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THE FRONTIER IN HISPANIC AMERICA

THE differences between Anglo-Saxon America and Latin or Hispanic America pointed out by sociologists up to the present time are well known. They all refer to the following perfectly established factors: race, climate, religion and the system of government during the colonial régime. (The marked contrast which the two Americas have presented in the nineteenth century and actually present was more than sufficiently explained by the radical differences in those factors.) There are, however, other elements of differentiation as important, or perhaps more important, which have been neither studied nor even, in some cases, insinuated: the process of the development of a country, its dynamic forces in operation have more importance than the static or permanent factors; it may be said that civilization is principally functional. The dynamic element par excellence in the development of Anglo-Saxon America has been the frontier. We owe this genial idea to Professor Turner; we know to-day, through his studies, that the frontier, that is, the progressive and assimilating advance on to new lands, has produced the perpetual renaissance and the greatest fluidity in American life and as essential consequences, in the psychological order, the American individualism, the spirit of enterprise and the creative activity; in the economic order, the necessarily solid physiocratic basis of society, and, in the political order, democracy, which is

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conceivable only when free land gives to all men equality of opportunity.

Does this same principle of progressive advance with its characteristics of individualism, solid economic development and democratic equality exist in Hispanic America? To answer this question is the object of this lecture.

A superficial examination may lead us to believe that in order for the frontier principle, such as Professor Turner understands it, to exist, the element of virgin and unknown lands suffices, regardless of their situation and of their being such as may be assimilated; and in that belief the influence of the frontier in Hispanic America, which even to-day has unknown and unexplored territory, might be asserted. But the frontier factor is not made up exclusively of the material element of territory, but principally of that slow process of assimilation of new lands to which civilizing action, which consolidates itself in them thanks to their situation in relation to the old nuclei of nationality and thanks also to their being available for agricultural production and human work, extends. In this sense we may affirm that the frontier appears only exceptionally in Hispanic America and that it is precisely on this that the essential difference between the United States and Canada and the other countries of the continent hinges. The frontier is not only quantitative but, principally, qualitative; it does not bear direct ratio to the gross extension of unknown territories but to their accessibility and their productivity, in one word, to their human value.

Latin America presents the frontier principle in the brilliant and almost miraculous beginning of the discovery and of the conquest but not in its slow and effective form of assimilating advance and progressive settlement.

Few contrasts shall history be able to offer more marked

than that which exists between the English expansion and the Hispanic expansion on the continent. In the seventeenth century and in the first half of the eighteenth century, the Englishmen had hardly colonized the territory between the cordillera and the water line. It is true that the first concessions made by the King of England, like those made to the south by the King of Spain, extended from ocean to ocean; but it is no less true that that theoretical demarcation was not effected until the nineteenth century because events took another course and the English Monarchy, on the eve of the war of independence, not only did not foster enterprises of conquest and settlement towards the unknown lands of the west but expressly prohibited them.

On the other hand, see the process of Hispanic expansion. Spain, during the sixteenth century, had discovered and explored the territories stretching from California to the Strait of Magellan and had taken possession, by sudden expansion, of the greater part of the land available and of human value in that vast territorial extension. The plateaus of the Anahuac, the central American valleys, the plains of Cundinamarca, the narrow Andine canyons, the plain of Collao, the central valley of Chile and the highlands of the Plata were assimilated by the Spaniards; the famous pioneers of this race naturally disdained the nearest and most accessible lands which were the low lands of warm climate in Mexico, Nueva Granada and Venezuela, and penetrating the very heart of the continent, they took possession of almost all the lands of agricultural value. If we were to compare the Spanish and Portuguese expansion of the beginning of the seventeenth century with that of the end of the eighteenth century, we would find the following difference only: the Portuguese advance in the valley

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of the Amazon, from the line of Tordecillas towards the head waters of the great river going beyond the line of San Ildefonso, to which advance Spain opposed its Missions of Mainas, Mojos and Guaranies. But the Portuguese advance was one of discoverers and not one of settlers, the Amazonic region not permitting the latter. The Spanish missions did no more than repeat the conquering effort of the soldiers of the sixteenth century and did not have an effective repercussion nor maintain a constant current of influences with that part of the Spanish colonies already definitely conquered. The Spanish frontier of the Amazon, in the heroic epoch of the military incursions in search of El Dorado or in the religious epoch of the missions, was not the progressive advance of the excess population of the old settlements towards free land nor did it establish the principle of fluidity and gradual expansion characteristic of the North American frontier of the Mississippi.

