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In the latter part of the nineteenth century, east coast city dwellers in the United States had difficulty repressing a sense of their own persistent cultural inferiority vis-à-vis London and Paris. At the same time a great many old-stock Americans were dismayed by the stream of immigrants coming to these shores whose diversity called the future cohesion of the Republic into question almost as seriously as the issue of slavery had done in the decades before the Civil War. In such a climate of opinion, the unabashed provinciality of Frederick Jackson Turner's (1861-1932) paper "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," delivered at a meeting of the newly founded American Historical Association in connection with the World Columbian Exposition in Chicago (1892), began within less than a decade to resound like a trumpet call, though whether it signalled advance or retreat remained profoundly ambiguous.

On the one hand, if Turner were to be believed, effete easterners need not have worried about lagging behind European civilization. Instead, a new nation, with a sturdy character of its own, had already formed under western skies, since "the advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence along American lines."¹ National unity and national identity were safe and sound too, because "In the crucible of the frontier the immigrants were Americanized, liberated and fused into a mixed race, English neither in nationality nor characteristics."² Persistent cultural difference from Europe was therefore evidence not of inferiority, but of a unique and indigenous response to free land and other freedoms of the [5]
frontier, since it is “to the frontier that the American intellect owes its striking characteristics.”

On the other hand, as Turner was careful to remark in both his first and last sentences, the Bureau of the Census had officially declared the frontier extinct in 1890. What did that portend for the future of American civilization? Might not the frontier-generated uniqueness of the United States decay as rapidly as it had arisen? In Turner’s own words: “He would be a rash prophet who should assert that the expansive character of American life has now entirely ceased. . . . But never again will such gifts of free land offer themselves.”

The frontier thesis therefore appealed to optimists and pessimists, westerners and easterners alike. The extraordinary attention Turner’s idea continues to receive attests the breadth of its resonance within our society.

Some two generations later, Walter Webb (1888-1963) extended Turner’s thesis beyond American borders by propounding the idea of a Great Frontier extending all the way around the globe. Webb argued that this Great Frontier had the effect of bringing windfall profits into the European metropolis, and these profits in turn sustained a prolonged era of economic expansion from 1500 onward. Windfalls came in the form of free land for European settlers in Asia, Africa, and Australia as well as in North and South America, and also as a vast treasure trove of easily exploited gold and silver. But after about 1900 frontier windfalls became a thing of the past. The depression of the 1930s, in the midst of which Webb conceived his book, therefore registered the end of the frontier-based era of easy times not just in American but also in world history. In Webb’s hands the frontier thesis thus became unambiguously pessimistic as to the future. Partly for that reason, perhaps, his idea has been far less influential than
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Turner’s, and, except in Texas, was soon rejected by historians and forgotten by the public.

There were compelling reasons for this rejection. World War II and the thirty-year boom that followed certainly seemed to invalidate Webb’s gloomy economic prophecies. In addition, after World War II American historians decided that the expansion of Europe was no longer a respectable field of academic endeavor. Instead, it became fashionable to assist the peoples of Asia and Africa in throwing off European imperialism by writing their histories for them. Accordingly, Webb’s synoptic vision met short shrift. Experts found that frontiers in Australia, South Africa, and Latin America were not the same as the frontier in North America, where the behavior of French and English pioneers also differed. Meanwhile, Europe itself faded from historians’ purview. National, regional, and thematically specialized research took pride of place as professors of European history at American colleges and universities responded to the breakup of European world power and to cheaper transatlantic air fares by trying to rival European scholars at their own game of improving accuracy by exhausting the archives.

There was, however, an oddly isolated intellectual counter-current in the postwar American academic scene. It stemmed from an effort, funded and sponsored by the Social Science Research Council, to transcend the traditional fragmentation of social studies as embodied in university departments by bringing the entire spectrum of humanistic and social science sensibilities to bear upon the study of a particular human society or some geographical region. Cross disciplinary area studies therefore nurtured large views without ever quite achieving academic respectability.

This was the situation that stimulated Louis Hartz to draw on his American studies background at Harvard to write a
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provocative book titled *Founding of New Societies: Studies in the History of the United States, Latin America, South Africa, Canada, and Australia* (New York, 1969). Hartz and his associates (for he farmed out detailed analysis of Latin America, South Africa, Canada, and Australia to like-thinking colleagues) found a meaningful pattern in the very diversity of frontier experiences. The local differences that, according to others, discredited Webb’s synthetic idea made sense to Hartz because he saw in each overseas transplant a mere fragment of the original complexity of European class structures. Each such segment, torn from its original context, having rooted itself on new ground, subsequently evolved according to a logical dynamic of its own, and departed from the European norm and from other patterns of frontier development because of the fragmentary, lopsided character of the initial transfers.

