

# Myths of the American West

Marlon Lieber

In 1886, Eleanor Marx, Karl Marx's youngest daughter, and her partner, Edward Aveling, toured the United States to study the American workers' movement. In Cincinnati, Ohio, the two visited a museum in which they came across an exhibit of a group of cowboys in "picturesque garb". One of them, introduced as "Mr. John Sullivan alias Broncho John", gave a speech denouncing "capitalists in general and (...) ranch-owners in particular", which greatly impressed his European audience. In private, the cowboy complained that "no class is harder worked, ... none so poorly paid for their services". This is because they lack an "organisation", such as a "Cowboy Union".<sup>1</sup> For an audience familiar with cowboys through popular culture this must surely come as a surprise, as the cowboy is commonly represented as a self-reliant, 'rugged' individual. The idea that cowboys should join a trade union seems, to anyone who has ever seen a Western film, preposterous.

It is necessary to keep in mind that popular representations of cowboys in particular and the American West in general should not be mistaken for accurate depictions of historical figures, places and events. Instead, the popular West is a mythic space, which reveals as much about the culture that has produced such representations as it does about American history itself. The popularization of the cowboy can already be discovered in Marx and Aveling, who do not encounter cowboys in the wild, but in a museum. Already in the 1880s, when tens of thousands of actual cowboys still roamed the prairie, 'the Cowboy' had been condensed into a representation, articulating materiality (the cowboys' 'picturesque garb') and meaning (the qualities they embody), that could be consumed by eastern audiences, and was even recognizable to European visitors.

Cultural Studies tries to explain why concrete articulations (of meaning and materiality) emerge in specific historical conjunctures. It analyzes how and why human actors mobilize particular versions of the past in order to create social identities through the work of cultural memory. To understand how the figure of the cowboy has served this purpose, it is important to know more about the past that is culturally remembered in

this figure.

In his classic study *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, Henry Nash Smith elaborates on the role that open land in the West has played in the American imagination, writing that

one of the most persistent generalizations concerning American life and character is the notion that our society has been shaped by the pull of a vacant continent drawing populations westward. <sup>2</sup>

The promise of freedom in the West was articulated differently at different times, but always relied on “images” that expressed “collective desires” and allowed American settlers to make sense of their experiences. These images, as Smith puts it, not only influenced the way newcomers perceived the land; they also “motivate and direct action”. <sup>3</sup> They served, in other words, as lenses and blueprints, as maps of meaning that informed the perceptions and actions of Americans. But these images did not assign the same role to all that came. The metaphor of the ‘virgin land’ has gendered connotations, amongst other things, evoking the idea of (feminine) nature passively waiting for (masculine) settlers to actively take possession of it. And, indeed, in hegemonic representations of the American West, men usually appear as the free subjects of expansion, whereas women are subjected to the status of passive bystanders.

Often, the story of American independence is told as a conflict over political representation (“No taxation without representation,” as the famous slogan had it), but it is also intricately related to westward expansion. The British Empire was primarily interested in maritime trade, and, consequently, had little interest in opening up the interior, as the infrastructure to transport agricultural goods to the Atlantic seaboard was missing. <sup>4</sup> The colonists, however, were strongly attracted by the vast tracts of unsettled land – unsettled by Europeans, that is! – and moved West, where they encountered and often clashed with indigenous populations, some of whom had been Britain’s allies in the French and Indian War fought from 1754-63.

In 1763, King George III prohibited further settlement west of the Alleghenies. The colonists felt that this was a violation of their rights, “since they defined their sovereignty as the right to move west”. <sup>5</sup> Soon, the original thirteen colonies were to declare their independence from

Great Britain. As the historian Greg Grandin argues, the “Declaration of Independence of 1776 was, among other things, the colonists’ counter to the Royal Proclamation of 1763”, and over the following century European settlers conquered the entire continent all the way to the Pacific Ocean.<sup>6</sup>

For Thomas Jefferson, who would later become the third president of the United States, the existence of open land to be settled by farmers ensured that American citizens would remain independent and virtuous:

Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he ever had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue.<sup>7</sup>

In this passage, an action (working the land) is articulated with a set of values (virtue). Jefferson, here, expresses the myth of ‘agrarianism’, in which the land is imagined as an “Edenic paradise symbolizing pastoral simplicity and economic independence”.<sup>8</sup> Social conflicts are largely absent from this vision.

