not been democratic, suggesting that the institutional heritage from the old society and the requirements of organizing production in the new are significant determinants of social structure. Turner's concept of sectionalism has been criticized for its vagueness and lack of explicit recognition of the underlying economic determinants of sectional conflict; further, the major domestic issues of the past thirty years, revolving around the proper role of the federal government in our economy, have created cleavages along occupational rather than sectional lines.

Granted the validity of these criticisms, Turner was profoundly correct in asserting that Western history is national history and in emphasizing the importance of Westward expansion; and certainly the possession of a tremendous domain and resources had a great influence in shaping the American character. The chief defects of the Turner Thesis, in the view of the present writer, are that it does not provide (1) an explanation of American development as part of the expansion of the international economy, (2) a sequential explanation of the process of U. S. economic growth, and (3) a satisfactory explanation of the interrelationships between economic development on the one hand and social and political structure and behavior on the other. This paper attempts to point out the contribution that research in economic history is making toward filling these gaps in our conceptual framework of the economic, social, and political development of the United States.

Economic Growth

The first two defects in the Turnerian structure can be corrected by (1) emphasizing the importance of the international flow of goods, people, capital, and ideas to U. S. economic growth and (2) using location theory and the regional concept to impart a sense of process to expansion of the nation's economy.

The great struggle of the early colonists, as in all new regions settled within a commercial, "market-oriented," capitalist framework, was to develop export industries, and the American colonies developed on the basis of raw material exports, notwithstanding the additional complication of "triangular trade." Growth of the economy could not be accounted spectacular, however, until the early decades of the nineteenth century. The key elements accounting for rapid economic growth in that century were:

1. Natural resources. These were plentiful, rich in quality, and diversified; furthermore the resource base was continually expanded by technological innovation.

2. Innovations. The series of mechanical innovations in England known as the Industrial Revolution greatly increased the demand for raw materials, particularly cotton; rising population and income in England and more gradually on the European continent increased the demand for foodstuffs and increased the supply of savings available for international investment. Innovations in land transport led to the rapid opening of new regions and the

exploitation of their resources, particularly in the United States. Innovations in ocean transport reduced freight and passenger rates and contributed substantially to international trade and migration of labor. In the later part of the century innovations in metallurgy, electricity, and the internal combustion engine laid the groundwork for rapid growth of manufacturing in the United States.

3. Relations with the international economy. In no other historical period has there been a smaller amount of institutional restriction on the international migration of labor, capital, commodities, and ideas than in the nineteenth century. U. S. economic development was stimulated by all four types of flows. In the nineteenth century the volume of international trade was two to three times as great relative to the national product as at present, but statistics do not tell the whole story. Foreign investment, for example, was directed especially to an area of the economy--transportation--providing an important social overhead function, requiring large amounts of fixed capital, and where important cost-reducing innovations were being made. A complex machinery gradually developed for the application of European capital to the financing of U. S. development and foreign trade.

4. Institutions oriented to rapid economic growth. The institutions inherited from Britain were favorable to the drive for material advancement from the beginning. While capital was scarce in the early national era, the state and local governments performed an important entrepreneurial and banking role; later the policy of laissez-faire gave the maximum scope to corporate and individual enterprise.

Given these favorable conditions, how describe the process of economic growth which occurred? The differential growth of new regions, exploited for their natural resources, was the principal factor generating growth at least until the Civil War. European demand was particularly important in stimulating the growth of the cotton economy in the South and of the Western agricultural regions both directly through the demand for foodstuffs, especially wheat, and indirectly because the West exported foodstuffs to the South. Long run upward movements in the prices of these commodities favored investment in the new regions. While bank credit expansion provided the initial financing, foreign capital sustained the investment boom. Canals, later railroads, brought about a fall in transport costs, with a revolutionary effect on migration, land sales, production and export of raw materials, and location of economic activity. While opening of the new regions had an initially unfavorable effect on agriculture in the eastern U. S., the overall effect on the East was overwhelmingly favorable because of the new investment opportunities created there, leading eventually to rapid growth in the manufacturing sector. Indivisibilities in transport facilities and rising expectations led investment to "overshoot," generating a "boom and bust" process of expansion, the downward phase involving falling raw material prices, cessation of foreign and domestic investment, and declining land sales, aggravated by the reactions of an immature and unregulated banking system. Eventually the underlying forces making for growth (rising income and population; innovations) reasserted themselves and westward expansion was resumed.

Within the newly developing regions high and fairly evenly distributed incomes from the staple exports encouraged the growth of a sizable economic

superstructure: various types of manufacturing industries developed (materials oriented industries, "residential" manufacturing, and industries such as machine shops providing services to the export industries), as well as construction, retail trade, services, and public employment. Urban nodal centers with special processing and transfer cost advantages for these "superstructure" activities came into existence. Yet the whole structure depended on the region's export base. Some of the new regions, notably California, favored by an especially rich and diverse export base, ultimately grew out of this stage of complete export dependence, as population and income grew to the level where they could support market oriented finished consumer and capital goods industries (i.e. became "industrialized"). Less fortunate regions fell prey to the hazards of a limited resource base and in the present century turned increasingly to the federal government for aid in reviving the process of economic expansion.