Such a view affirmed the central importance of the European heritage in determining subsequent social and cultural development. Simultaneously, it emphasized deficiencies in what had been transferred to new ground. Hartz’s vision of American culture and society therefore implied, without explicitly affirming, an enduring inferiority of the American “fragment” when compared to the full complexity of the European matrix whence it had been excised. In so characterizing American life he gave fresh voice to cultivated easterners’ longstanding alienation from the crudity of the backwoods that Turner and Webb had deemed worthy of celebration. Terms of debate altered: witness the quasi-Marxist epithets “feudal,” “bourgeois,” and “radical” that Hartz used to characterize his new societies. But the debate continued to pit the effete east against the brash west as before.

Hartz’s portrait of frontier societies seems to me therefore quite as provincial as Turner’s and just as much in need of refurbishing. And refurbish we must if the history of the United
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States, taken as a whole, is to become really intelligible once again. For if we want to make sense of all the local, ethnic, and thematic dimensions of the American past, to which professional historians have devoted their principal efforts of late, we very much need a framework into which the entire national experience in all its facets will somehow fit. Otherwise more and more facts, however well attested in the sources, become a burden on the memory, and the study of our history runs the risk of turning into mere antiquarianism.

The trouble is that the over-optimistic view of earlier generations who saw the meaning of American history in material progress, guaranteed and sustained by liberty as experienced on the frontier and codified into the Constitution, now seems inadequate. Too many people were left out: blacks, women, ethnics.

Class consciousness, even in Louis Hartz’s modulated form, turned out to be an entirely inadequate substitute. This was not solely because, as the official ideology of an unfriendly power, Marxism carried a taint of treason in post-World War II United States. The real deficiency of Marxist views was that class differences did not accurately coincide with the rather more acute ethnic, religious, and racial fissures in American society. Moreover, a vision emphasizing class struggle disrupted nationwide unity and fellow feeling and exacerbated frictions with other human beings who were uncomfortably close at hand. Accordingly, Marxist versions of United States history have remained sectarian, quite incapable of remedying the inadequacies of the older, evangelical and liberal, vision of our past.

Professional response among historians was to concentrate on detail, hoping that from more and more facts a better portrait of the whole would somehow emerge, quite of its own accord. But histories of all the various groupings into which
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Americans have consciously divided themselves, and might be divided by historians in retrospect, do not add up to a history of the nation as a whole any more than separate histories of each county in each state, if set side by side on library shelves, would provide a substitute for a history of the United States. Fragmented vision and close attention to detail do not necessarily improve accuracy. Focusing on separate trees may obscure the forest; preoccupation with an infinitude of differing leaves may allow the tree itself to disappear from view. Every increase in historical detail, in other words, risks losing sight of larger patterns which may be more important for public action and understanding than anything segmented sub-histories can discover.

The opposite extreme of looking at the history of this nation as part of a far larger process of European expansion may seem calculated to deprive the United States of its uniqueness. But if appropriately modulated to recognize both differences and uniformities, it seems to me that this perspective provides a far more adequate and comprehensive vision of our past than anything older nationalistic histories of liberty and prosperity had to offer. It puts the United States back into the world as one of a family of peoples and nations similarly situated with respect to the old centers of European civilization. Moreover, by taking seriously the Great Frontier phenomenon of modern times, we will find plenty of room for the downtrodden and poor as well as for the rich and successful, and thus avoid one of the main reproaches leveled against the liberal, establishmentarian version of the American past.

Here lay Webb’s great achievement. He offered an appropriate framework for reappraising the history of this country by recognizing that our past was part of a global process of civilizational expansion. Progress and liberty, so dear to our forebears, played a part in the process; but so did their op-
posites—slavery and the destruction of all those non-European cultures and societies that got in the way. By accepting such a framework, therefore, the successes and the failures can all find appropriate scope in our history if we are wise and sensitive enough to see the persistent double-edgedness of change—destroying and preserving, denying and affirming established values of human life, everywhere and all the time.

Foolhardy though it may be, this is what I propose to undertake in these lectures. Foolhardy—but not impossible: for what matters is perspective and proportion, not detail.

Webb’s Great Frontier, like Turner’s, was a region where men with skills derived from Europe met Amerindians and other “savage” peoples who were quite unable to resist the advances of white settlers. The “free land” that white men appropriated was land once used by others. The expansion of one society occurred only at the cost of another’s destruction. As such, the American frontier was merely an extreme case of contact and collision between societies at different levels of skill—a pattern that runs throughout recorded history, and constitutes one of the main themes of the human past.

