F.J. TURNER'S 'FRONTIER THESIS': THE RUSE OF AMERICAN 'CHARACTER'

American society was transformed by the expansion of capital Westward and the explosion in opportunities that ensued for land grabbing and agricultural and industrial investment. In Turner's (1961) frontier thesis this was portrayed as resulting in the emergence of 'the new man' i.e. the fulfilment of American character. The frontier thesis is a neo-Darwinian contribution. It posits exceptionalism and transcendence as the keys to American character. The gene pool of the Americans, thriving in a new geographical and social environment, is depicted as achieving a higher level of development than the stratified societies of Old Europe. What the thesis ignores is the importance of orthodox Eurocentric strategies of colonization and land appropriation. Turner portrays pioneer/settler society as a heroic departure, but in many ways, it is a continuation of European precedents. Analogously, the proposition that the push West crystallized American character obscures the role of personality, especially in urban-industrial settings, in establishing the parameters of American life. Turner conceived of character as emerging from a struggle with the spatial frontier. But the struggles of personality with the social frontier of repression and establishment values is no less significant.

The paper examines the tensions between character and personality by using some ideas developed by Carl Schmitt on the significance of 'the opportunity' in competitive advantage. The importance of the opportunity and personality in developing the American way of life are examined by the vaudeville and celebrity traditions.

The exploitation of contingency for personal advantage, the use of melodrama to engineer social impact, the social validation of forthright behaviour are examined in the context of the careers of the film actress Mae West and the comedian Bob Hope.

For many commentators on American history, Frederick Jackson Turner's (1961, originally published, 1893) famous 'frontier thesis' has canonical status (Billington 1966, Slotkin 1973, 1985, 1992). Even its mistakes are believed to be instructive. The thesis purports to establish a causal connection between the territorial expansion of the Western frontier and the crystallization of American character. Turner portrays the nineteenth century Westward pioneer as fulfilling the latent

potential for adventure and achievement in American settler society. Consecutively, and by no means accidentally, he constructs the thesis to underwrite the proposition of American exceptionalism i.e. the formation and evolution of a character type based in the values of bold endeavour, fortitude and innovation that the stratified societies of Europe, and the neo-European cities of the American Eastern seaboard, allegedly could not match. Subsequent American historians (and myth-makers), among them Theodor Roosevelt (1893), select and elaborate aspects in the frontier thesis to support frankly racist hypotheses having to do with the alleged innate superiority of pioneers and their privileged destiny to civilize the Western 'wasteland'. These contributions obscure the three pillars upon which Turner's thesis of American character rests. In his view, the frontier is won by American individualism, dynamism and respect for democracy. By individualism, Turner means the liberty of individuals to develop freely and fully; by dynamism, the spirit of energy that seizes upon barriers as obstacles to be overcome; and by democracy, tolerance for equal rights and respect for majority rule. While these character traits have their origins in Ancient Society, Turner maintains that it is only in rolling back the Western frontier that they are fully realized (Keane 2009). Implicitly therefore, he discounts the English revolution (1642-49) and the revolution in France (1789) as courageous failures. In the fullness of time, both succumbed - to borrow a term used by William Cobbett in another context - to 'Old Corruption'(1). By way of hard evidence, in England, Charles II was restored to the throne in 1661; and in France, Napoleon Bonaparte was declared Emperor in 1804. Ostensibly, in America deposing King George III, and vanquishing the redcoats,

neutralized the conditions for the re-emergence of Old Corruption. The American Revolution was a once and for all break in history. At least, this is what Turner believes. Given this, it is easy to comprehend why many North American historian's of Turner's generation automatically assumed that the qualities of character relating to individualism, dynamism and democracy are doomed to fail in Europe. For Turner, the new Canaan of the West supports the American character traits that elicit the prospect of unparalleled success in the pursuit of enterprise, the advance of property and the perpetual revitalization of democracy. In short, the peculiar conditions of the American Western frontier provide the prerequisites for the efflorescence of American character.

Turner's (1961) understanding of character is faithfully Darwinian. He beholds the Western pioneer to carry unique capacities of vision, enterprise and industry. These were taken to evolve and reach enviable maturity. Through epic struggle with soil, climate, beast and 'primitive man' America realizes its true self. At the level of theory, the annexation of physical space is conflated with racial triumph i.e. over the indigenous population. Thus, the ideal of conquering the 'wild', 'untamed' frontier is advanced as both a struggle with nature and the destiny of civilization. By these means the parturition of the 'new man' is achieved: the Western kinsman. Billington (1958) used the emotionally loaded term 'virgin wasteland' to describe the frontier. Turner would not have objected. The idea shades subtly into the concepts of a clean slate and a new beginning for anyone with the energy and pluck to give Western migration a try.