Synthesizing the foregoing it might be said that Spain, in the colonial period, took possession of the whole continent, settled the lands that could be assimilated and were of human value, scattering the centers or nuclei of culture and offering as regards the unknown lands only the work of pioneers but not that of definitive settlement. On the other hand, England, in the colonial period, colonized only the narrow strip between the Atlantic and the water line and did not advance on to the Alleghenies trying to enter the region of the future through the valleys of that chain, by the natural ways of the Ohio and the Cumberland until the end of the eighteenth century.

The contrast between the valley of the Mississippi and that of the Amazon is striking. The Mississippi, the theatre of the future American expansion, was, during the

entire colonial period, completely foreign to the life of the English colonies. Discovered and possessed in its southern part by Spain, explored and run over in its northern part by the French pioneers, it was at that time, as was the Amazon, the theatre of incursions and of fantastic trips but not of gradual settlement. A historical destiny was reserving it for peoples different from those that discovered it and was to offer it as the theatre of future although slow advance of the new nationality that arose as a result of the American independence. The Amazon, discovered at its headwaters and run over by the Spaniards since the sixteenth century is possessed in its lower part by the Portuguese. The centre of fantastic reigns, it attracted first the seekers for gold and later the missionaries. In the nineteenth century it still continues in almost the same condition in which it was at the end of the eighteenth century. The forest has not been dominated, there are no means of communication other than the rivers, the nation that possessed the mouth of the great river has affirmed its political sovereignty but has not assimilated it economically; the nations that possessed its headwaters have not done any more than the old colonies to which they succeeded. And the explanation lies in that there have been the two following essential differences between the valley of the Mississippi, theatre of the Saxon-American frontier, and the valley of the Amazon, theatre of the possible Hispanic American frontier: the territories of the northern and central Mississippi were suitable for agriculture and easily accessible from the populated centres, whereas the territories of the valley of the Amazon consisting of tropical forests could not be converted into arable land and access to them from the region of the Andes was most difficult. As Nathaniel S. Shaler very well observed: "The

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valleys of the St. Lawrence, the Hudson, the Mississippi, in a fashion also, of the Susquehanna and the James, break through or pass around the low coast mountains, and afford free ways into the whole interior that is attractive to European peoples. No part of the Alleghenian system presents any insuperable obstacle to those who seek to penetrate the inner lands."

The same author sets out the easy application of the lands of the Mississippi to agricultural purposes when he says: "For the first time in human history, a highly skilled people have suddenly come into possession of a vast and fertile area which stands ready for tillage without the labor which is necessary to prepare forest lands for the plow."

And thus does one explain to one's self that the American pioneers of the eighteenth century, such as Daniel Boone and Clark, should have been followed in the valley of the Mississippi by a stream which entered by the natural ways and which was later to turn into the colonizing torrent which was to assimilate those lands definitely to the new nationality. The Mississippi or, rather, the West is since then a determining factor in the history of the United States in the nineteenth century.

On the other hand, the Andes, in contrast with the Alleghanies, have presented and continue to present insuperable obstacles to the access of the valley of the Amazon. The paths of the Incaic attempts were the same that were used by the captains of the conquest, and the same as those used by the missionaries and they continue to be the same entrances used by the few travellers of the nineteenth century. And the land continues to be "intractable" as the old chroniclers expressed it, that is, rebellious to human effort and work.