As president, Jefferson realized that this required the federal state to assume an active role by providing new land for settlers, which meant displacing its original inhabitants. Heike Paul, thus, points out that there is a second, less peaceful myth, in which the West figures “as a site of individual and collective quests for land and dominance”. This is the ‘expansionist’ myth.<sup>9</sup> Jefferson himself oversaw the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, through which the United States almost doubled its size by acquiring vast territories west of the Mississippi from France. The Indian Removal Act, signed into law by President Andrew Jackson in 1830, authorized federal troops to push Native Americans to areas west of the Mississippi, which they did with great brutality. The Mexican-American War (1846-48) followed the annexation of Texas and ended in the United States taking possession of much of the Southwest. Moreover, the California Gold Rush sent more than 100,000 gold seekers towards the West coast in 1849.

Westward expansion was often legitimized by the ideology of ‘Manifest Destiny’; in 1845, John O’Sullivan proclaimed that it was the Americans’ “manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions”.<sup>10</sup> It was, in other words, assumed that it was the Americans’ God-given right (and duty) to expand.

Debates over whether the new states in the West should allow slavery (among other issues) resulted in eleven Southern states seceding from the Union in 1861. From 1861-65, the Civil War was fought between the Union and the Confederacy, and as many as 750,000 soldiers died. By the end of the Civil War, legal slavery had effectively been abolished (though other racist practices continued), and the nation could again expend energy on moving West, forcibly moving Native Americans to reservations and brutally fighting against those who resisted. In 1890, US troops massacred more than 300 Lakotas at Wounded Knee, more than two-thirds of whom were women and children.

The older agrarian myth, however, did not disappear, and continued to inform American politics. The Homestead Act (1862) promised farmers land in the West. The idea was to allow poor Easterners to become yeoman farmers, so that class conflicts in the East could be averted. The plan did not really work out. Instead, the belief that free land acted as a “safety valve” can rather be seen as

an imaginative construction which masked poverty and industrial strife with the pleasing suggestion that a beneficent nature (...) would solve the new problems of industrialism.<sup>11</sup>

In practice, the Homestead Act gave rise to land speculation and did not result in large-scale land ownership by independent farmers. In the end, the agrarian myth was no match for a reality increasingly dominated by capital.

The decades after the Civil War were also the period of the open-range cattle industry and the historical cowboys. Spanish colonizers had brought cattle to the Americas, and vaqueros had long raised cattle in the South and Southwest, where Anglo-Americans encountered their tradition. Later, the railroad gave cattle owners access to northern markets. In 1867, the Kansas Pacific Railroad established a stockyard in Abilene: “That year 35,000 head of cattle arrived at the railhead, but over the next half decade Abilene shipped out more than 1.5 million Texas longhorns”.<sup>12</sup> As a result, the American landscape was changed forever.

In cattle towns, where the trails (on which herds led by cowboys arrived) met the railroad, cowboys gathered in saloons, and in this atmosphere, where “unattached young men, alcohol, and firearms” mingled, the “reputation for cowboy outlawry” was established.<sup>13</sup> Out on the range in

all-male groups, however, cowboys also engaged in ‘stag dances’, where some put on female clothes and danced with their fellow men.<sup>14</sup>

Homosocial bonding – and, possibly, homosexual practices – were, thus, also part of the cowboys’ way of life. And so was diversity. According to some estimates, “one-third of all trail cowboys were African American, Mexican, or Indian”.<sup>15</sup> Neither of these facts is acknowledged in hegemonic representations of the cowboy, which, more often than not, portray him as a heterosexual white man.

By 1890, then, the West had been ‘won’. The United States had turned from a rural nation of 2.5 million in 1776 to a highly industrialized one with a population of 76 million in 1900. However, this story of westward expansion also became “the story of how a society *with capitalism* became a capitalist society”. The historian James Parisot writes that

for many settlers, westward movement was a way to escape rising relations of capitalist dependence in the east. (...) In the long run, though, capitalism did come to dominate and control the American population.<sup>16</sup>

The promise of freedom in the West had been real (if primarily for white men), but now it seemed as if “the last Bourgeois Paradise on earth” would turn into an “Inferno”, as the German socialist Friedrich Engels put it.<sup>17</sup> The disappearance of land to be settled and the seeming end to the expansionary drive produced a crisis for the American imagination.

No one had a better sense for this crisis than the historian Frederick Jackson Turner, whose 1893 thesis on the frontier’s role in American history would shape the nation’s self-understanding for decades to come. Turner rejected the then prevalent narrative of Anglo-Saxon (and Teutonic) heritage and its racialist implications; instead, he claimed that “what was good in America was made in America”.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, he attempted to explain the origin of a uniquely American cultural identity.