Posterity has revealed several difficulties with Turner's thesis. To begin with, the characterization of thousands of acres as virgin space, and the native people that inhabited them, as 'surplus' to the requirements of private property, underwrote forms of aggression against indigenous populations that are now widely regarded to be morally indefensible. The pioneers undermined the whole way of life of the American Indian. The results were devastating. Madley (2008) reports that in 1846 the native population of California numbered 150,000; within two decades it had plunged to between 25,000-30,000. The push West, with its attendant, and, at the time, dimly apprehended, spectres of physical hazard and internecine conflict, which, in themselves, were interpreted to require unusual vigilance and firm resolve, afforded scope for pioneers to depart from Biblical doctrine and forge moral principles in their own, *ad hoc,* ways. Thus, they reaped the abundant economic reward that followed from asserting new property rights. The pioneers held fast to the character value of derring-do and the belief that faint heart never wins favour. All of this coalesced to make the Western frontier a potent symbol in American cosmology. In the American imagination, the West was never simply a physical space. Nor was it liminal in the sense of being provisional or subject to contestation from other interests. Once claimed and occupied it became irrevocably incorporated into the American state. The geographical boundary was conflated with features of character and state ambition that identified the frontier with a perpetually expanding universe of hope and aspiration. The content of these qualities was conveniently redefined by successive generations: vast tracts of farmland for cultivation in one era, the Gold Rush in the next, oil thereafter, Hollywood, silicon

valley, and so on. What these details camouflaged was a more important character ideal in the American self-image i.e. the vision of escaping the stifling conventions of the Old World and the Atlantic seaboard and proving oneself (and what is immanent in the race), in a confrontation with the untamed 'wilderness' of the West. The Christian, religious overtones of an ethic of discipline, faith in Turner's frontier thesis, are undeniable. The Westward quest abounds with Salvationist connotations. It was a seductive vision colonized by Hollywood which has come down to us today most forcefully as the 'gunfighter logic' of the Wild West (Slotkin 1992). To his credit, Turner's thesis provides a more elevated interpretation of pioneer stock forging American character. In his view, the wagon trains rolling West were embryonic democracies in which individual resourcefulness, dynamism and vitality were called upon to set the American spirit free. The frontier settlers, with their suspicion of government and boundless appetite to seize opportunity, were self consciously launching a Promethean new beginning (Billington 1958: 5). It was the Western kinsman that showed the rest of America, confined by the stratified rules and conventions of the Eastern and Southern seaboards, the image of their own future. The frontier thesis then, equates the frontier with nothing less than the progress of the American state. However, curiously, in doing so it ignores how the demarcation and control of the frontier, categorizes and separates people. As Tagil (1977: 14) demonstrates, the 'separating qualities' of frontiers condition the interaction between people situated on either side of the boundary. What is progress for the American state, is, from the standpoint of the indigenous population, more ambivalent. Yet the Frontier thesis ignores this in

favour of a Whiggish intepretation that regards Westward expansion to be universally progressive.

Posterity again, pours cold water on the romance of beholding the wagon trains as embryonic democracies. In this respect Turner's thesis is too muscle bound to the idea of the Westward push as an heroic conquest of Nature and stratified society. Many pioneers were indentured to Old World trading companies. It is reasonable to assume that initially, at least, inequalities were less severe among pioneers, because they would have included a higher proportion of young, marginal people seeking their fortune. Older, richer families may have dabbled in the Westward adventure, but because of the innumerable risks involved, it is probable that comparatively few ventured to become permanent, settlers. In general, for the rich, life was safer and sufficiently agreeable at home. However, from the start, differences in wealth, power and influence were evident. By 1860, the richest 20 per cent of households owned 64 per cent of the wealth (Pessen 1976). Given this, the relative similarities in wealth distribution between the established settler communities of the stratified East and the supposedly free, egalitarian West, are remarkable. Pessen (1971: 1026) estimates that, on the eve of the Civil War, the wealthiest one per cent in Philadelphia owned fifty per cent of the city's wealth; in the newer cities of St Louis and New Orleans the richest five per cent owned about sixty per cent of each city's wealth. In Chicago, in 1860, eighty per cent of the wealth was owned by ten per cent of families (Bubnys 1982: 105). Thus, the settlers did not break with Eastern economic conventions. Western settlement quickly reproduced familiar patterns of wealth distribution. Additionally, tried and tested features of property accumulation in the Old World,

