

# ***Immigrants or Planters? The Social-Cultural Matrix of the US Economic Performance***

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## **1. Introduction**

It may seem unusual that a short paper on an anthropological-cultural issue should be published in an economic history journal. And yet, as Peter Mathias astutely points out in his *Economic History: Still Living with The Neighbours*, every discipline can “progress” thanks to external stimuli, and economic history’s destiny is to “live with the neighbours”, including cultural anthropology and sociology which have given it “vital new nourishment”.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, the very concept of culture understood in its broadest sense includes the economic sphere too. Bronislaw Malinowski, regarded as the founder of British social anthropology, considered culture as “society in its entirety, consisting of instruments and consumer goods, constitutional charters, ideas and arts, beliefs and customs”.<sup>2</sup> He argued that every culture is made up of a set of responses which society supplies to human beings’ universal needs, these being of three kinds: fundamental needs, such as eating and reproducing, to which each culture supplies particular responses; derived needs, which are no less important, including political and economic organisation that spring from the necessity of every society to preserve its coherency; and psychological

<sup>1</sup> Peter Mathias, *Economic History: Still Living with The Neighbours*, *Journal of European Economic History*, no. 1 / 2006, pp. 39-40.

<sup>2</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, *Teoria scientifica della cultura e altri saggi*, Feltrinelli, Milan, 1962.

needs such as religious beliefs, traditions, language and art. Culture, therefore, is an ensemble of closely connected “bodies” (politics, economics, religion, art etc.), whose correct functioning permits the correct progress of society. Each of these “bodies” cannot be understood outside the general context of the culture which produced it.

Malinowski's claims are not very different from those of Douglass North and other New Institutional Economics scholars who argue that “economic activity and institutions are social-cultural constructions incorporated in society and in its values” and that both the drive for economic change and the sources of inertia which thwart it are to be sought “in the depths of society's institutions and ... in the social-cultural matrixes of a country, matrixes which, together with the political process and the juridical system, represent to a large extent the social and cultural determinants underlying those processes”.<sup>3</sup>

Starting from these conjectures, we hope that an article on how American cultural identity was built can lead to a better understanding of the economic history of the United States of America.

## 2.

*“I should like to be able to know what sentiments stir the heart and what thoughts strike the enlightened Englishman who sets foot on our continent for the first time. There is no doubt that he will feel great happiness because he is living in a period of history which has allowed him to witness the discovery and the colonization of this very beautiful country. He must also feel a surge of national pride... saying to himself: “this is the result of the work of my compatriots who, worried by quarrels and beset by every kind of shortage, have found refuge here...”. He sees the industriousness of his native land put to good use in a new way here...*

*Probably this English visitor's next desire will be to learn where all these people come from. They are a mixture of English, Scottish, Irish, French, Dutch, German and Swedish. From this muddled assortment that new race we call Americans was born. ... (They came here) and everything they found has regenerated them: new laws, a new way of life, a new social system. They have become new men.*

*The American is the man who, having left behind old ideas and customs, has received new ones from the new lifestyle he has embraced, from the new*

<sup>3</sup> P. Mathias, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

*government he obeys, and from the new position he holds. He becomes American because he is welcomed into the bosom of our Alma Mater. Here the individuals of every nation merge into a new race of men, whose labours and whose descendants one day will bring great changes to the world...*

Jean Hector de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, (1782), Letter III, What an American Is.

*"Being an American is not something that is inherited, but something that is achieved".*

Perry Miller, *Nature's Nation*, (Harvard University Press 1967).

This phrase summarises in an exemplary manner the essence of "Americanism"; or at least what "Americanism" has been until recently. To be American, in fact, does not mean simply to have been born on US soil, but to have specific qualities and to subscribe to characteristic values. In the anthropological-cultural sense, this is true for any people, but, in the case of the USA population, building a national identity came about consciously and systematically, indeed, we would say "instrumentally". The Republic born with the Declaration of Independence from England in 1776 intended right from the start to appear to the rest of the world "different and distinctive" and is regarded thus by foreign observers, too, the first being Alexis de Tocqueville whose book *Democracy in America*, published between 1835 and 1840, has become a classic among studies on the United States. The "distinctiveness", whether it exists objectively or is part of the "American myth", is still upheld nowadays and has a great deal to do with the United States' attitude in the field of foreign policy and international relations. Even in the twenty-first century, America continues to define herself in terms of "difference".

