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William James and Frederick Jackson Turner: Nature, Corporate Expansion, and the Consumption of Space

One model of the environment prevalent in nineteenth-century philosophy posits a rigid, epistemological correspondence between identity and place. In “The American Scholar” (1837), for instance, Emerson argues that “Know thyself” and “Study Nature” are actually the same “maxim” (55). However, social and economic developments in the middle of the century made this model untenable. First, the construction of interstate trains destroyed the sanctity and isolation of place. Second, the corporations needed to finance the trains undermined the economic – and by extension the philosophical – independence of the individual. Corporate expansion shifted the terms of the environmental discussion, replacing the traditional rhetoric of place and identity with an economic system based on access, mobility, and distance. In the evolving corporate landscape of the late nineteenth century, the personal relation to nature gave way to the impersonal forces of naturalism. Knowledge ceased to be an epistemological problem of recognizing the self in nature and instead became a technical and managerial problem of using nature as a resource to propel the body forward in space.

The growth of corporations had a profound effect on those psychological and historical theories that helped define the terrain of twentieth-century politics. This paper will analyze the way William James and Frederick Jackson Turner redefine the relation of the body to its environment as they grapple with incorporation as a fact and a concept. The differences between these two theorists are significant: Turner is a corporate apologist and an imperialist; James is opposed to “bigness” in all of its forms. Of equal significance, however, is their common assumption about the range of the debate. Both thinkers are anti-environmental in the current sense of the term; they advocate treating nature as a resource, something to be consumed, even used up, for personal and political ends. While this is not necessarily a corporate way of thinking, it does mark a divergence from the proto-conservationism implicit in the Emersonian model. What James and Turner have in common, despite their profound differences, is the belief that the environment is something to move through and consume.

While it is often overlooked, William James is above all a theorist of movement. His first book, *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), maps out an impersonal but highly

regimented space made up of overlapping trajectories, some intentional (thought), some sensational (perception), but all of them natural. Early in his career James rejected the absolute mind/body distinction assumed by his predecessors, instead elaborating a theory in which the stream of consciousness overlaps with and emerges out of the stream of sensations. In this fluid space the boundaries of the body are posited, not given. James says, for instance, that a baby learns where its toe is by seeing it, grasping it, and ultimately defining its position in relation to the rest of its anatomy (*Psychology* II 187-188). The baby maps out its environment in an analogous way. In James, the body not only moves through space, it moves through itself as space.

James's innovation was to treat the starting points of traditional physiology – the body and its environment – as heuristic fictions posited in the wake of the only given in experience: movement. In “Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?” (1904), James defines the relation of the body to its environment along the trajectory of cognition, i.e. the movement of a thought towards its object. Thought is defined as that which can be penetrated by itself. The body puts up some resistance to thought, but it is less resistant than the environment; conversely, the body is the instrument through which thought modifies its environment, or senses where obstacles in the environment must be avoided. All discussion of bodily integrity is irrelevant here. The difference between the body and its environment is one of relative inertia. (As we shall see in a moment, this theory of inertia allows James to account for specific corporeal differences – e.g. race, class, gender – according to a coefficient of resistance. His sympathies go towards those who encounter more resistance.)

Identity too is understood along a trajectory of experience. In “A World of Pure Experience” (1912), James says that the “starting point [of a stream of experience] becomes a knower and their terminus an object meant or known” (*Writings* 201). These terminal points are literally re-membered, or put together in retrospect. Identity is not a given in James; it is incorporated, this being a figure not of ownership but of assemblage. Walter Benn Michaels argues that for James “selfhood... consists neither in having a body or in being a body but in being embodied” (22). Identity is not a starting point; it is the narrative of the body's continuous effort to move through space, and through itself as space.