namely land grabbing, yield speculation and the quest for monopoly power, rapidly asserted themselves (Slotkin 1992: 57-8). Revisionist history has exposed the mythological foundations of the qualities of individualism, dynamism and democracy celebrated so fulsomely in Turner's thesis. 'Winning the West' and expanding ranching settlements were supported by massive public expenditures. Settler ranchers enjoyed subsidized finance accessed from the government in Washington, and Eastern bankers and robber barons (Wilshire, Nielson and Hazlett 2008). Property speculators in the East and Europe supplied the infrastructure of transportation, state education and military protection against native Indian warriors. The brave new world of the settled West was built on tenacious Old World economic foundations. Nor were Old World cultural ties sundered. Gitlin (2010) argues that the French merchant settlers established the so-called 'Creole corridor' that stretched from the Great Lakes, through the Mississippi Valley to the Gulf of Mexico, as a geo-political and cultural zone of French trading and influence. After 1763 this space emerged as a new profit driven frontier beyond the Anglo sphere. Far from being ambivalent capitalists, the French pioneers invested heavily in constructing a buoyant infrastructure to facilitate trade and pushed on with Indian land clearance. Gitlin (2010) portrays the French merchants in the Creole corridor not so much as utopian settler stock, but representatives of Old World values and impulses, intent upon land annexation and profiteering. The culture retained deep loyalties to the cultural values of discrimination and taste common in the homeland. They may have been seized with the romance of taming 'the Wild West', but for generations they saw France as their true home.

What does ‘frontier’ mean?

Another problem having to do with etymology remains. The English word ‘frontier’ derives from the classical Latin root (‘front’ or ‘forepart’) via the medieval Latin term, ‘fronteria’, meaning line of battle. Cognate terms such as the French *fontiere*, the Spanish *frontera* and the English *frontier*, have widely different connotations (Baud and Van Schenel 1997: 213). The earliest, most common usage in America is thought to designate the frontier as a ‘fortress’ or ‘fortification’ (Juriceck 1966: 10-11). This meaning suggests defensive qualities to the term ‘frontier’. These are obscured in Turner’s tendency to associate the term with hope, expansion and a fresh start. The Turner thesis exaggerates the connections with ‘liberation’ and ‘opportunity’, and under-values the links with ‘containment’, ‘defense’ and ‘domination’.

Notwithstanding these reservations, the frontier thesis continues to wield considerable influence in debates about American character. To a considerable degree this reflects the over-determination of geo-physical, cultural, emotional and psychological connotations embodied in the concept. *Inter alia,* the term stands for perennial rebirth, creativity, mobility (social and geographical), escape, freedom, opportunity, promise, courage, resourcefulness, restlessness, redemption, purification and conquest. In Turner’s (1961: 205) own words, the frontier ‘breaks the cake of custom’ to translate the Western kinsman into the apotheosis of American character. The expression of this character finds its vital, renewable focus in what might be called frontierism i.e. the philosophy that the frontier is a

perpetually shifting horizon that tests the individual and is the catalyst for self improvement and wealth creation. The spatial frontier denotes an imaginative expanse in which social being and personal character is tested, reinvented, and crucially, rewarded. Reductively, the essence of frontierism is therefore a combination of American expansionism and exceptionalism. It is an equation that today finds disturbing echoes in American foreign policy, especially, in recent times, in Afghanistan and Iraq.

At bottom, Turner's (1961) logic of frontier character is very orthodox. As noted, it portrays the evolution of character in simple Darwinian terms as a struggle with wilderness and rival, racial species types. Through this titanic battle, the fittest prosper and the fulfilment of American character is achieved. A happy side effect is that American endeavour, fortitude and know-how become the benchmark for the subdued and oppressed everywhere. Yet the veracity of this reductive equation, namely the twin theses of American expansionism and American exceptionalism, are, by no means, self evident. The annexation of land and the elevation of private property as the decisive principles of ownership were hardly unique to America. To be sure, throughout the 1800s and the turn of the next century, Federal initiatives applied a legal basis of egalitarianism in the recognition of split-estate interests in water rights, transport improvements and grazing values (McIntosh 2002). However, these were matters of expedience, plainly secondary to the private procurement of land for ranch development and urban accumulation. This, together with the brutal suppression of the native population, hardly constitute *departures* from European colonial precedents. Rather, they stand in direct line with them (Slatta 1990, 2001;

Vandervort 2006). As to derring do and giving everyone a fair shake, of course, there were countless examples of individual heroism and examples of primitive, communal democracy that support Turner's thesis. However, properly speaking, they were epiphenomena of the prime mover behind expansion. Fundamentally, the Western push was about the advance and multiplication of capital. The logic of expansion was not unprecedented. It followed European examples in Asia and the New World.