When we speak of the "American myth", we must make it clear that the term "myth" is to be understood in this context not as an "imaginary story" or an "untrue story", but as a "sacred story" within a "civil religion". Creating myths is one of mankind's primary characteristics, and the mythical tale presents a people's or a culture's view of the world and its sense of history, reducing centuries of experience to a myriad of metaphors. The myth's narrative action recapitulates a people's experience in its land, recounts the view the people hold of that experience in relation to the universe, and reduces both the experience and the view to a paradigm. Creating myths is, by definition, a psychological and social

action. The myth, i.e. the story that, over many generations, has acquired an evocative capacity, is told by individual artists and produces an effect on the mind of every single person, but its function is to reconcile and unite those single individuals into a collective identity.

A nation's mythology "is the intelligible mask of that enigma called "national character". The psychology of their ancestors' view of the world is transmitted so strongly to the descendants through myths that our perception of contemporary reality and our capacity to act in the world are directly influenced by it"<sup>4</sup>.

The Americans have always felt the need of that sense of consistency and direction in history that myths give to those who believe in them. The first US writers were convinced that the national mythology should take a literary form and begin as a Homer-like epic, and so they attempted to create an American epic to mark the beginning of a national mythology and a context of which later authors would be able to become part. Although mythologies spring up spontaneously in the pre-literary periods of the history of peoples, the people of the USA succeeded in giving rise to a heritage of myths in an essentially artificial, but typically American, manner.

**3.** The "distinctiveness" of the United States compared with the rest of the world is the heart of both the mythology and the American national identity founded on that mythology, and is based on three fundamental aspects: the experience of emigration and colonisation, the latter being considered as a "fight" against the wilderness<sup>5</sup>, that wild, uncultivated land inhabited by people who were just as wild and "uncultivated"; the awareness of having a mission assigned directly by Divine Providence; and the experience of frontier life. These three aspects intersect and overlap to found a single, three-dimensional identity, like a three-sided solid.

The colonisers of the region known later as New England, the so-called "Pilgrim Fathers" of the Mayflower and the other Puritans who

<sup>4</sup> R. Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Wilderness is understood both literally and metaphorically.

followed them were, indeed, “different” from the founders of other settlements in the rest of the world. Almost every colony, including those in the New World, was founded by uneducated men with no financial resources, and at times, as in the case of Australia, by convicts. However, the people who were the first to settle on the coasts of North America all had a certain degree of education and did not leave their native land to seek their fortune; they left it for spiritual reasons, because they were persecuted in England and highly critical of the established church, and in order to “enable an *idea* to triumph”<sup>6</sup>.

In the writings of those who reached the coasts of the New World, the effect of emigration was an irrevocable change in both physical and personal conditions, a prenatal “labour” which was the beginning of a better state of physical health, of manners and of spirit.

It is as well to clarify that the term “emigration” has a different meaning here from that which we generally give it. The United States, in actual fact, cannot be regarded, as they generally are, as a country of emigrants. Although the migration waves, especially after 1830, consisted of emigrants in today’s sense of the word, New England’s first European inhabitants considered themselves “planters” i.e. founders of a colony<sup>7</sup> to which the king often granted a charter giving them the right to form a political society and to govern themselves while remaining within the laws of the mother country.

The system of government, the language, the pattern of labour and colonisation, and much of the mentality to which immigrants had to adhere later were those of the first founders. The heart of United States’ culture has been and is still today the culture of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century settlers. That culture’s central elements may be defined in several ways, but they include the christian religion, protestant morality and values, labour ethics, the English language, British traditions as far as laws, justice and the limits of power are concerned, and a European

<sup>6</sup> de Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique*, 1835).

<sup>7</sup> For the distinction between emigrants/immigrants and planters see John Highman, *Send These to Me: Jews and Other Immigrants in Urban America*, Atheneum, New York, 1975, p.6.

heritage in matters of art, philosophy, literature and music. However, it must not be forgotten that most of the English settlers who arrived in America were dissidents for either religious or political reasons, and that, although still deeply immersed in their original culture, they strongly desired to become different. Those settlers, in the end, rebelled against the mother country and founded a new and “different” society.