All that we have just said sets out the radical difference

between the United States and the most typical of the countries of Hispanic America, which are Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia. These nations are made up mainly of valleys and interior highlands. The lands easily accessible from the coast are either unhealthy tropical forests, such as those of Colombia and Ecuador, or deserts such as those of Peru and the former Bolivian coast. And the small part which they still have of the old Spanish patrimony in the valley of the Amazon has the inconveniences and insuperable disadvantages which we have just pointed out. The frontier such as we conceive it is the free land, the land within the reach of property and human effort; that free land does not exist in these countries. That has led Lord Bryce to state the disagreeable and perhaps exaggerated conclusion that the mountainous region of Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia does not deserve to have greater population than it actually has; and, as regards the valley of the Amazon, that settlement is hardly possible in it where man faces a nature so difficult to dominate.

It is thus explained why the Andine countries present to-day almost the same character that they presented in the colonial epoch; with motionless cities, with stagnant population and everywhere with evident signs of that lack of the characteristics of frontier countries: the youthful growth, the fluidity and the constant transformation in the social organism. It may be said that these Andine countries preserve the same colonial structure. The scarce area of land that is capable of assimilation, wrested from the indigenous natives, is in the hands of a few great owners. Immediately following comes a middle class which lives principally on the bureaucracy developed infinitely more than in colonial times; and last, forming the lowest social stratum, is the aboriginal class on which rests the work

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of the mines and of the land. And that structure has not changed, not for reasons of a psychic nature nor because of political factors but almost exclusively due to the absence of frontier, as the Andine pioneers of to-day, the men engaged in the rubber industry, are few in number and their work has not advanced further than that of their illustrious predecessors, the captain of the conquest and the missionary of the colony, in the direction of starting a current towards the virgin lands.

Chile shares the same character of the Andine regions. It is not a frontier country either; the land capable of assimilation is to-day, as in colonial times, in the hands of a small number of owners. Its middle class elements will not be able to find, as did the North Americans of the middle of the nineteenth century, the field of the free land. Its orientation will have to be for that reason essentially industrial.

In Venezuela it shall be possible to apply the frontier principle when the excess of population in the world and the modern means of progress determine the settlement in vast scale of the plains of the Orinoco which are to-day in a condition similar to that of the forests of the Amazon.

Mexico, although with different aspects, presents, as regards the frontier, the same characteristics as the Andine countries. In spite of the considerable extension of the Mexican territory, the tropical forests of the hot land on the coasts of the Pacific and of the Atlantic and the desert region of the central plain near the United States border must be deducted. Eliseo Reclus calculates that these regions which cannot be assimilated represent at least two-fifths of the Mexican territory. The rest of the lands capable of assimilation, unlike the new lands which presented themselves only gradually to the occupation and advance

of the North Americans, was appropriated in its greater part either by the ecclesiastical institutions or by the great lords of colonial times, whence arose a régime of large estates, and, practically, the lack, or scarcity at least, of free land for the settler. Even the unoccupied lands belonging to the State were not in the same condition as were the frontier territories of the United States. So that Mexico's problem was not one of exploitation or assimilation of new lands but that of better distribution or allotment of those already known or exploited. The clergy possessed half the lands; it was natural that the new political factors created after the independence should wish to reach economic influence through the possession of the lands; this was the origin of the reform laws which vested in the State the property of the lands of the clergy. Then came the reaction; the dispossessed elements sought external influence in favor of an already impossible restoration and the Empire arose. The Empire having been destroyed, it was not possible for the land problem to have the natural solution of settlement by small land owners which the frontier countries have. New great lay land owners took the place of the clergy; the land, with different owners, continued to be in the hands of a few; the great popular mass continued in its condition of servitude, the middle class without any outlooks other than those of the bureaucracy. The dictatorship inaugurated on the downfall of the Empire distributed the lands of the State in the form of large and unlimited concessions. The land problem remained alive and, as time passed, it was to produce the formidable crisis of 1911, which has not yet ended. Had Mexico's free land been easy to assimilate and in the situation of frontier land, its history would have been very different. The frontier criterion applied to the history of Mexico throws new

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light on the problems that burden that country, and discards the interpretations of superficial sociologists who have done nothing other than to calumniate the aboriginal race, the qualities of which they have not known, or the Spanish education the fundamental principles of which they are unacquainted with.