With hindsight, Turner over-egged the case for American expansionism and American exceptionalism. In doing so he produced a teleological explanation of American character. It wrongly mistook its conclusion for its predicate. The three principles of individualism, dynamism and democracy that Turner took to be the culmination of American character were, in fact, idealistic constructs. They could only be advocated by framing the history that preceded them through a characteristic prism. They ignored pioneer land grabbing, vigilante law and episodes of violence against the population of native Americans (Slotkin 1983, 1985, 1992; Wolin 2008). In the Westward push the culture of everyday reality, wherein pragmatic individualism, dynamism and democracy were enacted and refined, was replaced by a virtual reality in which economic accumulation was conducted around a virtuous political diplomacy. In effect, this diplomacy was encouraged to make its own reality. In a word, with respect to American character, idealism was permitted to *replace* awkward historical facts and contrary everyday experience. By no means accidentally, this proved convenient in what is properly described as the *colonization* of the West. Later, it became the bulwark of American foreign policy and global ambition. The success

of 'the American way' in linking the Pacific shore with the Atlantic seaboard in the American continent validated the construct of American character. It encouraged 20th and 21st century leaders of American 'managed democracy' to interpret effective globalization as the Americanization of the world (Wolin 2008) (2).

A Frontier of Character of Personality?

Conversely, the frontier thesis deflected attention from the cultural revolution in opportunity and mobility. In America this was concentrated, not primarily in conquering the Great Plains and the Rockies, but in challenging and eroding the conventions of urban stratified society. The social transformations in the main metropolitan centres of America, which occurred, as it were, behind Turner's back, directly challenged the neo-Darwinian emphasis upon the crystallization of character through the evolution of the American state. After the 1880s, migration, industrialization and accumulation, were challenging or overturning nearly *all* boundaries in Anglo-American culture. An analytically distinct type of frontierism was at play here. It focused on testing the boundaries of stratified society. Achieved (Upwardly mobile) Celebrities in the fields of art and literature, and later sport and entertainment, played a dramatic, symbolic role in pushing back the social mores and conventions associated with old money. In Turner's (1961) thesis, American character is about building and refining virtue through overcoming adversity to acquire the integrity of a serene kind of wisdom. What happened in the earth shaking, mould breaking expansion of the leading American cities after the 1880s, was a convulsive appreciation that the display of *aptitude* and

the exhibition of *virtue* and boldness were sufficient to seize the day. As a by-product social relations gradually became popularly understood as provisional and subject to manipulative dramaturgy. This is anticipated brilliantly in Herman Melville's (1857) great, but long misunderstood novel, *The Confidence Man*. The book was neglected for many generations because it was dismissed as possessing vague, unrealized characters and an obscure narrative. Why this is a mistake is that the absence of character and uplifting narrative is precisely the point that Melville wants to establish about the industrial transformation of American society. All of the action takes place on April Fool's Day aboard a Mississippi steam boat heading South. Revealingly, the boat is called the *Fidele*. Melville uses the nicety of the name of the vessel to contrast with the bewildering deceits, bluffs, double dares, swindles and confidence tricks played by all of the passengers on board. On the *Fidele*, all of the action, all of the social jockeying and posing, is about nothing more than gaining personal advantage over the other fellow. Melville portrays a social universe in which no-one and nothing can be trusted or believed. Belief is entirely secondary to getting ahead by whatever means necessary.

It is this dimension of gaining immediate, momentary advantage without much thought, and with no attention to the long term future, that is absent in Turner's thesis. It suggests that to conceive of frontierism only in terms of the evolution of character in an epic struggle with 'wilderness' that results in the crystallization of the Western kinsman misconstrues the full extent of the many sided upheavals in the American road to modernization. In fact there were two frontiers in American society. The *horizontal* frontier, addressed by Turner (1961), refers

to the push West and the struggle with Nature and the indigenous population. The *vertical* frontier refers to the challenge to the social boundaries and cultural conventions set by stratified society. In pushing back these boundaries and conventions upwardly mobile Americans and migrant labour transformed the power structure of American society. The tools and weapons that they used to do so can loosely be called individualism, dynamism and democracy. But the means through which they were applied, and the ends involved, were very different from Turner's (1961) construct of the exalted progress of the American state and evolution of character.

It is my submission that, to encompass the complex movements and counter-movements in challenging the vertical horizon, the concept of 'personality' is preferable to that of character. In order to explain why, it is helpful to refer briefly to Carl Schmitt's (1919) discussion of engineered intimacy and strategic emotional labour (3). Of course, Schmitt's interest is not in the American frontier or the social transformations in the stratified culture of American cities. His (1919) book, *Political Romanticism,* is about German politics in the 19th century. However, its real aim is to unmask the role of personality in communicating (and seeking to convey the impression of elucidating) the dialectical forces and processes identified in Marxist theory. Through elucidation comes the impression of command i.e. a source of personal status and power. However, a good deal of what Schmitt says about the hectic, episodic display of emotional labour to gain personal advantage transfers readily to the challenges against the vertical frontier in the American urban-industrial milieux. Schmitt's founding point is that the desire to change the world progressively is not fundamentally, a matter of objective