The continued appeal of James, at least for literary critics, is probably based on his emphasis on narratives over statements or positions. I will limit myself to two further examples. Semantics: the object of a thought is that thought's “entire content or deliverance” (*Psychology* I 275). Theory of truth: a statement is true “in so far forth.” What is important in James is the direction of a statement, its semantics as opposed to its syntax and substantives. This emphasis on movement got James in to trouble, even in his own formulations of his theories. In *Pragmatism* he expressed his theory of truth in a highly

controversial way: “‘The true,’ to put it very briefly, is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as ‘the right’ is only the expedient in the way of behaving” (*Pragmatism* 106). At first this emphasis on changing truth, and the relativism it implies, was seen as a justification of imperial expansion. Bertrand Russell, after reading *Pragmatism*, said that James’s philosophy was “Bismarkian” in its emphasis on force. I would argue, however, that James’s emphasis on movement represents an important step away from the racism, sexism, and nationalism implicit in traditional concepts of fixed national identity. This is the position taken by Cornel West in *The American Evasion of Philosophy*: “Just as his cultural mission is one of reconciliation, so James’s conception of truth attempts to unite the novel and the familiar with a minimum of friction and a maximum of openness to the future” (64).

There is a deep connection between James’s philosophy and his politics, and contrary to Russell neither provides a ready apology for force. James’s politics were progressive. He was Vice President of the Anti-Imperialist League; he spoke out against racism and lynching in the South; he argued that women should be allowed into medical school; he sympathized with the plight of laborers and gave lip service to the desirability of a gradual redistribution of wealth. A recent biographer argues that we should understand James’s philosophy as a form of activism or “public thought,” though most simply see him as a moralist with his heart in the right place and an occasional letter to the editor to back it up (Cotkin 4, 11; West 58). However we measure his activism, his politics are the natural expression of his theory of the relation of the body to its environment. Ralph Barton Perry, James’s first biographer, argues that “James’s standard of international politics was an application of his individualism,” and he quotes James as saying “Damn great Empires! including that of the Absolute.... Give me individuals and their spheres of activity.” Perry supplements this statement with another taken from James’s famous letter to Mrs. Henry Whitman (June 7, 1899):

I am against bigness and greatness in all their forms, and with the invisible molecular moral forces that work from individual to individual, stealing in through the crannies of the world like so many soft rootlets, or like the capillary oozing of water, and yet rending the hardest monuments of man's pride, if you give them time.... I am against all big organizations as such, national ones first and foremost; against all big successes and big results.... (315-316)

This eulogy of “rootlets” is an important precursor to Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of “rhizomes.” Both theories prioritize movement and experience over fixed concepts of identity; both advocate disorganized forms of revolt. Perry is right to define James’s

anti-imperialism as an expression of his individualism, but James's is a particular kind of individualism, one in which the individual is an enabling fiction, not a sovereign entity that defines itself through its possessions. Again, James does not posit an embodied self, but the self always in the process of being embodied.

This conception of the body is central to James's politics. James often expressed his political views through corporeal metaphors. In his 1903 "Address on the Philippine Question," James compares imperialism to the natural process of digestion:

We prehended our prey, or took it into our mouth, when President McKinley posted his annexation edict, and insalivated with pious phrases the alternative he offered to our late allies of instant obedience or death. The morsel thus lubricated, deglutition went on slowly during those three years and more when our army was slaughtering and burning, and famine, fire, disease and depopulation were the new allies we invoked. But if the swallowing took three years, how long ought the process of digestion, that of teaching of the Filipinos to be 'fit' for rule, that solution of recalcitrant lumps into a smooth 'chyle,' with which our civil commission is charged – how long ought that to take? (*Essays* 81-82)

James's answer is "never." He characterizes imperialism as a crisis of incorporation. The Filipinos can never be assimilated into the American political body no matter what policies are developed to gobble them up. The impossibility of digestion is reaffirmed a few pages later by an act of historical regurgitation:

The country has once for all regurgitated the Declaration of Independence and the Farewell Address, and it won't swallow again immediately what it is so happy to have vomited up. It has come to a hiatus. It has deliberately pushed itself into the circle of international hatreds, and joined the common pack of wolves. (*Essays* 85)

Imperialism leads to a crisis of incorporation on two levels: first, it involves biting off more than the country can chew; second, it requires the expulsion of fundamental American ideals. There are organic limits to expansion – limits that have nothing to do with economic, military, or political power, and nothing to do with a stable concept of American identity. The model is one based on management or self-governance on a very local scale – a sustainable body as a field of inertia between ideas (like the Declaration of Independence) and environment ("the circle of international hatreds"). James's politics are grounded in a model of efficient movement rather than in a model of the pure, self-sufficient self.