When peoples of approximately equal levels of skill, numbers, and organization meet on a frontier, drastic geographical displacements are unlikely. Minor fluctuations in the demarcation zone can be expected, with fluctuations in the incidence of victory and defeat. But as long as the parties remain nearly equal, no very drastic change can, by definition, occur. Minor borrowing back and forth is to be expected. Techniques and ideas that for some reason have novelty value may pass from one society to its neighbor. But it is only when inherited institutions on one side of the demarcation line cease to work well that more fundamental change becomes in the least likely, for most human beings most of the time prefer the safe and
familiar to anything new. When, however, institutional decay weakens effective resistance to alien pressure, world-historical changes may ensue. Civilizational benchmarks like those signalized by Alexander's conquests of western Asia and Egypt, the Germanic invasions of the Roman empire, or the Moslem conquests of the Middle East and northern Africa record these extraordinary shifts.

Such events are rare and exceptional inasmuch as they fall outside the range of everyday encounters. An ordinary and therefore more important frontier phenomenon arose whenever one society abutted upon another that was somewhat less or more skilled. When the skill-short participant in such an encounter became aware of the difference, efforts to borrow skills needed to catch up and overtake the stronger neighbor were likely to follow. Alternatively, the weaker party might undertake measures to strengthen home defenses against an alien way of life that seemed to threaten something precious in the local cultural heritage. Far-ranging, deep-going social transformations may be triggered by either reaction.

This, indeed, seems to me to be the principal drive wheel of historic change. Encounters with strangers whose ways were different, and often threatening as well, were in all probability the main factor provoking and propagating inventions from the most ancient times to the present. And from the time when crossroads societies first achieved skills distinctly superior to those of their neighbors, i.e., since civilization first appeared on this earth, incessant interaction between more skilled and less skilled peoples has been in train. The upshot, despite numerous back-eddies and local breakdowns of civilized complexity, has been an ineluctable expansion of the portions of the globe subjected to or incorporated within civilized social structures.

Inside any given civilization an analogous interaction may
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also be detected between center and periphery, capital and provinces, upper and lower classes. For civilized societies were created and are sustained by dint of occupational differentiation and specialization. Varying skills and conflicting interests therefore divide civilized communities against themselves. Such internal frictions and differentiation merge with the polarity between civilized and fringe “barbarian” communities by almost imperceptible degrees, for civilizational boundaries are always imprecise.

My proposition boils down to the assertion that cultural differentiation generated historical change, whether within a civilized society, or across its borders. Climatic and other limits of course checked the interactive process. Agricultural skills could not readily be transferred to desert land. Disease barriers were also often important in checking expansion of dense forms of human settlement onto new ground. Protection costs against hostile military harassment were sometimes too high for cultivators to sustain on ground otherwise propitious for them. For all these reasons, the cultural landscape of the earth never approached uniformity, even though the high skills initially confined to a few civilized centers did tend to spread to new places as the generations succeeded one another.9

As long as patterns of transport and communication changed slowly, cultural interaction proceeded century after century without generating a frontier of the sort Turner and Webb celebrated. Differences between adjacent peoples were kept within relatively modest bounds because new skills diffused in short bursts across limited distances and among peoples of nearly equivalent levels of knowledge and organization. A few conspicuous gaps, like that between steppe nomads and settled agriculturalists, became chronic, based, as they were, on contrasting human adaptations to enduring geographical diversity.
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The gap between pastoral and agricultural societies long remained critically important in the Old World. This was because important zones where nomads penetrated tilled land existed across a broad region of the eastern hemisphere: along the edges of the African savanna, and across the borders of the even more extensive steppe and desert lands of Eurasia. From the time when pastoral nomads first learned to shoot arrows from horseback, about 800 B.C., until the fourteenth century A.D., military advantage consistently rested with the peoples of the desert and steppe who moved faster, and could therefore concentrate superior force at a given locality almost at will. The political history of civilized Eurasia and of Africa, in fact, consists largely of intermittent conquest by invaders from the grasslands, punctuated by recurrent rebellions of agricultural populations against subjugation to the heirs of such conquerors. Only at the two extremes of the Old World, in Japan and western Europe, were these rhythms of alternating nomad conquest and agricultural revolt too weak to matter very much. 10

So far as I can tell, an “open” frontier of the kind that developed in North and South America, Australia, and South Africa after 1500 never arose in earlier times. Perhaps when neolithic farming folk first spread their fields across Eurasia, penetrating forests where hunting bands had previously roamed, something faintly analogous to the modern frontier arose. But that happened long before the dawn of recorded history, and the archaeological record does not show whether the advance of agriculture involved wholesale displacement of populations, as on the American frontier, or whether hunters already on the ground simply learned from neighbors how to supplement their kill by making fields and raising crops. Both processes presumably were at work, in what proportion no one can tell.