What happened during the colonial period is the perfect example of the so-called “doctrine of first settlement”: whenever there is settlement in an empty territory, or a resident population is driven away by invaders, the specific characteristics of the first group capable of creating a functioning society which can be perpetuated are of crucial importance for the subsequent social and cultural development of the area, no matter how small the initial group of colonisers. Thus, in terms of lasting impact, the activity of a few hundred initial colonisers can mean more than the contributions of tens of thousands of new immigrants some generations later.

The Pilgrim Fathers\* who reached the American coast in 1620 had separated from the Church of England and regarded themselves as soldiers at war against Satan who was trying to thwart the coming of God’s kingdom on earth by sowing dissension among those who professed faith in Christ. This small group of Christians had no hope of reforming the Church of England and its hierarchy from within, and so in 1607, with the accession of James Stuart who was against puritanism, they moved to Holland. A few years later, however, feeling foreigners in a foreign land and fearing the loss of their identity as a religious community, they applied for permission to settle in the colony of Virginia where they landed in 1620 and founded Plymouth.

Although their separatism prevents them from being representative of the large number of settlers who arrived in the New World at the end of the seventeenth century, the Pilgrim Fathers have become an integral part of American “mythology” and American identity. The writings of William Bradford, who led them across the Atlantic and was the first

\* Information on the puritans is taken from the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Sixth Edition, pp. 121-125.

governor of Plymouth, remain an important testimony of those years, and have contributed to imprinting on the American imagination the image of the United States as a "redeeming nation".

The puritans who, led by John Whintrop, in 1630 founded the colony of Massachussets were much more representative of the attitude towards the Church of England. Although they dissented from the Church of England, they were not separatists like the Pilgrim Fathers, despite the fact that the faith of both groups was based on the same premises: like Martin Luther, they both believed that no bishop or pope could impose a law of any kind on a Christian soul and, following John Calvin's teachings, that God chooses freely who is to be saved and who damned for eternity. Although they believed in the fall of Adam and Eve, both groups of puritans believed in a new "Gracious Alliance", a pact between Christ and mankind, sealed with the Crucifixion. The rigour of the Puritan rule and the conviction that they were God's chosen people confirmed in the faithful the conviction that they were a group of special people. As God's chosen people, it was their task to win back the wild American territory from the forces of evil and make it the New Canaan. The land was understood as something sacred or at least something that would become sacred after the intervention of the elect. Just as God had promised the Israelites that at the end of their wanderings in the desert he would give them a special land running with milk and honey, so the puritans would receive a specific land as their prize. The march through the wild forests of the new world, therefore, was a journey towards reconciliation with God. This is why the specific land takes on a sacred value, even though territorial conquest is not an end in itself: the founding of a New Israel, in fact, will bring back righteousness throughout the world, which will thereby be restored. This conviction is confirmed in John Whintrop's speech to his followers on board the ship that was to take them to America, when he stated that the eyes of the world were on them and so they had to set an example for everyone, "a city on the hill". It is not too rash to say that, collectively, the United States consider their land a utopia of the real world.

De Tocqueville draws our attention to the fact that the founding of New England "was a novel spectacle and all the circumstances attending

it were singular and original... In the English colonies of the North, the two or three main ideas that now constitute the basis of the social theory of the United States were first combined<sup>9</sup>. The political principles of those first colonies have gradually spread into what then became the States of the Union, right across to the Pacific Ocean. "The civilization of New England has been like a beacon lit upon a hill which, after it has diffused its warmth immediately around it, also tinges the distant horizon with its glow."<sup>10</sup>