The body politic in Frederick Jackson Turner is, on the contrary, essentialized, though Turner, like James, emphasizes movement in his account of the way the body interacts with its environment. His famous Frontier Thesis (1893) decouples identity from place in order to re-deploy it as a trajectory in open space. Turner argues that the so-called democratic spirit is not an outgrowth of the American landscape but the product of moving through it. While the frontier was open, those fed up with the corruption of the city could simply light out for the territories. This freed their spirit and helped produce free institutions. By an irony of history, however, these same pioneers became vanguards of the civilization they were trying to flee. Eventually, the pioneering spirit that made for strong individuals led to the trusts and monopolies that spelled the end of free movement in open space.¹ In “Social Forces in American History” (1910) Turner says:

In a word, the old pioneer individualism is disappearing, while the forces of social combination are manifesting themselves as never before... The world has never before seen such huge fortunes exercising combined control over the economic life of a people, and such luxury as has come out of the individualistic pioneer democracy of American in the course of competitive evolution. (125-126)

Turner’s story is as familiar as it is inaccurate. Numerous historians have shown that the criteria Turner used to assess the presence of the frontier – including the 1890 census – are not credible indicators of social behavior or geographical fact.² Also, we now find suspect Turner’s efforts to define the “character” – a notoriously vague concept – of individuals, institutions, and the nation in relation to a line that no one can see. Turner was attempting to locate, both historically and geographically, the transition point between nature and society, Western expansion and industrial consolidation, individualism and the huge corporations that dwarfed individual effort (125-126). Like James he speaks of movement, but his theory is really a matter of borders and frontiers, not the trajectories that traverse them. Certainly, the frontier can be seen as the outer edge of a trajectory,

¹ “In a word, the old pioneer individualism is disappearing, while the forces of social combination are manifesting themselves as never before.... The world has never before seen such huge fortunes exercising combined control over the economic life of a people, and such luxury as has come out of the individualistic pioneer democracy of American in the course of competitive evolution” (Turner 125-6).

² In his introduction to *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner* (1994), John Mack Faragher says, “Turner’s argument for the closing of the frontier has not held up well. His critics have long pointed out that far more public land in the trans-Mississippi West was taken up in the years after 1890 than in the years before. Western settlements continued to expand in the decades after the 1890s, yet on the census maps of 1900 and 1910 the ‘frontier line’ made a mysterious reappearance. Frank and Deborah Popper recently pointed out that using Turner’s own definition of ‘unsettled,’ there are in the late twentieth century 149 ‘frontier’ counties in the West, and that many areas of the western Great Plains are steadily *losing* population. The cartography that so inspired Turner, it turns out, was less a work of science than of the imagination. A century later, the West has yet to fill up” (6).

but Turner's trajectory is the expression of the supposedly innate American character. When the boundary reaches its outer limit in Turner's analysis, and the frontier runs into the Pacific, the corporate concerns – both business and political – become the “safeguards” of American character by usurping this same trajectory. Though Turner sympathizes with those who oppose corporate control – he calls them the “sectionalists” – he reserves his respect for the “self-made men” like Morgan and Harriman who use corporations to amass great control and wealth (126).