The closest analogue to the modern frontier phenomenon

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in the deeper past seems to be the expansion of Chinese society southward from its original home in the Yellow River valley. Chinese colonization started before 800 B.C., and continued sporadically to the present. It was therefore a relatively slow, massive, and sustained process, involving the wholesale remodelling of natural landscapes. The Chinese built rice paddies as they advanced, leveling each field precisely, and arranging for suitable inflow of water so as to keep the surface submerged during the growing season. On most larger streams, effective water management required canal construction, digging, and other improvements to natural water courses. The settlers thereby created a transport network that tied China’s expanding body politic together as effectively—perhaps, indeed, more effectively—than did the Confucian bureaucracy that oversaw the whole effort.

Like the ponderous, slow-moving Pleistocene ice sheets, whose scouring action transformed the landscape of northern Eurasia and much of North America, the expanding human mass of Chinese settlers engulfed earlier inhabitants of the Yangtze valley and regions farther south, incorporating them into the Chinese world. Human numbers and the enormous investment of labor, skill, and organization involved in making the natural landscape over into paddy fields surrounded and then submerged earlier occupants. Military action played very little part in the process. What mattered were the picks, shovels, and hoes of countless millions of pioneers, laboring persistently year after year after year, under the direction of government officials.¹¹

Perhaps Andean civilization expanded in pre-Columbian times in a similar fashion. Certainly the abandoned terraces that still cling to Peruvian mountainsides constitute an impressive monument to past human effort. The taming of other regions to agriculture must also have involved prolonged, anonymous

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human labor on a massive scale. But until modern times, nowhere, so far as I know, did the process involve ingestion of one population by another on anything approaching the scale that occurred across the Chinese southern frontier. That was because the Chinese had skills as farmers and water engineers that contiguous peoples lacked, and were ready to submit to a labor discipline that others resisted. China’s historic magnitude, cohesion, and population density resulted—traits quite unparalleled elsewhere.\textsuperscript{12}

But China’s slow-moving frontier paled before the extraordinary circumstances that confronted Europeans after 1500. For the overseas expansion that followed hard on the heels of European voyages of discovery was matched by a landward expansion of almost comparable significance. European settlers began to drift into the Ukraine and adjacent areas of the western steppe in the sixteenth century, finding empty or almost empty grasslands awaiting them. This was because older nomad populations had shrunk back, retreating in all likelihood from exposure to bubonic plague, which had become endemic among the burrowing rodents of the western steppe in the fourteenth century.\textsuperscript{13} In the course of the next two hundred years, the western steppe was firmly incorporated into European agricultural society by Slavic and Rumanian pioneers who did the work, acting, for the most part, under the legal control of noble estate owners and entrepreneurs, often of a different nationality.

The scope of this “eastward movement” bears comparison with the more familiar westward movement across North America. Expansion of agriculture into the drier and more easterly portions of the steppe continued sporadically throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries. The latest episode came in the 1950s, when the Russians plowed up millions of acres of marginal steppe lands in Kazakhstan in
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order to remedy the persistent grain shortages that had long plagued their planning.

Europe’s landward frontier extended northward through forested land as well. There, agriculture was seldom practica-
ble but fur-bearing animals abounded. Medieval fur traders, operating from such northern cities as Novgorod, successfully
solved the problems of long-distance travel and survival in the Arctic and sub-Arctic regions of northern Russia. Once across
the Urals (by 1580), therefore, Russian fur traders could move from one Siberian river system to another by making a series
of easy portages. This they already knew how to do. Consequently, explorers reached Okhotsk on the Pacific coast as early
as 1637. A vast land, thinly populated by weakly organized hunters and gatherers, thus came under Russian control. A
little later, but in almost the same fashion, other fur traders, operating from Montreal (after 1642) and from the shores of
Hudson Bay (after 1670) extended their control over the Can-
dadian Arctic. As is well known, the rival fur-trading empires
met in the 1780s when Russian pioneers who had crossed to
Alaska collided with British, American, and Spanish claimants
to the Pacific coastlands of North America.¹⁴

Because of our national origins, we in this country are far
more conscious of the overseas dimension of Europe’s expan-
sion. Nor is this merely the result of myopic local perspective.
European ships did in fact inaugurate more drastic new en-
counters after 1500 than anything happening overland within
Eurasia. This justifies us in giving pride of place to European
frontiers overseas, for nothing in earlier ages can quite com-
pare with the revolution in older human balances inaugurated
by those famous voyages—Columbus to Magellan, 1492-
1521—so remarkably concentrated into a single generation.

Thereafter, Europeans commanding skills accumulated
across millennia of civilized history found themselves face to

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face with previously isolated and therefore low-skilled peoples in many parts of the earth. In Australia, for example, to cite the most extreme case, European intruders met aborigines whose way of life, as attested archaeologically, seems to have altered very little after their initial penetration of the continent thousands of years before. Even in the New World, where far more accomplished Amerindian societies, like those of Mexico and Peru, came up against Spanish conquistadors, they, too, proved quite unable to resist the newcomers. Numbers were all on the side of the Amerindians at first. Spanish skills and organization, though undoubtedly superior, were not so enormously above the levels attained by the Aztecs and Incas as to compensate for the small numbers of those who followed Cortez and Pizarro, whether at the time of their conquests, or subsequently. But European epidemiological superiority was indubitable and decisive. Inherited and acquired immunities to a formidable array of lethal infections allowed Europeans to survive in the presence of killers such as smallpox, measles, flu, tuberculosis, diphtheria, and others, whereas the inexperienced Amerindians proved vulnerable to wholesale destruction on first encountering these infections.  