forces. It is rather, above all, a matter of *subjective interest.* Schmitt's political candidates for influence and fame are driven by personal ambition and the search for opportunity. They are moved by 'the emergency', 'the event', 'the incident' or – to use Schmitt's (1919) term, *the occasion*, because it affords the opportunity to shine and be noticed. There is a strong element of 'excessive sociability' about this urge. Being noticed is intrinsically a matter of using social skills to gain acceptance and approval. Emotional intelligence and labour are directed, not merely to the business of achieving change, but, more narrowly, to being personally noticed and acquiring individual reputation. Schmitt (1919) views these manoeuvres in emotional intelligence and emotional labour as expressions of what he calls 'transcendental ego'. The personalities in German romantic politics in the nineteenth century often behaved as if they only have themselves to answer to. Higher theological and metaphysical arbiters are dismissed as delusions. What really excites and absorbs the transcendental ego is acquiring and grasping attention for themselves, rather than doggedly advancing a collective cause based in objective reality. This fully embraces the business of staging events or engineering incidents in order to acquire attention capital (4). In contrast to Turner's (1961) Western kinsman, these men and women cannot be relied upon for their wisdom and unflinching, reliable behaviour on every occasion. Rather, they are adept at having their cake and eating it. This is because their orientation to life obeys the demands of an ego that regards itself to be above ordinary boundaries. The successful personality must be fit to milk the opportunities provided by 'the occasion'. The dynamics of industrial change, in which 'the

fleeting', 'the ephemeral' and 'the transient' abound with dizzy profusion, creates a surfeit of opportunities to seize 'the occasion' and generate attention capital (5).

The Vaudeville Tradition

In brief, the case that I wish to advance at this point, is that the challenge against the vertical frontier was primarily about the display and refinement of personality in accumulating attention capital. It is this accumulation of attention capital that provided the foundation of new forms of power and influence. The logic of advantage was based in relations of consumption rather than production. In the course of this, celebrity culture rooted in the sphere of amusement, was fundamental in extending cultural literacy about dramatizing personality and communicating the cultural literacy necessary to bloodlessly test the boundaries of stratified control. In the space available here it is impossible to fully test this argument with detailed historical evidence. But a taster of what I have in mind can be supplied by briefly considering the vaudeville tradition and further, addressing two case studies of celebrity personalities that marshalled attention capital and eroded stratified boundaries through the use of personality: Mae West and Bob Hope.

In the American road of modernization, the development of personality occurred along many fronts. Melville's (1857) gamers, tricksters and exponents of one-upmanship aboard the *Fidele* convey something of this prolific variety and invention. However, nowhere was it accomplished more publicly realized than in the vaudeville tradition. By the 1880's, for ordinary men and women domiciled in the

cities, the popular palaces of amusement that multiplied in direct proportion to the growth of urban populations, the influx of migrant labour from Europe and the rise in real wages, were not only places of entertainment and distraction. They were beacons of upward mobility where performers brazenly ridiculed the excesses and vanities of stratified society (Allen 1991; Fields and Fields 1993; Kibler 1999;Lewis 2003). Historical research has demonstrated that colonizing and extending vaudeville culture were important in raising the profile of, respectively, Irish and Jewish migrants on the American mainland (Lavitt 1999; Snyder 2006; Cherry 2013). Style and attitude were weapons of contesting the established social and economic power mix. While most of the acts had their day in the sun and were swiftly forgotten, some rose to become important referents of attention capital that changed the balance of power between established and outsider groups (Van Kriekan 2012). This paper is not a contribution to the social history of vaudeville. Instead the focus of interest is upon the mixture of emotional intelligence and emotional labour that combined on stage in the presentation of personality, and later the radio waves and screen, to test and overcome stratified social frontiers. The vaudeville tradition, combined with the expansion of mass communications, equipped audiences with a new emotional literacy. Ernest Gellner (1985, 1988) advanced the proposition that material and social transformation in industrial development operates to replace the struggle for survival with demands for acceptance and approval (6). The vaudeville tradition dramatized the demands of labour, migrants and women for more recognition and resources. It was a front out of which attention capital accumulated with consequences that extended well beyond the stage,

the recording studio or the film set. In order to add substance to this train of thought, consider the cases of Mae West and Bob Hope.