Turner’s paper begins by noting the significance of the frontier, the border dividing the land settled by Americans from the “wilderness” beyond: “The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development”.<sup>19</sup> On the basis of this assessment, he then argues that conditions at the frontier were responsible for creating the American national character:

For a moment, at the frontier, the bonds of custom are broken and unrestraint is triumphant. (...) In spite of environment, and in spite of custom, each frontier did indeed furnish a new field of opportunity, a gate of escape from the bondage of the past.<sup>20</sup>

He also explains which specific traits emerged at the frontier:

to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things (...); that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom – these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier.<sup>21</sup>

The frontier, for Turner, is thus a site of permanent cultural renewal, where Americans reassure themselves of their identity (their national character) by encountering difference (wilderness, Natives) – the frontier can thus be seen a site of schismogenesis on a world-historical scale.

In the twentieth century, many historians challenged Turner's thesis. Patricia Nelson Limerick quotes a woman who had left her native Virginia for a ranch in Montana in the 1880s: "Everyone in the country lived out of cans (...) and you would see a great heap of them outside every little shack".<sup>22</sup> These discarded cans serve as a reminder that communities in the West remained connected to the East through commercial links. Moreover, it shows that culture is not merely spread on the level of ideas, norms, and values, but also materially: practices of food consumption in the West were made possible by tin cans (just as the cowboys' way of life relied not just on horses and guns, but also on the material infrastructure of the railroad).

Richard Slotkin emphasizes the role that violent conflict has played in the myth of the frontier:

the myth represented the redemption of American spirit or fortune as something to be achieved by playing through a scenario of separation, temporary regression to a more

primitive (...) state, and regeneration through violence.<sup>23</sup>

The cultural renewal celebrated by Turner is revealed by Slotkin to rest on the violence meted out against Native Americans (and other external enemies). This violence would not cease after the frontier was closed.

Turner himself had suggested that “now, four centuries from the discovery of America (...), the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history”.<sup>24</sup> But if the frontier was what established a distinctive American identity, its closing constituted a threat. Three alternatives suggested themselves. First, Americans could look for new areas in which to apply the frontier traits such as the ‘practical, inventive turn of mind’, and many regarded the quest for technological innovations to be a field where Americans could excel. John F. Kennedy used the metaphor of the frontier in this way in 1960, calling for Americans to conquer space and to put Americans on the moon: “This is the new age of exploration; space is our great New Frontier”.<sup>25</sup> This was echoed in 1994, when it was suggested that “Cyberspace is the latest American frontier”.<sup>26</sup> Less peacefully, new frontiers could be sought in imperialist expansion, and soon after the closing of the frontier, the United States waged the first of many imperialist wars (the Spanish-American War in 1898). Lastly, Americans could return to an imaginary frontier in the realm of popular culture.

The popularization of cowboys had already begun in the 1880s, offering representations of a ‘Wild West’ to an urbanized readership. Mass-produced and cheap dime novels told tales of outlaws, lawmen and cowboys relying on “formulas which could be used by any number of writers” and revised “according to the changing demands of the market”.<sup>27</sup> Among the most popular heroes of the dime novel era were Deadwood Dick and Buffalo Bill. The latter was modeled on William Frederick Cody, the creator of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, a spectacular show which ran for more than thirty years after 1883, toured the United States and Europe, and included live music, horseback riding, live buffaloes, stagecoach chases and fights against ‘Indians’, who were depicted by Native actors.

The dime novels and the Wild West shows were replaced by a medium that fused lurid storytelling with spectacular performances and that influenced popular perceptions of the West more than any other: *film*. Starting with *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), thousands of Western films told heroic tales relying on spectacular representations outshining

anything Buffalo Bill could put on. Early Westerns usually featured a hero “with a clear moral compass” who used his skills to defeat evil. This

formula western reinforced established social values and mores and assured audiences that the forces of good and evil were easily distinguishable; most important, they promised that good would triumph.<sup>28</sup>

At a time when the United States had undoubtedly turned into the world’s major capitalist power, Western films offered an “imagined egalitarian rural past rather than (...) the realities and complexities of an urban present”.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, stories set in the West, from dime novels to Western films, often obscured class (capital vs. labor) or sectional (North vs. South) conflicts.