4. From what has been said, it appears very clear that right from the time of colonisation, the founding fathers of the United States were convinced they had a "manifest destiny", a "divine" mission to the rest of the world. With the first settlers, and in particular with the puritans, this "mission" was to bring civilisation to an environment that was wild, in both the literal and the metaphorical sense, but with the birth and the expansion of the new nation the "divine mandate" came to signify the spreading of social equality and democracy, used as synonyms in de Tocqueville's book which we have quoted, where they are indicated as fundamental American characteristics. De Tocqueville writes: "Among the novel objects that attracted my attention during my stay in the United States, nothing struck me more forcibly than the general equality of condition among the people. I readily discovered the prodigious influence that this primary fact exercises on the whole course of society; it gives a distinctive direction to public opinion and a distinctive tenor to the laws; it imparts new maxims to the governing authorities and peculiar habits to the governed. I soon perceived that the influence of this fact extends far beyond the political character and the laws of the country, and that it has no less effect on civil society than on the government; it creates opinions, gives birth to new sentiments, founds novel customs, and modifies whatever it does not produce."<sup>11</sup> The development of democracy and social equality is, for de Tocqueville, a providential fact. "If the men of our time should

<sup>9</sup> de Tocqueville, *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> de Tocqueville, *op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> de Tocqueville, *op. cit.*

be convinced, by attentive observation and sincere reflection," he writes, "that the gradual and progressive development of social equality is at once the past and the future of their history, this discovery alone would confer upon the change the sacred character of a divine decree. To attempt to check democracy would be, in that case, to resist the will of God; and the nations would then be constrained to make the best of the social lot awarded to them by Providence."<sup>12</sup>

That was already the real situation in America, where the feudal nobility and the monarchy had never existed, where democracy was the first form of government and where social equality existed right from the birth of the nation. It is only a short step further to regard the United States as the "Lord's Anointed" in the advance of the democratic process.

Although the idea of "manifest destiny" is to be found *in nuce* both in the writings of the founding fathers and in de Tocqueville's book of 1835, it was formulated for the first time by the journalist John L. O'Sullivan in an article on the occasion of the debate on whether Texas should be annexed to the United States or not.

Texas was created in the 1820s as a "cushion zone" between the United States and Mexico when Mexico was still in Spanish hands. Sparsely populated and a long way from the heart of Mexican territory, Texas soon became the target of American cotton-planters who settled there more and more, to the extent that the Mexican government was prompted to permit their settlement officially. The increase in the population of US origin led to the request for Texan independence, and Texas asked to be annexed to the Union, which, in fact, happened in 1845. It was on that occasion that O'Sullivan maintained that the expansion of the United States, whose Congress at that time was debating the annexation of Oregon, was the result of the country's manifest destiny to advance and take possession of the entire continent with which Providence had entrusted them "to develop the great experiment of freedom and self-government in federal form"<sup>13</sup>. He is very explicit in defining the acquisition

<sup>12</sup> de Tocqueville, *op.cit.*

<sup>13</sup> Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny. American Expansion and the Empire of Right*, (Hill and Wang, New York 1996), p. 43.

of the new state in terms of symbols (a flag with stars and stripes) and of "homeland"<sup>14</sup>: "It may be said that Texas' star and stripe have taken the place to which they are entitled in the glorious emblem of our national community... For us, Texas is no longer merely a space understood in geographical terms, a particular combination of coasts, plains, mountains, forests and rivers. It must be regarded as part of the beloved, sacred definition of "our country"; no longer a *pays*, it is part of *la patrie*"<sup>15</sup>.

5. We now come to the third fundamental aspect of the history of the development of American national identity: the experience of the pioneers on the frontier of what was called Indian Country.

As the geographer Wilbur Zelinsky noted, "the mythological fact can triumph as much as the historical fact and the myth of the frontier, in other words the conviction that the frontier has played a crucial part in forging American national character and culture, continues to persist in the nation's imagination." The "myth" was created and skilfully narrated by Frederick Jackson Turner exactly three years after the final closure of the frontier between the United States and the Indian Country.

However, the "cultural" function of the frontier is as ancient as the history of humanity. Every civilisation has felt the need to solve the problem of rendering an area stable with specific means of control, above all, the creation of borders. This need stems from what Ernesto De Martino has defined "the territorial anxiety that must be redeemed culturally"<sup>16</sup>. In the case of America, the "territorial anxiety" lies precisely in the clash/encounter with the wilderness, that "other" territory from which people had to defend themselves but which had also to be "defeated" and "Americanised" so that people could live there.