Mae West

At the peak of her cultural influence, in the 1920s and early 1930s, Mae West played the part of public amanuensis to cultural strata and social problems from which respectable society chose to discreetly avert its gaze. While her later career disintegrated into self parody, the heyday of her stage and film work criticized many of the hypocritical mores and standards of stratified society and broke down phobias of prejudice and intolerance. In the Jazz Age and Prohibition era, West cultivated various tricks of personality in order to seize 'the occasion' and disclose the transgressive, alternative underworld that lurked beneath the veneer of American straight society. She learned the craft of sexual innuendo and testing frontiers from female impersonators, like Bert Savoy and Julian Eltinge (Curry 1996). The risqué popularizing of outlawed pleasures was her trademark. She exhibited familiarity and ease with the taboo cultures of prostitution and camp. Two of her plays were raided by the vice squad, and a third was 'dissuaded' from opening on Broadway (Hamilton 1990: 384). Her scandalously successful stage plays *Sex* (1926), for which she received a 10 day prison sentence (for allegedly corrupting public morals), and *The Drag* (1927), dealt with controversial subjects of sex workers, homosexuality and cross dressing. In a pioneering move on Broadway, *The Drag* employed openly gay actors and freely used camp repartee. West wrote, produced and starred in these productions. Very visibly, she defied social and

sexual conventions. To be sure, her plain-speaking style ridiculed these conventions as the bastions of a bankrupt culture. Her confrontational, provocative personality did not make her an outcast. On the contrary, she became an icon of the gay community, the 'new' woman and, more generally, a symbol of the transgressive metropolis. Her stage persona was carried over into film. Like Bob Hope after her, West made the Westward migration to Hollywood from the New York stage. 'In most of her films,' comments Mellen (1974: 576), 'she reduces herself to a sexual object in quest of economic security while she is, simultaneously, defiant and self sufficient, seeking mastery over her life.' The wise cracks, the *double entendres,* the take-it or leave-it attitude cemented the public image of her as a hard-boiled, mould-breaker. Her film work discards the respectable idea that the relationship between the sexes is one of politesse and decorum. For West, the real relationship between the sexes is the endless see-saw between dominance and submission. There is a frank, self knowing attitude to her portrayal of sexuality. 'When women go wrong,' she has her character, Lou, say in the film *She Done Him Wrong,* 'men go right after them' (Williams 1975: 120). This would have been deplored as coarse and common by apostles of stratified society, but many trapped in the lower levels of power or marginalized relished it as refreshing 'straight talk'. In West's hands it turns into an assault on the idea of crystallized American character, forged through a struggle in which Might and Right triumph and a serene social hierarchy is instigated. For West, stratified society plays a deceiving game of immoveable, justified social divisions and settled social order. 'By rejecting the divisions between black and white,' observes Watts (2001: 317),'man

and woman, rich and poor, self and other, she continues to challenge a society that thrives on fixity and certainty.' This life-long interest in role play, counter identity and grand bluffs of concealment, led some writers to call her 'the first female leading man' and 'greatest female impersonator' (McKorkle 2011: 48). Her cultivation of provocation, confrontation and teasing on stage and screen were designed to produce instant attention capital and achieve maximum social impact (Wortis-Leider 1997: 4). It all boiled down to projecting personality – deployed artfully at conducive 'occasions' in different settings – to be noticed, publicized and adored. West had no interest in being a role model or providing lessons in character. Her object was to display how personality can be used to seize the occasion and gain a greater share of unequally distributed resources. All of this disguised a shrewd, hard-headed business woman who, like Bob Hope later, built a substantial and lucrative property empire in California.

Bob Hope

Bob Hope offers a paradigmatic case of the dividends and costs of celebrity personality politics. On stage and screen, he was the bravado-charged braggart who characteristically yielded to innate cowardice when incidents and episodes turned against him; the butt of the wily Bing Crosby's stunts in the highly popular 'Road 'moves; the skirt chaser who continued to play the game until well into middle age; the syndicated cheer leader for the troops in successive wars after 1941; the regular 'Ordinary Joe', whose financial worth, at the time of his death in 2003, was conservatively estimated to be $100 million (mostly concentrated in an extensive West coast

property portfolio) (McCann 2003). The themes of avarice, manipulation, injustice and inequality are all present in Hope's standard comedic repertoire.

However, tellingly, the comfort zone of his humour seldom extends beyond the commonplace beliefs and values of middle America. His most successful movies, such as *The Cat and the Canary* (1939),*The Paleface* (1948), *The Lemon Drop Kid* (1951) and of course, the *Road* movies, portray success and failure in American life as entirely a matter of personality. Hope's testing of boundaries, uses incidents and occasions to reveal the points of leverage in market society. His repeated barbs against Democrats lightly, but insistently, treat Republican values as laws of nature. The structural dimensions of power and inequality are not addressed. Fate rules destiny. As such, Hope, who migrated from Britain at the age of 4, and whose family initially struggled to make ends meet in Cleveland, may be described as an exemplary capitalist comedian. That is, his faith in the American way, and hostility to opponents in the Cold War, were ferociously uncritical. Although he supported Charities, through personal donations and free performances, it was always an open question whether he was selflessly trying to alleviate suffering or calculatingly seeking to strengthen his brand. In the 1950s, when comics indignant with the political status quo, such as Lenny Bruce and Mort Sahl, preached system change, Hope was more comfortable with conserving and honouring values of continuity and order. This is not to say that, Hope was impervious to the craftsmanship of the best political humour. On the contrary, his lifelong employment and ruthless vetting of multiple joke writers, was designed to convey to audiences familiarity with local, national and international issues. A central element in his tour