Representations of the West and the characters populating it became more complex as the genre matured.<sup>30</sup> Westerns increasingly focused on the psyche of the Westerner and gave expression to a fundamental ambiguity underlying the celebration of the ‘rugged individual’. In many films, the hero needs to establish or protect ‘civilization’ against forces threatening it (‘Indians’, outlaws, or corrupt elites). Often, it is violence that allows the hero to save the community, but, paradoxically, by “(ridding) society of a menace, (...) he reaffirms his own basic incompatibility with the community’s values”.<sup>31</sup> The hero’s ability and willingness to use violence means that he cannot remain part of a lawful community.

By the 1960s, in the face of an increasingly radical challenge to capitalism and white supremacy at home, and the escalation of the war in Vietnam, it had become harder for popular culture to obscure the violence underlying American expansionism by displacing it into a mythic past. Revisionist Westerns such as Sam Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch* (1969) “unmask” the “evil element” inherent in American culture.<sup>32</sup> The popularity of the Western genre subsequently decreased.

This does not mean that the allure of the mythic West disappeared entirely, however, as the characters and plot structures were taken up in other genres and media, such as George Lucas’ Star Wars saga, which features Han Solo as a space cowboy, or the TV series *The Walking Dead*, where a rugged lawman (Rick Grimes) is engaged in a brutal fight against zombies, who have replaced Native Americans as the victims of what



Slotkin had called regenerative violence in an age of protracted economic crisis and mass precarity.<sup>33</sup> The Western may no longer be the primary cultural form in which Americans articulate their hopes, desires, and anxieties, but the formulas it established are still employed in this cultural work.

1. Edward and Eleanor Marx Aveling, *The Working-Class Movement in America*, London: 1891, p. 156-59; omission in the original.
2. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, Cambridge, MA: 1970, p. 3.
3. *Ibid.*, p. ix.
4. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
5. Greg Grandin, *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America*, New York: 2019, p. 20.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
7. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 2nd ed., Chapel Hill: 1996, p. 164.
8. Heike Paul, *The Myths That Made America: An Introduction to American Studies*, Bielefeld: 2014, p. 314.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Quoted in Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States, 1492-Present*, 3rd ed., Harlow: 2003, p. 151.
11. Smith, *Virgin Land*, p. 206.
12. Robert V. Hine & John Mack Faragher, *The American West: A New Interpretive History*, New Haven, CT: 2000, p. 304.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 308.
14. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 313-314.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 310.
16. James Parisot, *How America Became Capitalist. Imperial Expansion and the Conquest of the West*, London: 2019, p. 2.
17. Frederick Engels, "Letter to Florence Kelley-Wischnewetzky, June 3, 1886", in: Karl Marx & Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 47, New York: 1995, 451-452, here p. 452.
18. Grandin, *The End of the Myth*, p. 115.
19. Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History (1893)", *The Frontier in American History*, New York: 1920, 1-38, here p. 1.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 37-38.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
22. Qtd. after Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*, New York: 1987, p. 17-18.
23. Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*, Norman: 1998, p. 12.
24. Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier", p. 38.
25. Qtd. after John M. Logsdon, *John F. Kennedy and the Race to the Moon*, New York: 2010, p. 10.
26. Esther Dyson, George Gilder, George Keyworth & Alvin Toffler, "Cyberspace and the American Dream: A Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age", *Future Insight* 1:2 (1994) (accessed 29 Sep 2021).
27. Smith, *Virgin Land*, p. 91.
28. James Hanlan, "The 'New' West and the New Western", in: *The Columbia Companion to American History on Film: How the Movies Have Portrayed the American Past*, ed. Peter C. Rollins, New York: 2003, 430-436, here p. 430.
29. R. Philip Loy, "The Frontier and the West", in: *The Columbia Companion to American History on Film: How the Movies Have Portrayed the American Past*, ed. Peter C. Rollins, New York: 2003, p. 578-582, here p. 580.
30. Cf. Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System*, Philadelphia: 1981, p. 50.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
32. Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, p. 613.
33. Cf. Marlon Lieber, "The Living Dead in the Long Downturn: Im/possible Communism and Zombie Narrative Form", *Coils of the Serpent* 8 (2021) (accessed Sep 29 2021).

## Selected Bibliography

Grandin, Greg: *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall*, New York, 2019.

Paul, Heike: *The Myths That Made America: An Introduction to American Studies*, Bielefeld, 2014.

Slotkin, Richard: *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*, New York, 1992.

Smith, Henry Nash: *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, New York, 1950.

quote as:

Marlon Lieber, "Myths of the American West", *An Introduction to the Study of British and American Cultures*, cultural-studies.org (October 2022)