

Student: (Jennifer Yum):

This week's readings examined different types of frontiers, territorial as well as intellectual. Though the topics were fairly spread out, all the historians agreed on the ambiguity in defining borders. The fuzzy area in between, or "zones", tend to take on a hybrid characteristics of their own.

Though I hadn't read F.J. Turner's work in the past, I had, in reference, heard that it was bad. It isn't hard to see why his book is generally criticized by today's academic community. However, it is a product of the author's time. It's over a century old, and hence interesting to think of Turner himself as a primary source. He clearly romanticized the American frontier. As Owen Lattimore points out: "Turner, in fact, was an acute observer; but what he saw so clearly he saw while standing on his head. In large measure, when he thought he was what the frontier did to society, he was really seeing what society did to the frontier" (490). I don't commend Turner for his lack of sensitivity toward the people that had been living in the frontier regions while the Americans moved into the open lands of the West, but can't deny that the frontier has left an indelible mark on the fabric of the nation. He writes that "each of these areas has had an influence in our economic and political history" (12). Turner notes that the frontier: 1) "promoted the formation of a composite nationality for the American people." "Immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race," and 2) "decreased our independence on England" (22-23). And perhaps his most controversial point is that "frontier individualism has from the beginning promoted democracy" (30). Further, Turner writes that even American intellectual culture has also been affected. It is the frontier to which "the American intellect owes its striking characteristics" of "dominant individualism," "buoyancy," and all the other traits that come with "freedom" (37). Ultimately, though, his piece focuses on the closing of the American frontier. However, this readings show that frontiers are not only territorial. Most interesting is the present-day intermixing of "academic" and "real" worlds.

Rosalind Williams, in discussing the "disintegration of engineering," examines the "hybrid world" of MIT engineering students. In this day and age, "engineering is less and less a separate realm and more and more an integral part of science and business" (40). Time has transformed the nature of boundaries: "In the age of technoscience, disciplinary and organizational boundaries, like national boundaries, can be a hindrance" (45). Further, it becomes more difficult for academics to remain detached from the "real world." MIT's tenure and promotion process is proof of the university's mission that it should "provide critical reflection on the larger world as well as service to it" (56). In fact, "Engineering can save its soul only by losing it in the larger technological world" (88). So, what about history? Are academic historians (in the real world

context) in the dark? In revising the knowledge of the past, how can historians improve the world today? Albeit short, the Bush excerpt lays out the case for further support of science students: “without scientific progress no amount of achievement in other directions can insure our health, prosperity, and security as a nation in the modern world” (5). Will the study of history, or any discipline in the humanities for that matter, create more jobs, create cheaper products, or contribute to national defense? Lastly, how can historians “cross over” without sacrificing the integrity of the discipline? The reading on the Enola Gay controversy a few weeks ago highlighted this difficulty.

The comment made by a member on the Academic Council that students are thinking in terms of Wall Street Journal is unfortunate, but valid. In today’s world of industries and high salaries, “that social contract has long since been cancelled...Engineers have learned that they are part of the market flow rather than the corporate dependence on one company” (64). MIT’s broader educational mission to provide a “humanistic stem” to the educational “tree” of core science and math classes suggests the need to shift toward a liberal arts education that aims to form well-rounded people, better fit to function in an increasingly eclectic social milieu. Williams then makes the quasi-cynical observation that the socialization of engineering is, however, “happening almost entirely under the aegis of business” (69).

The preface to Owen Lattimore's book contained important points for historians to consider. First, he insists on a historical approach that combines “the study in the classroom and library with observation in the field” (11). Lattimore’s frequent travels gave him a fuller, more nuanced, understanding of history. He suggests that primary sources too have limits, for they are at best documents: “It is not only a question of what people know, but of what they believe; a belief, even a mistaken belief is also a kind of fact; it is one of the innumerable varieties of raw material that go into the building of history” (24). I certainly realized the validity in this point through my research on African historiography. Without face to face interaction and personal accounts, history can become excessively theoretical, even anaesthetized. Owen uses the term “intellectual shackles” which inhibit “commonsense reasoning” (26). This in turn leads to the writing of bad history. Further, he strikes a chord of agreement with the microhistorians in arguing for the importance of specificity and the exclusive examination of the region at hand. Yet his focus on structures reminded me of the Annales paradigm. Lattimore writes, for example, that “Mature historical understanding requires full recognition of the factors of physical geography, the climactic stimulus,” but also, the “appreciation of the dynamics of social groups typical of each landscape” (116). Writing about Chinese frontiers, he makes an interesting point about “maximum expansion,” and the “zone of diminishing returns” (171-173). Again, he uses the term “zone,” not “line,” to show the

ambiguity and the temporariness of boundaries. Finally, I don't know his ideological orientation, but his closing comment on the beginnings of a new frontier in history bothered me. He groups the US, Canada, Western Europe, and a few others in one community. Other frontiers are "Soviet-Chinese-East European." The ultimate difference is cultural, and while in the first group are divided in degree, the latter are divided by kind. What did others in the class think about this distinction?

Perdue's makes the point that Chinese zones resembled "mixing bowls from which emerged new cultures, new policies, and new social movements" (20). In China, "there were 'middle grounds' where people from radically diverse ecologies mixed together, creating new cultural formations' (6). This point can be applied to the rest of this week's readings to show that any interaction between frontiers (cultural, disciplinary, or regional) makes way for distinctly new combinations.