Lethal diseases from Europe and, ere long, also from Africa (yellow fever and malaria in particular) demoralized survivors and paralyzed Amerindian efforts to mount resistance against European political and cultural domination. In many places, depopulation became almost total, leaving unoccupied land for European settlers to appropriate freely. Thus the “empty” frontier Turner spoke of arose from the destruction of Amerindian populations by infections imported from the Old World, sporadically reinforced by resort to armed force. Similar epidemiological disasters afflicted other formerly isolated inhabitants of Oceania, South Africa, and, indeed, wherever a disease-inexperienced population encountered disease-resistant
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pioneers and explorers. Siberian hunters and trappers met the same fate when Russian fur traders initiated contacts with them, for example; and Eskimos in the Canadian Arctic were experiencing a parallel catastrophe as recently as the 1940s.\textsuperscript{16}

The combination of epidemiological superiority with a greater or lesser superiority of skills on the part of intrusive Europeans was what gave the Great Frontier its unique character.

Nevertheless, it is worth emphasizing that not all the uncivilized parts of the earth were hospitable to European penetration. Until about 1850, tropical Africa was very effectively guarded by a formidable array of local diseases which mowed down European and Asian intruders as ruthlessly as European diseases mowed down previously isolated people of the temperate zones. African peoples of the rain forest and savanna south of the Sahara therefore remained in undisturbed possession of their ancestral lands. The slave trade soon assumed hitherto unexampled scale among them, supplying labor to European-managed plantations in the New World and to Moslem households and plantations in the Old in approximately equal numbers.\textsuperscript{17} Slave raiding undoubtedly altered older patterns of human life in Africa in far-reaching ways. Simultaneously, the spread of maize and of other new crops from America began to provide a far more productive basis for African agriculture. Changes must have been drastic under these circumstances. But Africa did \textit{not} become a theater for European frontier expansion save for a small area in the extreme south, where a cooler, drier climate prevented tropical diseases from spreading.

Before 1750, therefore, the steppe and forest zones of Eurasia, together with North and South America, constituted the principal regions where frontier encounters assumed the extraordinary form familiar to us from our own national history. This was where Europeans could and did begin to occupy

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land emptied, or almost emptied, of older inhabitants by the catastrophic juxtaposition of disease-experienced civilized populations with epidemiologically and culturally\textsuperscript{18} vulnerable natives. Nothing comparable had ever happened before. European expansion therefore assumed unparalleled proportions. The process gave birth to the two politically dominant states of our own time, the USSR and the USA, one east and the other west of the older centers of European civilization. Brazil and the diverse states of Spanish America are likewise heirs of this frontier. So is South Africa; but the European encroachment on Australia, New Zealand, and other Pacific islands did not begin until after the middle of the eighteenth century and so does not yet enter our purview.

The most salient characteristic of the Great Frontier created by the combined ravages of civilized diseases, alcohol, and firearms on indigenous populations was that human numbers were or soon became scant in the contact zone. Anyone who wished to exploit the land agriculturally or sought to mine precious metals or extract other raw materials faced a problem of finding an adequate labor force to do the necessary work. Shortage of manpower meant that European skills and knowledge could not readily be brought to bear in frontier lands, no matter how richly they were endowed.

Carrying Europeans across the seas to remedy this situation was expensive. Relatively few ever made the crossing before the 1840s, when steamships began to cheapen passage and to enlarge passenger carrying capacity. Estimates of transatlantic migration are very inexact, since early records of voyages across the ocean are spotty at best and seldom include passenger lists. A recent guess set the total of British immigrants to North America before 1780 at 750,000 and of French to Canada at only 10,000.\textsuperscript{19} Further south no careful calculation of any general total of European immigration exists, though what
scrapes of evidence there are suggest that something like a million persons crossed the ocean to take up residence in the Caribbean and Latin America before 1800.

Spaniards did, of course, employ Amerindians in the mines and for innumerable building projects and other enterprises in the first rush of their conquest. But the extreme vulnerability of such a labor force to epidemic disease led to heavy loss of life and soon made recruitment difficult. In most islands of the Caribbean the Amerindian population died out completely. Amerindians also disappeared almost totally from the coastal regions of the Caribbean, where African diseases reinforced the destructive power of those imported from Europe. Enslaved Africans, however, could and soon did provide a more disease-resistant labor force for plantation agriculture and other economic enterprises in the New World. Relatively precise calculation of the number of slaves carried from Africa is possible because the traffic came to be conducted by specialized slave ships, whose number and carrying capacity can be established with some accuracy. A recent estimate puts the number of Africans brought to the New World before 1820 at 7.8 million; and the same authority suggests that this figure is four to five times the contemporaneous total of European migration across the Atlantic.