When we speak of a border or a frontier the first thing that springs to mind is something permanent, a clearly-marked boundary line that

<sup>14</sup> John O'Sullivan, "Annexation" in *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, n.1, July-August 1845, p.5.

<sup>15</sup> In French in the original text.

<sup>16</sup> Giulia Piccalunga, *Terminus. I segni di confine nella religione romana*, (Edizioni dell'Ateneo, Roma 1974), p. 27.

divides two entities of space which differ from one another, and a line that must not be crossed. Indeed, both in ancient times and nowadays, crossing a border is synonymous with "declaring war" between states and between landowners. And yet, the very concept of a boundary suggests in some way the possibility of its being moved to enable the expansion of that very territory, the size of which we would keep unchangeable. We are faced with a situation which, on the one hand, wants to and must remain immobile but which, on the other hand, cannot do without dynamism.

In the case of America, the contrast between stability and dynamism appears even more marked. Although, on the one hand, the Indian Country and the peoples who inhabit it have to stay outside the civilised territory firstly of the colonies and afterwards the United States, on the other hand, the territory beyond the frontier has to be conquered, both literally and metaphorically. Military conquest must be revised and justified culturally, awarding it a God-given mission for the necessary advancement of progress and the ideals of freedom and democracy. Furthermore, so that people can really become Americans, the "other" way of life, i. e. the Indians' way of life, must somehow become part of civilised society. With the steady advancing of something which should be fixed, an area which otherwise could not be controlled is given "cultural" stability: in other words, a territory perceived as foreign, different, uncontrollable and therefore a source of "that cultural anxiety" quoted by Ernesto De Martino becomes "American". The continuous mobility of the America frontier, therefore, is a concrete but also a "cultural" solution to these two contrasting but inseparable requirements.

In 1890, the final closure of the frontier between the United States and the territory that once belonged to the natives of North America was announced officially in the report of the Superintendent of the Census for that year: "up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line"<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> F. Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, 1893, chapter 1.

In Turner's own words, that brief official announcement marked the end of a big historic movement, given that until then "American history" had been to a great extent "the history of the colonisation of the Great West". "The existence of an area of free land", he wrote, "its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development."<sup>18</sup>

The American frontier was very different from the European frontier. In the case of Europe, it was a very clear-cut boundary which crossed densely populated areas, whereas the first distinctive characteristic of the American frontier was that it marked the division between a colonised territory and a territory regarded as empty. The presence of the native peoples was of no importance whatsoever.

The firm belief that the lands which were still in the hands of the natives could be regarded as "empty" dated from the era of Columbus. The "international law" in force at that time required that the discovery of "new lands", considered *res nullius*, no-one's property, by Christian princes, be regulated geographically and politically by the Supreme Pontiff. The firm belief of the time was that the Pope, Peter's successor and Christ's representative on earth, was lord of all. The heathen, in other words those outside the true faith's grace, had no right to anything until they recognised the supremacy of Christ and the Church. The political and geographical organisation of the New World, later called America, stems from what is known as the Doctrine of Discovery which originated in the papal bulls that divided the world among the Christian sovereigns. As early as 1823, the Supreme Court of America issued a document in which it affirmed that the Indians could "occupy" the territories within the United States but that they had no claim to ownership of these territories in that their "right of occupation" was subordinate to the "right of discovery" inherited from the English.

Once the occupation of those lands began, first the settlers and then the Americans were obliged to adapt to very particular conditions: they had to defeat and "tame" a wild territory, inhabited by just as wild Indians

<sup>18</sup> F. J. Turner, *op. cit.*, chapter 1.

who were identified with it; they had to cross a continent and, in so doing, had to re-adapt every time to those “frontier” conditions that the first settlers had overcome. And so conquest has not meant simply advancing along a single frontier, but going back to “primitive” conditions on a frontier that advanced continuously. In Turner’s words, “American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character.”<sup>19</sup>