The corporate ideal quickly becomes racialized. Turner says that “the sympathy of the employers with labor has been unfavorably affected by the pressure of great numbers of immigrants of alien nationality and of lower standards of life” (124). The racial border between labor and capital is recapitulated as the national border between the U.S. and its colonies. Thus the Filipinos, whose struggle against Spain might have suggested them as freedom fighters according to the American model, become perfect targets for colonial expansion. Turner's lament for the vanishing independence of the cowboy becomes an apology for those profoundly non-individualistic imperial and economic forces supposedly engaged in establishing new frontiers, both national and racial. In “Social Forces in American History” (1910), Turner says that the “extension of power” into world affairs was “in some respects the logical outcome of the nation's march to the Pacific, the sequence to the era in which it was engaged in occupying the free lands and exploiting the resources of the West.” And more problematically: “[The United States] was obliged to reconsider questions of the rights of man and traditional American ideals of liberty and democracy, in view of the task of government of other races politically inexperienced and undeveloped” (123).

While Turner's theory turns away from the blood and soil essentialism typical of other nationalist ideologies, it transforms movement into a new essential metaphor of identity. Turner represses the actual locus of movement – the body in all of its specificities of gender, ethnicity, location, and class – only to have it return in a totalized form as the body politic. The result is a politics that advocates imperialism as a way of preserving national identity. If this is individualism, it is the individual writ large. Like James, Turner laments corporate expansion, since corporations rob men – especially white men – of independence, but unlike James he advocates imperialism, since natives are not “fit” to manage themselves.

Turner's politics are based on his theory of incorporation. This theory is a pendant piece to his more famous Frontier Thesis; he sees the development of a transportation network as the driving force behind Western expansion. More specifically, he characterizes the nation as a slowly evolving body whose circulatory system is the road system and whose skin is the famous frontier:

Thus civilization in America has followed the arteries made by geology, pouring an ever richer tide through them, until at last the slender paths of aboriginal intercourse have been broadened and interwoven into the complex mazes of modern commercial lines; the wilderness has been interpenetrated by lines of civilization growing ever more numerous. It is like the steady growth of a complex nervous system for the originally simple, inert continent. If one would understand why we are to-day one nation, rather than a collection of isolated states, he must study this economic and social consolidation of the country. (41)

Turner's geographical metaphor was not new even in 1890.³ Nevertheless, he uses it towards a novel end. The anatomical account of transportation essentially naturalizes the incorporation of the landscape, depicting it as the inevitable culmination of personal evolution. The huge body is the displaced figure of incorporation. Turner corporealizes the transportation system, which for him meant the end of the pioneer, only to have it become a giant individual, the monstrous double of that same pioneer. Alan Trachtenberg argues that Turner's notion of character is a way of "incorporating" nature under the guise of individualism (Trachtenberg 16). Threatened by large concerns and the disappearance of his frontier, Turner manages to preserve the shell of individualism by projecting it on an impossible scale. This is precisely how movement, defined as an individual right, becomes a prerogative of the larger political and economic body. Turner's theory of movement becomes an apologetic for imperialists like Roosevelt, supplementing and coming out of social Darwinism as philosophy of corporate expansion. James's movement is narratological or retrospective, but Turner's is evolutionary and teleological. In "Social Forces" he recommends judging the past in light of the present – not as a source of historical models or an opportunity for self-reflection, but as the end of streams or currents that might have seemed unimportant when they began (129).

While Turner and James have opposite political agendas, they are both anti-environmental in the current sense of the term. In "The Moral Equivalent of War," James prescribes a war against nature as a corrective to bellicose emotions. Turner advocates conquering new frontiers, and other peoples, to keep the "democratic" spirit healthy. These alternatives define the range of choices available to early twentieth-century politics – a politics that treats the environment not as a place, but as a resource to be managed for social ends.

³ In 1850, Thomas Hart Benton gave a speech on the senate floor claiming that road building did not require professional engineers. He said, "[wild animals] are the first engineers to lay out a road in a new country; the Indians follow them, and hence a buffalo road becomes a war-path. The first white hunters follow the same trails in pursuing their game; and after that the buffalo road becomes the wagon road of the white man, and finally the macadamized or railroad of the scientific man" (Stewart 17). While Benton's aim is very different from Turner's, his notion of the natural evolution of roads is strikingly similar.

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