

Geography, Progress, and Its Discontents

Reflections on Turner's *Beyond Geography*

Steve Izma

a review of

Beyond Geography: The Western Spirit against the Wilderness by Frederick Turner. Viking, 1980

Beyond Geography first came to my attention in the early 1980s when Fredy Perlman began his arguments in *Against His-story, Against Leviathan!* with an appraisal of Turner's book. Both of these texts attracted attention from the anarchist milieu around the *Fifth Estate* at the time, especially for those of us trying to build an historical picture of where human society went wrong.

As Perlman stated in *Against His-story*,

"Frederick Turner borrows the lights of human communities beyond civilization's kene to see beyond geography. He sees with the eyes of the dispossessed of this once beautiful world that rests on a turtle's back, this double continent whose ponds emptied, whose banks were rent, whose forests became arid craters from the day it was named America."

Unlike most anti-capitalists, many in the anarchist and anti-authoritarian tradition see the linearity of history as an aberration from the regenerative cycles of nature. At some point, human beings went off on a tangent into a trajectory of hierarchy, aggression, property, and exploitation. From this perspective the transition from feudalism to capitalism—so minutely and obsessively studied by Marxists—explained very little. The more closely anti-authoritarians examined the history of civilization, the more the roots of oppression receded into the past.

If we confine our scope of political discussion to the history of capitalism, especially under the Marxist definition that sets the early boundary only a few hundred years ago, we can become easily trapped in the idea that human nature is equivalent to the capitalist mindset rooted in competition and convinced of the need for aggression in order to survive. But a longer look at human existence, which goes hundreds of thousands of years outside of history, gives us a contrast to our current conditions that radically challenges this conventional idea of our nature.

Materialism versus Superstition: A False Dichotomy

Turner contemplates this contrast as the distance between us (members of Western societies) and

"human beings whose relationship to their lands was dictated by an oblique but strong recognition of human biology, by the particularities of those lands, and by a living mythology that celebrated all this....This, then, is an essay in spiritual history...founded on that surest of realities: the human spirit and its dark necessity to realize itself through body and place."

This is a call not to superstition, but to a critique of the Western myth that filters out spirit and leaves only the traces of measurable activity. All organizations, religious, political, and cultural, build stories to justify their existence, and even what we think of these days as "evidence-based" science is constructed on interpretations, usually fragile, of our observations of the world. We become dangerously self-satisfied to think that somehow we have established truths that eclipse all previous belief systems.

Pointing out the qualitative differences among the ways in which different societies legitimize themselves, Turner shows how the mythologies of original peoples invariably presented our earthly environment as the center of creation and reproduction, not surprisingly associating these processes with female essences, too simplistically referred to in our times as deities.

He then demonstrates the relationship between, on the one hand, the shift in human activity from hunter-gathering to sedentary agriculture and, on the other, the shift from female to male deities, an inversion of seeing the earth as the mother-center of existence to seeing the sky as the abstraction of male dynamism. In this new system, the sky's rain and sunshine make the now-passive earth productive.

Along, then Beyond History

Turner discusses the many aspects of the violent interface between nature-centered societies and property-centered ones. His chapters focus on a series of pivotal events, like the rise of monotheism, the technologies of empire expansion in Classical times, and various examples of imperialist aggression, first aimed against mostly European and Asian barbarians, then expanding outwards to all parts of the globe.

He charts the need for and the rise of a coherent ideology to bind the increasingly diverse citizens of these empires together. Christianity, the epitome of the sky-based, monotheistic belief systems, fitted the bill perfectly.

Emerging just as the imperialism centered in the Italian peninsula faltered, the Holy Roman Empire structured European society in a way that co-ordinates the political needs of various warrior fiefdoms. But it also allowed for the accumulation and co-ordination of economic resources needed to build roads, fleets, and markets.

Turner describes the demonization of Christianity's enemies that fueled the wars against Islam, but also led to the internal purifications of culture and thought, as policed by the Inquisition. Referring to German sociologist Max Weber's ideas on the rise of capitalism, Turner points to the process whereby pagan spirits are erased from the world. He writes that, as a consequence of fighting paganism and internal heresies, the world starts to appear

“as neutral and even empty of all spirit life. To Weber, this view resulted in the conception of the world as an open field for such human activity as might be pleasing to a god infinitely removed from it....Such a non-sacramental world, bereft of spirit, its gods and sacred groves and megaliths reduced to euhemeristic [i.e., historically rationalized] ciphers, or else banished to devilish realism, could pose no resistance to those intensive investigations of nature that ultimately resulted in the West's celebrated ability to expand.”

Thus, the earth becomes passive material, mere resources, unworthy of the kind of respect one would naturally bestow on a living entity. The Christian god has created the earth, but not breathed into it, and just leaves it behind for human beings to stand on.

Referring to the American critic of technology Lewis Mumford, Turner observes

“that the greatly increased fund of scientific knowledge was accompanied by a ‘deformation of experience as a whole.’ The instruments of science, he writes, ‘were helpless in the realm of qualities. The qualitative was reduced to the subjective: the subjective was dismissed as unreal, and the unseen and immeasurable as non-existent.’”

This is the framework Turner uses to analyze the Spanish invasion of the Americas and then the destructive westward movement of the American colonization effort—new directions, new territory, but always occurring within the paradigm of fear of the wilderness and, especially, of its peoples.

With Europe consolidated by the late 15th century, more resources could be invested into exploration and exploitation of the lands beyond that continent. But after 1500, the Christian empire's ability to plaster over the fractures within the Holy Roman Empire weakened fatally. The subsequent two hundred years of wars and civil wars brought the old order to its knees.

The Enlightenment and the Religion of Science

Most rationalists and materialists have difficulty understanding how the Christian Church has struggled throughout its history to maintain a coherent, rules-based control over the state.

The Church hierarchy has always recognized the need to separate phenomenon that can be explained by natural processes from miracles that have no other explanation than an act of God, especially an act of God that has resulted from an intercession on our behalf by a saint.

But this need for a probing rationality leaves the Church itself open to criticism. The very process of separating natural things from divine things set the Church firmly on a path of scientific rationalism that was bound to undermine its own dogma.

It's a mistake to dwell on the notion that the Enlightenment of the early 18th century brought us into the modern world by separating the Church from the state. A more accurate assessment would point to a new palace coup. The bourgeoisie, with its ideology of a mythless, secular state, believed they had laid the groundwork for a society that would evermore progress on the basis of a materialist set of laws.

They merely replaced the old state ideology, nominally Christian, with a scientism that immediately set to work eradicating all the remnants of primitive, nature-based paradigms. Despite the adulation of nature underlying a Romantic movement that reacted to the soullessness of the Enlightenment, the new ruling class and its dominant ideology effectively portrayed the peoples peripheral to Europe as impediments to a fully capitalist exploitation of global territory.

Today, we still have as tight an integration of ideology and the state as that experienced by humanity during the Middle Ages. The Church of Scientism runs a civil service ordained by global industrial players, particularly in the chemical and technology industries.

These and the politicians constitute a clergy who have grabbed the bull of progress by the horns and propelled themselves into the monopolistic citadels of Big Agriculture, Big Pharma, and their brethren. Their evangelism has created our environmental and medical crises and their ideological hold on all our educational institutions helps to shift the blame away from them towards a demonized nature.

Turner, in grappling with the contradictions of a linear and sterile geography-history, leaves us to ask: How can we regain our sense of place within the natural world as the beginning of a resistance to its modern destroyers?

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