planning was to use staffers to investigate issues and questions in the states, cities and institutions before he played which could be incorporated into his stage act (Zoglon 2014). This mirrored what politically radical comedians were doing. But Hope applied it to poke fun at the system rather than seek to challenge and change it. After seeing Lenny Bruce's act at a Florida nightclub and praising him to the audience, Bruce flagged Hope down in the parking lot and asked for a guest spot on his TV show. As Richard Zoglon (2014: 335) Hope's most recent, and best biographer, recounts, 'Hope laughed him off: "Lenny you're for educational TV".' In his movies, stage act and private life, Hope persistently seized the occasion to build attention capital. In the mid 1940s, he broke with the Paramount Studio system, to become an independent producer. This gave him a bigger stake in his movies and reap higher profits. In the next decade he made a similar deal with NBC becoming his own producer and charging the network a licence fee which ensured royalty payments in perpetuity. He was a celebrity pioneer in bespoke aggregation (7). In addition to his stage performances and radio and movie productions, he published his autobiography, memoirs and books on his travels and golf. Throughout his carer he was a prolific celebrity endorser of products in national and global advertising campaigns. He also had a syndicated newspaper column (ghost written) and sponsored lucrative mega-events, such as the Bob Hope Desert Classic gold tournament. From the 1950s he was even the star of a comic book, *The Adventures of Bob Hope,* launched by DC comics and published quarterly. Hope's business interests shaded uncomfortably into his politics. The *Bob Hope Classic Golf Tournament* founded in 1965, used the involvement of sitting President's (Bill Clinton) and

former Presidents in the competition and substantial corporate investment, notably from Chrysler cars (8). These manifold business activities were designed to be mutually reinforcing. The twofold aim was to maximize revenue and maintain Hope prominently in the public eye (Zoglin 2014: 14-15). In addition, they reinforced a particular view of normative order in which protest and challenge were automatically labelled as gratuitous and ungrateful. Hope's politics were unwaveringly nationalistic and supportive of property interests. To my knowledge, he never publicly criticized American government policy. His attacks on justice and inequality appealed to a primitive, unexplicated idea of natural right, rather than a coherent, integrated political standpoint. During the Viet Nam war his intransigence was turned into a damaging test of character. Hope's dedication to support the troops in Vietnam, was translated into blind support for American foreign policy (Davis 2004:306). Large sections of American youth culture turned against him. He was seen to be at odds with grassroots opinion and in the pocket of government. In American foreign policy, Hope's one attempt to build and maintain a consistent, solid position based in character back-fired. His unqualified support for the troops in Viet Nam and regular televised visits to entertain in combat zones became associated with inflexible, unblinking support for the establishment. Yet at the same time, Hope was unequivocally, an achieved celebrity who dramatically symbolized the rising power of the labouring classes. In his movies and stage act he is uneasy with, and often dismissive of, the values of old money. Having the right pronunciation, and bearing, are secondary to being the right personality. In his visits to combat zones in Viet Nam and elsewhere, Hope hob-

nobbed with Generals, but he emphatically sought to identify with the regular troops. Among most of them, he was seen as a champion of their interests often *against* the top brass. His valour in voluntarily flying to frontline zones was also appreciated as demonstrating that, at heart, Hope was one of them.

Conclusion

Frontierism is a Janus faced concept in the study of American culture. Historically, the term refers to the nineteenth century pioneer Westward push. F.W. Turner (1961) the architect of the so-called 'frontier thesis' enjoined that the triumph of the settlers over Nature and 'Savages' confirmed American exceptionalism. The Western kinsman emerged as a heroic model for the nation: an archetype of invention, fortitude and derring-do. This version of frontierism certainly captures the redrafting of cultural boundaries and the latitude this affords in cultural innovation and enterprise. Consecutively, it glosses over both the violence entailed in pioneer land grabbing and the parallels with European colonialism.

The second meaning of the term frontierism refers to challenging the boundaries of hierarchical society. The hammer and anvil behind this was industrialization and urbanization. The concentration of populations in metropolitan centres and the growth in real wages, that both reflected and reinforced the condition of the secure labouring classes, exposed most of the core mores and cultural motifs of the Eastern seaboard and old Europe as arbitrary. A major aspect of this meaning of frontierism was the emergence of celebrity culture. Symbolically, celebrity expressed accelerated, rags to riches, forms of upward mobility. As befits a seismic cultural change, it

often ridiculed and trashed hiearchical society by dwelling upon its pomposity and self aggrandizement. The new values of the urban celebrities made a virtue of straight-talking and giving everyone a fair shake until (and unless) experience differed. The multiplication of this form of frontierism owed much to new technologies of print and later, radio and film.