This perhaps surprising statistic ought to remind us of how important compulsory labor became and long remained in the New World. Compulsion bulks even larger in our perspective when we remember that most of the Europeans who crossed the Atlantic before steamships cheapened the cost of passage came as unfree indentured servants. Between 300,000 and 400,000 such persons left Britain for North America between 1650 and 1780, according to the best available estimates. This figure amounts to something between half and three-quarters of all the whites who came to North America from Europe.
before the American revolution.\textsuperscript{22} Indentured servants could, of course, look forward to becoming free men if they survived the period of their indentured labor. But as long as their bondage lasted—often seven years—their legal position vis-à-vis their master was not much different from that of black slaves, though the absence of physical differentiation in outward appearance may have made it easier for them to run away before completing their contracts.

The free, egalitarian, and neo-barbarian style of frontier life, so dear to Turner and his followers, did of course exist in North America. It arose wherever export trade failed to thrive during the early stages of colonization. But in the more favored and accessible regions, where European skills proved capable of producing marketable wealth on a relatively large scale, frontier conditions ordinarily provoked not freedom but a social hierarchy steeper than anything familiar in Europe itself. The reason was that commercially precocious frontier societies usually found it necessary to assure the availability and subordination of a labor force by imposing stern legal restrictions on freedom to choose and change occupation. Hence, slave plantations and gangs of indentured servants in the Americas, as well as the serf-cultivated estates of eastern Europe, were quite as characteristic of the frontier as were the free and independent farmers and jacks-of-all-trades whom we habitually associate with frontier life.

One form of export trade that often played a prominent role on the frontier did impose a close symbiosis of equalitarian freedom with bureaucratic hierarchy. Capturing and collecting existing goods—whether furs, placer gold, raw rubber from the Amazon rain forest, or codfish from the Grand Banks—could only be done by a dispersed work force, operating beyond any manager’s control. Trans-oceanic marketing of such goods, on the other hand, required comparatively large-
scale organization. Trading companies solved this problem by stationing agents at strategic locations, where they conducted a barter trade with the men who did the actual collecting. Commodities exchanged were sufficiently valuable to the parties concerned to bear the cost of transport; and even at remote locations, agents could still be controlled by their home offices since everyone knew that if they failed to send back adequate amounts of the sought-after commodity, the flow of trade goods needed for barter would promptly dry up.

Though a few big trading companies thus managed to span the forbidding distances between European metropolitan centers and the frontier, it remained the case that frontier conditions could not sustain the elaborately graded hierarchy that prevailed in the heartlands of European civilization. Near the center, long tradition and market constraints combined to fit men and women into an elaborately interlocking and largely hereditary pattern of occupations. Legal differentiation separated clergy, nobles, and commoners, and defined membership in a great variety of privileged corporations. In skilled trades, apprentices were bound to their masters for a period of years under conditions that somewhat resembled indentured labor in America. In all these senses, labor was subject to legal coercion in Europe too. But slavery was unimportant; serfdom had disappeared from the most active centers of European economic life long before Columbus sailed; and the price system, acting through fluctuating wages, was becoming increasingly effective in allocating and reallocating labor among competing occupations. Large-scale undertakings like mining and shipping could recruit the necessary manpower by offering appropriate rates of pay. Even soldiering had become a question of fulfilling a contract freely entered into, at least in principle; though once enlisted, a soldier, more even than an
indentured servant or apprentice, faced severe penalties for seeking to withdraw from his place in the ranks.

Western Europe's reliance on the market as a means of allocating and reallocating labor among alternative employments was sustained by birth and survival rates that were high enough to supply hands for existing enterprises with a few left over for promising new ventures as well. Legal compulsion, backed by force, became quite unnecessary when enough labor presented itself spontaneously for carrying out all the tasks that the rulers and managers of society felt were really necessary and important. Under such circumstances, compulsion became a waste of time and effort, and a needless provocation as well.

The balance of supply and demand for labor was always precarious. The Black Death in the fourteenth century set back European population for more than a century and altered wage rates abruptly. Thereafter, recurrent epidemics, concentrated especially in towns, frequently cut back on local populations, sometimes very sharply.24 But such perturbations were rapidly made good by accelerated influx from the healthier countryside, where all those youths who were unable to count on inheriting rights to enough cultivable land to live as their parents were doing constituted a pool of ready recruits for any venture that promised escape from what was, within the village confines, a radically unsatisfactory career prospect. Europe's remarkable record of expansion at home and abroad, dating back to about A.D. 900, rested on a demographic pattern that regularly provided a surplus of rural youths for export to towns and armies, with a few left over for migration to more distant frontier zones as well.

