THE AMERICAN CIVILIZATION

THESIS: INTERNALIZING THE OTHER

In *The Deerslayer*, James Fenimore Cooper presents two protagonists who represent the essentialist and progressivist approaches to civilization, but he does not offer a solution to the differences that remain between the two approaches. Bumppo’s and March’s positions cannot be harmonized by the end of the novel. As Cooper’s meticulous balancing of their position in terms of historical memory and space indicates, however, there is a serious national desire for discursive harmonization behind the seemingly trivial problem of quarreling protagonists. Only in harmony can the two discourses of civilization help legitimate specifically us claims to civilization and the North American continent. After all, if Americans do not constitute the unified, industrious nation that replaces Native Americans, they themselves must be considered the rugged and transitional piratical sovereignty that will eventually be replaced by legitimate European powers. The European, at the time of Cooper’s writing, still is the inherent definition of a representative of civilization, while Americans can still be conceptualized, at least to some extent, as deviants faced with European charges of illegitimate sovereignty.

To establish a specifically American perspective that was able to rebut these charges and that rendered the United States fully civilized, the two European approaches to civilization had to be merged. As scholars like Roy Harvey Pearce, Nancy Shoemaker, and Richard Slotkin have shown, the necessity for this lay in the history of European settlement in North America: the two rival approaches had consistently been used in parallel to conceptualize American relations with Native Americans. To decide in favor of one model while dismissing the other meant to discard half of America’s early settler history as uncivilized. By the end of the nineteenth century, this basic question of American civilization seemed ripe for an answer.

A hundred years earlier, as Shoemaker has noted, settler Americans and Native Americans were considered inherently and naturally different on the basis of race. But by the end of the nineteenth century, the marginalized, scattered, militarily insignificant tribes that constituted the ideal Native American in Cooper’s
characterizations of the Delawares had replaced the political notion of the racialized Other as a belligerent, barbarous entity represented by praedones. The Native American as a significant political entity had virtually “vanished” from the American continent.

Fredric Jameson notes that “the prototypical paradigm of the Other in the late nineteenth century . . . is the other imperial nation state [sic].” According to Jameson, these imperial rivals were now characterized as “the quintessential ogres and bogeymen of childhood nightmare [sic], physically alien and terrifying,” images that had been adapted from older characterizations of “the more radical otherness of colonized, non-Western peoples” who were now deemed inherently inferior and dependent, rather than invasive and threatening (“Modernism,” 49).

The characterization of the other imperial nation-state as a quasi-racialized Other and the dismissal of nonwhite Others as naturally inferior was based on a discourse of naturalizing certain categories of difference. “By about 1890,” Gail Bederman writes, “the discourse of civilization had taken on a very specific set of meanings which revolved around three factors: race, gender, and millennial assumptions about human evolutionary progress. . . . [B]elievers in civilization described evolution working in history to perfect the world. Instead of Christians battling infidels, they envisioned superior races outsurviving inferior races. . . . The most advanced, civilized races—that is, the white races—would be perfected. . . . This millennial vision of perfected racial evolution and gender specialization was what people meant when they referred to ‘the advancement of civilization’” (Manliness, 25–26).

Because the advancement of civilization was exclusively reserved for white men, other agents—such as the representatives of nonwhite peoples—could be categorically factored out of any discussion of legitimate violence, while the internal differentiation of white men and white nations as insufficiently civilized, perfectly civilized, or even “overcivilized” (Bederman, Manliness, 186)—became a defining concern related to the question of legitimate violence.¹

The first chapter of this part of the book discusses Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis. Turner’s “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1893) was almost immediately celebrated as a text of central importance for us culture, and it retains this status for good reason. As the first chapter of this part shows, Turner’s essay does nothing less than formulate a new model of civilization, which uses the hostis humani generis constellation to construct the United States as the new locus of civilization. Turner’s main contribution to the discourse of legitimate violence in the United States lies in combining the two previous models of civilization into a third one, which is characterized by perpetual self-civilizing disruption within the territorial borders of the nation-state. Due to the defining role of national boundaries, the frontier model’s self-civilizing disruption is dependent on changing the context of the constellation’s figures from the appropriation of territorial space to a progressive self-actualization within the institutions of a delimited nation-state. In this model, the pirata plays a radically altered role: rather than being
a renegade or an unwitting, problematic pioneer, he emerges as the foundational figure that sets civilizing self-actualization in motion. The pirata is the central figure in all the constellations discussed in this part of the book, while the praedo and the representative of civilization step into the background and simply help place the pirata’s violent actions in a national (here, primarily institutional) context.

The second chapter in this part of the book discusses the development of a corresponding understanding of civilization not as an inherent property of an expansive regime, but as a body of ideals that perpetually have to be reactualized in the nation-state. This logic is used increasingly in the early twentieth century, as European claims to inherent civilization become questionable after World War I (1914–18), and as the foundation of the Soviet Union in 1922 marks the rise of a model of post-European civilization that rivals the frontier model. This chapter discusses the ways in which US constructions of civilization adapt to these changing circumstances. To illustrate these developments, the chapter includes a brief discussion of Dashiell Hammett’s novel *Red Harvest* (1929), which draws attention to urban space as a new in-between zone that helps hone the frontier model’s constellational logic.

The third chapter in this part of the book discusses the redefinition of representative agency after the introduction of the frontier model of civilization, which goes hand in hand with a redefinition of the status of the innocent. This redefinition is due to the usage of hostis humani generis to define totalitarianism in the twentieth century—that is, as a regime that rests on the violent oppression of the innocent by praedones in representation of an evil ideology. In this context, the institutions of the law emerge as an explicit site for negotiating the legitimacy and illegitimacy of violence in the United States. The discourse of agency and oppression in the context of legal institutions indeed becomes the defining context for the frontier thesis’s civilizational reading in the United States.

The interpretive shifts formulated in the third chapter constitute the basis for the discussion of the fourth and final chapter of this part of the book, which offers an analysis of Richard Wright’s 1940 novel, *Native Son*. In this novel, an African American man serves as the pirata in a particularly nuanced application of the hostis humani generis constellation as it appears in the frontier model of civilization. The context of novel’s protagonist is racially segregated urban space, and the consequences of the pirata’s intervention are explicitly linked to the ideological and legal underpinnings of the nation-state. This chapter concludes the argument on an interesting shift that the frontier model of civilization, somewhat paradoxically, makes possible: by universalizing whiteness and therefore removing race as the distinction between the representative of civilization and the praedo, the model enables African American figures to be recognized as genuine representatives of national character and African American writers as serious commentators on the legitimacy of violence.
One important feature of the frontier model of civilization must be kept in mind. The frontier model never operates wholly independently of the essentialist model. Civilizing self-disruption inside the nation can be recognized as a legitimate use of violence only in the context of unambiguous binaries of good and evil outside the nation. The frontier model's dependence on the essentialist model becomes a challenge in the twentieth century—especially after World War II (1939–45), when the United States outgrows its reliance on civilizational dichotomies formulated by European powers and formulates its own set of essentialist binaries for the world. This issue will be discussed at length in part 4 of the book.