One helpful way of distinguishing between the two forms of Frontierism is to relate each with a particular type of ascendant psychology. Turner's frontierism was mostly about character formation. According to his way of thinking, the Western kinsman was the apotheosis of piety, fortitude, courage and invention. Turner was a man of his time in holding a neo-Darwinian view of development and progress. He regarded, the piety, fortitude, courage and invention that he identified in the Western kinsman, to signify a new benchmark in human civilization. The American West was teaching the stratified societies of the Eastern Europe and Europe a lesson. This form of frontierism then, is not just about pushing back boundaries, but establishing nation-building foundations.

In contrast, the metropolitan form of frontierism had more to do with personality. Schmitt (1919) was one of the first commentators to draw attention to the significance of 'the occasion' in promoting attention capital for the individual. The compression of populations in urban centres and the new channels of accessibility afforded by mass communications multiplied opportunities designed to engineer the accumulation of attention capital for individuals. This type of frontierism challenged hierarchy by seizing the moment and revealing the aridity of congealed status boundaries. Celebrity culture was an important pathway, because it

dramatized the futile constraints of hierarchy while at the same time promoting the competitive advantage of unfettered expression and urban derring-do.

In the course of all of this American culture became locked between the aspiration to get ahead by whatever means necessary and to demonstrate backbone. The contradictions are self evident today, in American attitudes to wealth inequality, the philosophy of homeland security and the adventurism of military interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen and the Pakistan Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA). According to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism (2015), to date in 2015, there have been 13 drone attacks in Pakistan territory. It is reported that 62-85 people have been killed (i.e. terrorists) and 2-5 civilians killed. There is considerable and understandable doubt about the extent of so-called 'collateral damage' casualties. Randle (2013) estimate the numbers killed in the TATA attacks to be as high as 3577, including 197 children. At the same time, there is no legal doubt that a state of war does not exist between America and Pakistan. As Turner's (1961) frontier thesis reminds us, American destiny is based in the maxim that feint heart never won favour.

References

1. 'Old Corruption' was a term used in 18th century England to refer to the informal system of bribes, vote rigging and rotten boroughs that elites operated to ensure their continuing power in the midst of 'democracy'.
2. The term 'managed democracy' treats the concept of one man, one vote as a façade that disguises the

power of the corporate-state axis in organizing and reproducing normative order.

3. Schmitt originally developed his ideas to expose what he judged to be personal opportunism in the Bolshevik and other socialist movements. His thought was eclipsed after World War 2, when his involvement with Nazism became an issue of academic notoriety. Since his death in 1985,his importance in political theory has grown. He is credited with being an influence on elements in the work of Jacques Derrida, Antonio Negri, Leo Strauss, Slavoj Zizek, Chantal Mouffe and Jurgen Habermas (Mehring 2014).

4. Here, the term 'designer notoriety' may be introduced to refer to deliberate, engineered attempts to disrupt normative order for the purpose of acquiring media attention capital and, through this, celebrity.

5. The 'ephemeral, 'the transitory' and 'the 'fugitive' are, of course, primary characteristics of modernity (Frisby 1985). The emergence of 'the occasion' as a means of gaining advantage and personality politics as a lifestyle asset are, by no means accidentally, related to the pupation and maturity of Modernity.

6. In societies where the struggle for survival has been replaced by the struggle for acceptance and approval, engineering intimacy and finessing emotional labour are pivotal. Engineering 'the occasion' and projecting traits of personality

to accumulate social impact become decisive in achieving competitive advantage.

7. The term ‘bespoke aggregation’ refers to mutually reinforcing elements of commodified culture organized around a celebrity. For example, in the case of Bob Hope, the radio broadcasts were used to reinforce the movies, the song repertoire, the syndicated newspaper column, the comics and the highly publicized goodwill shows for the troops. The aim of bespoke aggregation is to maximize the cultural capital and economic value of the celebrity by selling to audiences a whole way of life (see Rojek 2011: 163,65).

8. Originally the competition was known as the ‘Palm Springs Golf Classic (1959). Hope lent his name to the competition in 1964, but withdrew following an unxpected tax bill from the IRS to the board for $110,000 in back taxes. After the tax dilemma was resolved in 1965 the tournament was renamed the Bob Hope Classic. In 2012,9 years after Hope’s death, the tournament was changed to ‘Humana Challenge’ in partnership with the Clinton Foundation.

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