But Europe's demographic balance, elaborate social hierarchy, and the well-established interdependence of social classes could not be reproduced on the frontier. Local population
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was inadequate. Large-scale enterprise that required major input of labor could not be carried on without compulsion. This was as true of the overland as of the overseas frontier. The legal servitude of Russian peasants in the seventeenth century differed only slightly from the slavery of American plantations; and debt peonage imposed on Amerindians in the New World, as well as English indentured labor, had the same practical effect, even if the obligated human beings retained rights under these legal systems that were denied to black slaves.

The whole point was to keep slaves, serfs, indentured servants, and peons at work on tasks a managerial, owning class wanted to see accomplished. In proportion to their success, a flood of new goods—sugar, cotton, silver, wheat, indigo, and many more—entered European and world markets. Income thus accruing to enterprising landowners, mine operators, and resident factors for wholesale merchants based in Europe allowed them to buy expensive imported European products so that they could live like gentlemen—more or less. In this fashion a slender simulacrum of European polite society quickly arose in American and European frontier lands. Subsequently, in proportion as local population grew so that labor became available for various crafts and retail commercial occupations, an approximation to European forms of society could gradually develop in the shadow of the planter-landowner-managerial class.

The prominence of slavery and serfdom in European frontier expansion did not foreclose the egalitarian alternative entirely, even in societies dominated by compulsory labor. Runaways and individuals who had worked out their indenture could and did take off into the backwoods to carve out a life free of any obligation to social superiors. Such pioneers often cut themselves off from any but sporadic contacts with civilization. But, like planters and landowners of the frontier, they

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continued to depend for some critically important items on sources of supply far in the rear. Guns and ammunition, as well as iron for tools, were things that even the most remote frontiersmen found it hard to do without. How they got possession of such goods is often unclear. Hand-to-hand swapping could reach far beyond organized markets; and incentive to swapping was real enough since the frontier could usually be made to yield something precious and portable—furs, placer gold, or the like—that commanded a high enough price on world markets to justify its carriage across many miles of plain and mountain.

Hence even the most remote and barbarous *coureurs de bois* of North America, the *bandeirantes* of Brazil, the *gauchos* of the pampas, the *voortrekkers* of South Africa, and the Cossacks of Siberia retained a significant and vitally important link with the nearest outposts of civilization. Like the slave-owners and serf-owners of the frontier they, too, participated in the world market system that centered in western Europe. Their participation shrank in proportion as their mode of life descended toward local self-sufficiency. But complete autarky meant loss of the margin of superiority newcomers enjoyed vis-à-vis older native inhabitants. Those who cut loose entirely from Europe-centered and -managed trade nets simply merged into local indigenous populations, and thereupon ceased to act as agents of frontier expansion. Such persons were always few, since the status of a man without access to a gun (and other European-made goods) diminished drastically in remote communities.

The sharp polarization in frontier society between freedom and hierarchy should therefore be understood as arising from alternative responses to the overriding reality of the frontier, to wit, the drastic shortage of labor. For this reason, one social structure was capable of abrupt transmutation into its opposite. Runaway slaves or serfs who made good an escape
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from their master’s control at once became egalitarian frontiersmen. The maroons of Jamaica constituted the most famous such community, but were only one of many. On Europe’s other flank, Cossack hordes in their early days recruited runaway serfs as a matter of course; later, after the hordes were themselves captured by the Russian state, such escape became illegal, though successful flight into the depths of Siberia continued to occur as long as Russian serfdom endured.

The opposite transmutation from egalitarianism to legally imposed hierarchy was even more common. In the east, wholesale enserfment of once-free peasant populations was the order of the day when frontier expansion into the steppelands got seriously underway in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the New World, the rise of peonage in Mexico in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was analogous. Efforts to transplant reinvigorated forms of manorial jurisdiction to Canada and New York met with scant success; and indentured labor provided only a precarious basis for gentlemen farmers in Virginia and Maryland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But such efforts show that the urge to impose legal bonds on free men operated in English, Dutch, and French colonial society as well as on the Russian and Spanish frontiers.

We are accustomed to thinking of the equalitarian alternative as the norm of frontier life. Both Turner and Webb, for example, skip over the role of slavery in the frontier history of the United States. I suppose this remarkable omission arose from the fact that they cherished an ideal of American liberty and equality, and also felt nostalgia for the days of their youth when residues of the Wisconsin and west Texas forms of frontier life still dominated local society. By noticing only one aspect of frontier reality, Turner and Webb were able to combine these sentiments uninhibitedly. But this kind of wishful
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thinking deserves to be subjected to skeptical examination. If one does so, it seems to me that a neutral observer would have to conclude that compulsion and legally reinforced forms of social hierarchy were more generally characteristic of frontier society than were equality and freedom.