From its birth, America has always wanted to appear in opposition to Europe, and so its frontier and its development, too, had to differ from the frontiers and the development of European countries. “In the settlement of America”, states Turner, “we have to observe how European life entered the continent, and how America modified and developed that life and reacted on Europe. Our early history is the study of European germs developing in an American environment... The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanisation. The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilisation and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois and runs an Indian palisade around him. Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and ploughing with a sharp stick, he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion. In short, at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish, and so he fits himself into the Indian clearings and follows the Indian trails. Little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe, but a new product that is American. At first, the frontier was the Atlantic coast. It was the frontier of Europe in a very real sense. Moving westward, the frontier became more and more American... Each frontier

<sup>19</sup> F. J. Turner, *op. cit.*, chapter 1.

leaves its traces behind it, and when it becomes a settled area the region still partakes of the frontier characteristics. Thus the advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines. And to study this advance, the men who grew up under these conditions, and the political, economic and social results of it, is to study the really American part of our history."<sup>20</sup>

Each frontier roughly followed a natural boundary. The first frontier – in the seventeenth century – was the “fall line” just beyond the tidewater region of the Atlantic rivers; in the eighteenth century it was in the Appalachians; the Mississippi marked the frontier in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, and the Missouri that of the mid-nineteenth century, bearing in mind, however, that settlements in California were already widespread; lastly, until the frontier was abolished, it was formed by the boundary of the desert territory, roughly the 90<sup>th</sup> parallel, and by the Rocky Mountains.

As far as American identity is concerned, however, the frontier's importance stems not from its geographical situation but from the strong symbolic, and therefore cultural, value attributed to it. The frontier is not a political border where fighting takes place almost perpetually to conquer new territory and to defeat a real enemy; it separates “us” from “other”, i.e. colonial settlements and the cultivated land inhabited first by settlers and then by “civilised” Americans, from the wilderness territory inhabited by the Indians. The frontier is a *limen*, a “threshold” of a vague area where life is not yet that of civilised society, but is no longer wild. It is a place one must pass through to become a “real” American. Thus living on the frontier is a rite of passage whereby people “die”, renouncing their previous background (of being Englishmen or Europeans) and are reborn as Americans<sup>21</sup>. The frontier and the wilderness which stretches beyond it and which must be “beaten” take on different characteristics over the years, but the end result is always the same: to affirm American

<sup>20</sup> E. J. Turner, *op. cit.*, chapter 1.

<sup>21</sup> On the “rites of passage” and the concepts of “limen” and “threshold”, see Arnold Van Gennep, *I riti di passaggio*, (Bollati Boringhieri, Turin 1980).

identity with its own traits and to ensure that it is “different” from both European and Indian identity.

For Turner, the closure of the frontier is critical for various reasons. From his point of view, U.S. history had been “to a great extent the history of the settlement of the Great West”<sup>22</sup>, and, therefore, of the continual shifting of the frontier, the principal product of which was the American character. “The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession and the advance of American settlement westward”, he wrote, “explain American development”<sup>23</sup>. American nationalism, American institutions and Americans’ very character all stem from the frontier experience: “The frontier is productive of individualism. Complex society is precipitated by the wilderness into a kind of primitive organization based on the family. The tendency is anti-social. It produces antipathy to control, and particularly to any direct control... The frontier individualism has from the beginning promoted democracy.” Thus the closure of the frontier caused a huge crisis. If, indeed, the nation’s identity, in other words its history, its institutions and its characteristics, stemmed from life on the frontier, what would happen now that the entire North American territory had been conquered and the frontier abolished? The very essence of America seemed jeopardised.

For Turner, knowing what being American meant was of fundamental importance, and his theory on this issue looked into the nation’s past as much as into its future. Primarily, by defining the country and its history as the pioneers’, mainly of Anglo-Saxon origin, moving westwards, the frontier theory excluded, as did other national myths, the presence of the Indians and all the ethnic groups that did not belong to the ruling class. In fact, this was, at best, an incomplete history, or, as the historian John Mack Faragher put it, “the cartography which inspired Turner was more the product of the imagination than of science”<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> F. J. Turner, *op. cit.*, chapter 1.

<sup>23</sup> F. J. Turner, *op. cit.*, chapter 1.

<sup>24</sup> John M. Faragher, “A Nation Thrown Back upon Itself: Frederick Jackson Turner and the Frontier” in *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner* (New York 1994), p.6.