After 1860 the pattern of economic activity in the U. S. changed sharply. Many factors favored the rapid industrialization of the northeastern U. S.: the favorable conjuncture of rich coal and iron deposits linked by water transportation; the progress of mechanical innovation; a growing domestic supply of capital and the development of financial intermediaries; the demand for capital goods arising from expansion of the railroad network and investment in the new regions; the growing labor force in the states of the East and the old Northwest; labor saving innovations in agriculture which steadily reduced the proportion of the labor force required to feed the population; and demand for consumer goods stimulated by rising population and income. The role of the raw material exporting regions of the U. S. in providing the conditions leading up to this industrialization should be evident. The growth of the eastern industrial complex in turn stimulated the final burst of westward expansion in the Mountain state and Far West lumber and mining areas. The growth of urban industrial areas increasingly became the dominant force in expansion of the U. S. economy. The U. S. shifted from debtor to creditor in the international economy. Two important consequences of this shift to a manufacturing economy must be noted: (1) innovations in the manufacturing sector required large amounts of fixed capital and made possible the increase of production at decreasing unit costs, with well-known consequences for market and social structure; and (2) an increasing proportion of industrial capacity was devoted to production of highly income-elastic durable goods, accentuating the system's instability; sudden variations in the rate of population growth, including cessation of mass immigration in 1924, reinforced this tendency.

While the above is a mere sketch, it is nevertheless hoped that it reinforces the Turnerian framework to the extent of providing the basis for a more integrated treatment of U. S. economic development.

Social Change

The next step is to provide a bridge between economic development in the U. S. and the process of social change. It is suggested that the changing character of economic opportunity provides such a bridge. Economic opportunity is determined by the rate and character of economic growth; the changing nature of economic opportunity has a profound influence on attitudes, institutions, and politics which in turn react upon economic growth.

Three eras of economic opportunity may be discerned in U. S. history: the commercial aristocracy-farmer period; the bourgeois epoch; and (for want of a more original term) the employee-oriented welfare state. Each period is characterized by a particular ethos--the economic aspirations of the non-elite groups, or perhaps more accurately the aspirations the non-elite had for their sons. These changed in the three periods first from farmer to small capitalist and then to well-paid employee or professional man. The political struggles of each period reflected the efforts and frustrations of the non-elite in achieving their aspirations.

The transition from the first to the second era was accomplished by the "Jacksonian Revolution." The aggressive, typically middle-period American character alleged by Turner to have been formed in the crucible of frontier existence was not completely developed at the time of the Revolution. At Independence there was a sharp division in class structure between the wealthy, educated, and cultured and the small farmers. It was the great expansion of economic opportunity stemming from the industrial revolution in Britain, rising demand, and construction of transport facilities into new regions which ushered in the frenetic era described here as the "bourgeois epoch." Bray Hammond has pointed out the most significant development of Jacksonian democracy was its encouragement of the new business community--different from the old commercial aristocracy--and Jacksonian policies removed the institutions which might have restrained and guided its oscillating career of expansion and exploitation.

The frustrations of some groups in achieving small capitalist status are reflected in the agrarian revolts of the late nineteenth century and in the schizophrenic conflict in the Knights of Labor over whether to continue the struggle for small capitalist status or to accept wage-earner status and seek governmental aid in elevating the entire wage-earning group.

The third era, in which the dominant ethos is that of the employee, not the small capitalist, has been firmly established since 1933; the new ethos reflects the reaction against the insecurity typical of an industrial civilization and seeks to establish a solid base of security on which to build a high level of consumption. C. A. R. Crosland's description of social change in the U. S. applies to the U. S. only in slightly less degree: "...the emphasis is transferred from...rights of property, private initiative, competition, and the profit motive...to the duties of the state, social and economic security and the virtues of cooperative action." This ethos is a consequence of the rapid change in the type of economic opportunity available (rather than a restriction of opportunity) after the 1880's.

Those non-elite groups which comprised a large proportion of the population, such as farmers before 1900 and industrial labor since 1935, tended to coalesce, particularly in periods of arrested economic growth, into movements with a relatively broad program of economic and social reform. Smaller minorities, such as the farmers after 1900, restricted themselves to pressure-group activity with a relatively narrow program. It is significant however that the greatest area of job opportunity created by industrialization has been for managerial, technical, clerical, and professional personnel. Relatively easy entry into these occupations has not only softened class antagonisms but has created a near-majority white collar group which holds the

balance of power between the big pressure groups; the necessity imposed on the pressure groups of appealing for support of their programs to the big middle group very probably enhances social stability and political moderation.

While the die was cast by the 1880's, the old ethos died hard. How account for the long transition to the "welfare state" in the U. S.? We can point here not only to the high level of income, the rapid rate of growth of income and its relatively wide distribution from the 1880's through the 1920's, but also to some historical circumstances peculiar to the nineteenth century U. S.: the early grant of the franchise and widespread public education; the absence of titles, class accents and other medieval paraphernalia; and mass immigration. The last of these is an especially important and perhaps neglected factor. M. L. Hansen has noted at some length the "massive resistance" of the late-19th century immigrant to change and reform (in the old country change was always for the worse) and Commons has stressed immigration as an impediment to the growth of trade unions.

Finally, the analysis of the process of regional economic growth developed earlier in this paper should be at least the starting point for analysis of differential regional social and political behavior. Turner's "frontier" and "sectional" hypotheses have been endowed with an aura of romanticism by some of his followers and exaggerated into a "Myth of Western Differentness." The writer would argue that the social and political characteristics of the new regions stem from their character as raw material exporting regions developing over time into more or less diversified regional economies demanding more or less governmental aid in the process of development, rather than from a mystic radicalism acquired through contact with the soil and the open spaces.

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THE CASE FOR EXHUMING FREDERICK JACKSON TURNER'S
LABOR-SAFETY-VALVE DOCTRINE

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I

It seems generally agreed that Turner's Labor-Safety-Valve Doctrine has been discredited. We would argue^{/1} that this is due to the fact that a critical tradition has grown up in which Turner's original views have been neglected.

Turner argued that the repeated accessions of territory with unused resources which the frontier provided had a different effect upon American society than new resources opened up by economic and social advance within other societies without a frontier. The frontier implied for him that

^{/1} We plan to present these arguments in revised form in another place.