Two reasons for this circumstance suggest themselves. First of all, free and equal nuclear families scattered thinly over the landscape are in a poor position to protect themselves. Consequently, wherever safeguard from enemy raiding parties was important, the radical equalitarianism of isolated pioneer homesteads proved inadequate. Even in the American west, the U.S. cavalry was called upon to shield settlers from raiding Indians. In the Old World, exposure to violence was far more serious, since, beginning in the 1480s, the Crimean Tartars organized systematic raids across the Ukrainian steppes to supply the insatiable Ottoman slave market. Scattered householders could not mount effective self-defense against such manhunts. Only specialized military organizations—whether the Cossack hordes or the Tsar’s regular army—could confront raiding Tartars on more or less even terms. Consequently, for pioneering cultivators of the soil, the price of security from Tartar raids was subjection to experts in violence who could maintain an effective, professionalized frontier defense. Heartfelt efforts to reaffirm vanishing social equality and freedom within the framework of the Cossack horde were nullified by the fact that the Russian state made the horde itself into a privileged corporation after 1648. By exempting enrolled Cossacks from the obligations of serfdom, the Tsar acquired a new and formidable instrument for defending the frontier and imposing serfdom on the rest of the population of the Ukrainian borderlands. Thereafter, Tartar slave raids quickly ceased to be profitable, and the rich grasslands of the
western steppe became safe for agricultural settlement on a massive scale.\textsuperscript{25}

Because North America was less exposed to military threat than the Eurasian steppelands, American frontier experience gave more scope to the egalitarian, libertarian alternative than did the Russian. Important divergences in our societies still bear witness to this difference. But it was not the frontier per se that dictated this result. Instead it was our unusually low protection costs during the three centuries from 1608 to 1917. Australia, too, enjoyed negligible protection costs until even more recently than the United States, whereas Boer Vortrekkers encountered quite formidable rivals in the kaffir tribesmen with whom they disputed rights to land and water for nearly two centuries. Australia's populist egalitarianism was therefore free to flourish at the expense of imported hierarchies of class and culture, whereas Boer anarchic and egalitarian traditions were tempered by recurrent acceptance of military subordination to commanders whose authority was as great as it was temporary.

A second factor militating against equality and freedom on the frontier was economic. Dependence on supplies from the rear meant that pioneers were chronically at the mercy of merchants and suppliers who, by controlling transportation, controlled the terms of trade. When frontiersmen needed little, and rarely bought or sold anything, this did not infringe upon their liberty very much. But when buying and selling increased in importance so that everyday life began to depend on it, then the few who controlled access to distant markets were in a very favorable position to enhance their income at the expense of the ordinary farmer, miner or fur trapper.

In other words, land ownership and control over a labor force legally tied to the spot was not always necessary to allow a few to exploit the labor of others. This was the burden of
populist protest against railroads and other outside capitalist interests that became such a prominent feature of United States politics in the second half of the nineteenth century. The Hudson’s Bay Company, John Jacob Astor, and the Stroganov company that dominated the Siberian fur trade were no more popular with the backwoodsmen of an earlier age. London and Lisbon merchants who supplied Virginia planters and Brazilian slave owners had a similar relationship with their aristocratic trade partners, while the grain dealers and shipowners who carried grain from Danzig and Odessa to European markets were also in an advantageous position to dictate terms to Polish and Russian landowners.

In all such situations, traders with connections back to the distant markets and workshops of Europe represented the entering wedge for the social complexity and occupational differentiation that was and remained the special hallmark of civilization. Men who bought cheap and sold dear, and made chaffering over prices into a way of life, were disliked and even hated by frontier dwellers—rich and poor, owners and workers, free and bond. Recurrent pogroms against Jews in eastern Europe attest this fact all too poignantly. But frontiersmen could not get on without such people either. Goods otherwise inaccessible were too attractive and too important to do without, even if the purchaser felt cheated in every deal. The only alternative to importation was local manufacture: and in some Ukrainian towns as well as in American cities artisan trades had begun to take root before 1750. Social complexity grew accordingly. Little by little civilization was encroaching.

Nevertheless, prior to 1750 the replication of cosmopolitan complexity and of a graded hierarchy of social classes in peripheral regions of the European world system remained incomplete and sporadic. Until after that date the European em-
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Empires arising from the first two modern centuries of expansion remained in place, and were, in fact, growing with each passing decade. That political fact registered the imperfect diffusion of civilized skills and techniques from center to periphery. After 1776, as the process of civilized expansion continued, political patterns changed, signalizing a more complete transfer of the arts and skills of civilization onto new ground. In addition, a new demographic regime in Europe provided a basis for far more massive emigration than had previously occurred.

My next lecture will consider aspects of this second phase in the history of the Great Frontier.