Turner's interpretation, however, is interesting for our purposes because of the way he tries to give an answer to the American middle classes' identity crisis at the end of the nineteenth century. His book, which aims to study how the "European germs" developed in America, also aims to show how the frontier experience has transformed and standardised the immigrants, enabling them to sever the ties with their homeland and to found a modern nation.

"The frontier", states Turner, "is the line of most rapid and effective Americanisation. Moving westward, the frontier became more and more American... The advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe... To study this advance is to study the really American part of our history."<sup>25</sup>

At first glance, the frontier experience consists exclusively in transforming and replacing the Anglo-Saxon immigrants' European roots: this excludes the presence of the natives from the history of America. However, we find paradoxes and contradictions in the relationship with the Indians. For Turner, what made people real Americans was, in fact, the complex relationship between Americans of English origin and Indians. Often, natives just do not feature in his imaginary landscape which appears empty and devoid of inhabitants, the proverbial "virgin territory" of colonial ideology, but, on other occasions, the Indians embody the wildness that has to be conquered and controlled like the just as wild land that lies beyond the frontier. Although this symbolic image is found in all previous literature on the subject, the novelty in Turner is that he defines the Indian not in opposition to the American spirit, but as a predecessor of the pioneer, the American *par excellence*, and hence as a predecessor of civilisation. An idea of this kind is evidently influenced by the evolutionist theories of the time and reflects the idea of progress on which social evolution depended. On the frontier, the complexity of European life met the simplicity of primitive conditions, and this return to a pre-civilised state indicated a process of "perennial rebirth", a series of new beginnings.

<sup>25</sup> E. J. Turner, *op. cit.*, chapter 1.

Turner traces the course of social evolution in America, which began with the Indian and the hunter, continued with the trader, the stockbreeder and the crop-grower, and ended with the city and the industrial system. Turner's white readers, portrayed as the heirs of the pioneers, thus found reassurance of their success, of having managed to reach the peak of progress by vanquishing the wildness, both of the Indians and of the land.

Turner's book thus redefines the relationship between a ruling culture and a native culture. Whereas the Indians had previously been portrayed as the antithesis of civilisation, Turner presents them as a necessary stage in civilisation. According to his theory, the progress of society stems from the encounter between pioneer and wildness, including "becoming Indians". Without this encounter American civilisation ran the risk of falling apart. Although it was based on the concept of social evolution, it partially broke away because it was the actions of individuals, in this case pioneers that permitted the advance of progress and the development of an entire human group, in this case, Americans. But to define the Indians as the necessary predecessors of civilisation entailed a series of problems. By considering the conquest an inevitable part of progress, Turner could accept the Indians and their way of life only if they belonged to the past. The fact that they were no longer part of the contemporary world eliminated the risks the world of the natives represented for the dominant culture and rendered the settlers legitimate heirs of the Indian way of life and the Indian territory.

Turner's interpretation, therefore, helped to clarify and "update" the features of American identity. By portraying the Indians as predecessors of the pioneers, Turner conferred the status of "real Americans" i.e. natives to his contemporaries of Anglo-Saxon origin, the pioneers' heirs. Thus the frontier theory also symbolically warded off the dangers that the flow of new immigrants constituted for the dominant culture.

6. As we have seen, Turner's theory did not merely reshape American identity according to the nation's past history; it also supplied the symbolic means to preserve American identity in the future, at the same time justifying American imperialist expansion. If the continual westward movement had

signified the birth of that well-defined identity, then the only way to save "the American spirit" was to continue expansion to the west. And once all North America had been conquered, only by going overseas could expansion continue and America's "manifest destiny" be fulfilled.

As American history from the end of the nineteenth century until the present day shows, American expansion towards what became a merely imaginary "west" has never ceased. In 1898 the Hawaii Islands were annexed, and Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam and Manila, in the Philippines, were occupied as an appendix to the war against Spain. But to take on the responsibility of governing lands outside the North American continent smacked somewhat of European imperialism, and was hard to swallow for an ex-colony. The cultural justifications for the new course of American policy were not long in arriving. People began to distinguish between the enlightened colonialism of Great Britain, hence of the Anglo-Saxon race, and that of the other European countries, based solely on violence and bullying; they began to speak of the "empire of freedom", the "empire of peace", the "empire of the intellect". The British colonisation of India had already brought to "wonderful perfection the type of democratic empire the Americans were now destined to create"<sup>26</sup>. In that they were of Anglo-Saxon origin, too, and collaborators in the task of civilising the world, the Americans emulated the British and transformed colonialism into a "protection" intended to prepare the occupied countries for the republican self-government that would follow in due course.