The only countries in which the frontier can be considered as in North America are the lands of the River de la Plata and southern Brazil. In fact these countries are the most similar to the United States. Their being bounded by the Atlantic which makes them more accessible to European immigration, their temperate climate, the circumstance of having agricultural lands on the coast and that of having in it navigable rivers and, finally even the fact that the elevations of the land or Sierras do not present the inconvenient heights and unfavorable harshnesses of the Andes, contribute to accentuate the parallel. It cannot be denied that this region has been privileged with the gift of disposable land suitable for agriculture which brought as a result the considerable Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and German immigration. But a deeper observation of these countries reveals to us that the frontier principle appears in them in a form which is not precisely the same as the most advantageous form in which it appeared in the United States. To begin with, the area of the states of southern Brazil, São Paulo, Rio Grande do Sul, and Santa Catalina, to which we have referred, is not very large. As regards Argentina, we may deduct the desert parts of Patagonia which cut the valleys of the Negro and Neuquen and the semi-tropical forests of the Chaco. As regards Paraguay, it is necessary to say that the land has, although not so accentuated, the same disadvantages of the Amazonic region. Uruguay comprises a relatively small territorial

area. Let it be added to this that the situation of the Argentine Pampa and of the Brazilian plains is not similar from the topographical point of view nor from the point of view of its relation to the populated centres to that of the virgin lands of the Mississippi in relation to the original nuclei of the United States. Above all, the Argentine Pampa was a spot of territory between the settled zone of the coast and the populated zone near the Andes of greatest importance in the colonial epoch. Although not settled and exploited, it may be said that the Pampa was in a certain way apprehended and in the course of time the romantic action of the gaucho was to make room for the governmental action which constructed railroads and made concessions of lands. Hence in Argentina the relation between the gaucho and the colonizer, who comes afterwards more due to official action than to the initiative of individuals, is different. The gaucho does not advance from populated centres, he is a product of the plain itself. The American pioneers are the advance guard of the settlers who immediately follow. These differences are not merely accidental and of scarce interest. The Argentine Pampa appears conquered by the railroads and distributed in the great lots of governmental concessions, the origin of the large estate; on the other hand, the American West is conquered principally by the individual advance of the settlers who establish there, as predominant and general, the régime of the small ownership. Thus, individualism and equality of opportunities, the two great derivations of the frontier principle, do not present in the countries of the River de la Plata the same intensity and relief as in the United States. They all recognize to-day, from Reclus to Lord Bryce and Reginald Enock, that the property régime in Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay is that of the large estate.

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In this sense these countries, in spite of the difference in their geographical and economical characteristics, resemble in their structure their brothers, the Andine countries. So that in Hispanic America the large estate continues to be the great obstacle in the way of democracy.

Professor Paul Reinsch on visiting the countries of South America observed in them the absence of certain freshness and energy, in one word, of youth, which is the characteristic of the North American democracy. "In a sense," Professor Reinsch says, "the South American societies were born old. . . . The dominance of European ideas in their intellectual life, the importance of the city as a seat of civilization never allowed the pioneer feeling to gain the importance which it has held and still holds in our life. This backwoodsman of South America has not achieved the national and estimable position of our frontiersman."

The observation is true but the explanation is inexact. It is not a psychological cause, the importance of the ideas of the city and the predominance of the European ideas that has caused the lack of youth in the life of Hispanic America and the different rôle of its pioneers. The effective causes of these facts lie rather in the land and in the process of our economic development. The absence of frontier, in the sense that Professor Turner gave the word, and of frontier currents, has caused the rigidity of our structure and our lack of youth and vitality. And in the very countries in which the frontier existed, the pioneer, because of the facts which we have just referred to, was more a character of legend and literature than a dynamic factor of progress and a vanguard of civilization. The frontier idea is a new point of view in the true interpretation of Hispanic American life and is called upon to establish the sociology of the New Continent on new bases.