From the second world war onwards, the United States' foreign policy has not diverged much from these premises. As well as carrying out its mission of civilisation, contemporary America has always wanted to build another on her own which, by contrast, continuously redefined the salient features of her national culture. Be it Hitler's Nazi regime, Communist Korea and Vietnam, the Soviet Union of the Cold War, or the fundamentalist Islam of today, the United States have always needed "something different", in a territorial and ideological sense, against which

<sup>26</sup> A. Stephanson, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

to fight in order to spread the ideals of freedom, social equality and democracy of which she makes herself the bearer.

## **7. Conclusions**

To conclude, we feel we must emphasise that the way a people acts, even through the decisions and the doings of its political representatives and its government, should never be analysed and judged regardless of its culture. The system of values, customs, beliefs with which that people identifies itself, its symbolic connection with a certain territory, the relationships it has established with other peoples and other societies, all contribute to making that people unique among the others, to giving it an identity that determines its behaviour over the centuries. Even though that identity may undergo variations due to both internal and external causes, it can never change radically, or else that people would cease to be what it is and would become something else.

That is why no meaning can be attributed to the events of the real world and current affairs except through anthropological research which analyses the protagonists of those events within their own culture and in connection with their own identity.

Today American national and cultural identity is shaken from its very foundations, as is the national and cultural identity of many other countries, especially in what is commonly called the West. In the United States, the increasingly numerous presence of the so-called "latinos" i.e. citizens from Latin American countries, is producing an increasingly forceful and increasingly present different America. For the first time in American history, English is no longer the prevailing language and it is flanked by Spanish, even in official documents. The reaction of the ultra-conservative Americans of Anglo-Saxon origin, who fear the risk of seeing the overthrow of not only their own political and cultural supremacy, but also of the very foundations of their national identity, has given rise to numerous associations for the defence of the English language and for the suppression of the use of Spanish in everything that concerns the public domain. At the same time, "the mass media are continually launching the alarm about the state of the national

language, often using dogmatically that data divulged by various associations which are pressing to obtain that English be declared the official language of the United States with an amendment to the Constitution.<sup>27</sup> After 11 September 2001, the perception of a state of national emergency has spread forcefully, and the language issue is closely linked with “the idea that American English is the irreplaceable expression and the principal instrument for spreading the values on which the country is founded”<sup>28</sup>.

Cultural crossbreeding, however, that phenomenon whereby two cultures living in close contact on the same territory merge to create a new culture, is by no means new. Until now “crossbred” cultures have usually been subdued by a minority colonial power, but one which was stronger politically and militarily. In every culture, as Vittorio Lanternari points out, the desire for the most radical innovations coexists alongside forms of tenacious attachment to tradition. These factors result in a strong urge to take the themes of western culture, reinvent them in order to turn them into traditional cultural baggage which thus appears decidedly renewed and projected towards new aims<sup>29</sup>. Crossbreeding, therefore, has been the conquered peoples’ “cultural” answer to the West.

In the case of the United States, it seems that we are faced with an example in the opposite sense. It will be interesting to analyse the effects that the presence of a cultural entity as strong and well-defined as the Spanish one will have on American national identity and institutions.

<sup>27</sup> Sara Antonelli, Anna Scacchi, Anna Scannavini, *La Babele americana*, (Donzelli Virgola, Milan 2005), p. 19. There is no article in the American Constitution that states that English is the official language of the Union.

<sup>28</sup> S. Antonelli, A. Scacchi, A. Scannavini, *op. cit.*, p.5.

<sup>29</sup> Vittorio Lanternari, *Movimenti religiosi di libertà e di salvezza dei popoli oppressi*, Milan, 1960. See also M. Massenzio, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

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# *Problems*

