Overview of Differing Interpretations on Key Topics in the American West

| Key Topic | Old Western Interpretation | New Western Interpretation | Other Interpretations? |
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| Why did the Native Americans and the US army come into conflict? What were the consequences? | * Natives were occupying key land needed for Westward expansion. * Natives often caused problems to travellers and therefore needed to be moved both for the safety of pioneers and themselves. * Army was instrumental in protecting pioneers from Natives and therefore its presence in the West was necessary. * “Indian Problem” removed – some apology for this in later work. | * Natives did not understand the processes by which Whites attempted to claim the land. * Natives were duped and lied to and were subdued by an aggressive army connected to an expansionist and racially motivated government. * Natives were not recognised as having a culture and therefore not seen as “human” in the same way. * Native culture survives –wrong to portray them as simply victims | * Micro histories looked at individual cases of conflict – lots written on Wounded Knee and Little Bighorn. Natives in this sense in the wrong place at the wrong time |
| Who were the settlers and what were their motives for moving west? | * Early pioneers “blazed a trail” this included caricature trappers, gold miners with a thirst for profit and cattle ranchers seeing opportunity. * Settlers were a nation of farmers who set out to seek an idyllic life farming in the West following in the footsteps of the early pioneers. * West was a pressure release valve for overcrowded cities in the East, people left the cities, were reformed by the journey west and became Americans. * Big business followed the popular settlements and eventually began to “ruin” the West. | * Settlers were a rag bag of immigrants, farmers, slaves, Hispanics, criminals, women and others who were both pushed and pulled East depending on their individual circumstances. * Few people came from the cities. Many in fact travelled into them. * Big business and government drove a lot of people Westward by providing vast amounts of support which settlers could draw on. * Many were escaping old lives and hoping for better profits. | * Feminist histories in particular look at women being dragged West by their husbands, demonstrating the power relations of the time. |
| What role did Native Americans play in the West? What was their culture like? | * Natives were another geographical obstacle to be overcome, nothing more. | * Natives have a rich and diverse history and culture stretching back well before the European chapter and continuing to the present. * Natives were one of a group of different settlers who have come the Americas. * Native culture was not homogeneous but rather varied from tribe to tribe and went beyond the geographical boundaries of North America. | * Early romantic interpretations saw the Natives as primitive but important representations of “true nature”. They were equated with the animals and general landscape * Micro histories tended to focus on native rituals and puberty rites. Avatar!!! |
| What contribution did women make to the West? | * Women played almost no major role in the West other than as prostitutes, trappers’ “Indian wives”, missionaries, moralisers who held on to their Eastern ways or deviants sent to pull men astray. | * Women have a much greater and more varied role in Western history. * Women helped to keep their Eastern culture and traditions alive in difficult circumstances. * Took on many traditionally male roles during the journey but quickly reverted back once reaching the West. * Were shaped by their interactions with other cultural groups on journeys Westward, helped to create a new type of culture. * Influential in winning voting rights and moving politics forwards. * A greater focus on the roles played by minority women – Chinese prostitutes etc. | * Feminist historians stress the importance of the roles done by women and show the male roles taken on by them. They also identify them as having been brought to the West against their will. |
| Were the American frontier and American democracy unique? Was 1890 really the end of an era? | * The frontier is the process which creates American systems. The presence of an area of free land and the nature of that land creates the conditions required for change and the constantly Westward moving frontier evolves the European “germ” into the American one. By 1890, the population along the frontier removes the variable of free land. | * Frontier is too simplistic – frontiers is more accurate as there are more than one existing concurrently at any one time. * Frontier is not unique as it is just an extension of the European frontier. Others exist in other countries eg. India, Canada, South America etc. * Frontier does not create the American character as for the most part Eastern culture is simply transplanted, the changes can be explained by cultural integration. * No end to the frontier either seeing as a geographical area or looking at the approach of a Mexican frontier moving Northwards today. |  |
| How important were the roles of the federal government, business and industry in the West? | * Federal government followed where the people of the US led them. Their only real role was in creating the initial purchase of Louisiana and sponsoring the Lewis-Clark expedition. * Manifest Destiny encouraged those travelling Westward that they were in the right. * Industry moved in after the frontier and destroyed the ideal societies being created. | * Federal government drove the Westward movement but made it appear to be a popular one. * Initially involved in looking for profit but later became a tool for controlling Congress over the slavery issues. * Manifest Destiny allowed the assertion of cultural dominance and the excuse to remove problematic rivals such as Britain and Mexico from the continent. * Treaties with Natives allowed the government to seize greater amounts of land but settlement enthusiasm lagged behind, hence the need for incentives such as the Homestead Act. * Demand for commodities encouraged businesses to expand Westwards pulling a workforce with them and encouraging Western dominance. * Desire to increase power of central government meant a longer control of territories and the appointment of corrupt and business oriented officials. Gave the US president greater powers than ever to interfere at a state level. |  |
| How far was individualism the key to success or were communities important? | * “Rugged Individuals” built the West through pioneering spirit and sheer grit and determination. Many examples such as the Pony Express or the typical “cowboy” character. Even the 49er was an example of someone making their fortune off their own back. | * Families were massively important units. Until the homesteaders arrived no-one really settled the West for extended periods of time. * Group and communal action allowed people to travel to the West in the first place. * Many of the original “pioneers” were broken by the demands of operating solo in the West. |  |
| What kind of society was established in the West? Was it a “new” society? | * A “brand new” America created in the West built by the environmental conditions and the European Germ evolving. * Communities began basic but quickly began to grow and develop. * Democracy developed through hard fought trial and error. * Law and order eventually developed thanks to hard work. | * The society in the West was essentially transplanted into the East – architecture, political and social structures, religion, values were all transplanted. * Non-conformist views such as those of the Mormons were crushed to make way for the European hegemony. * The multi-ethnic nature of the new society was played down. |  |

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| **A Basic Timeline of American West Historiography** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
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|  | **Pre 1890** | **1890** | **1900** | **1910** | **1920** | **1930** | **1940** | **1950** | | **1960** | | **1970** | | **1980** | | **1990** | | **2000+** |
| **Romantic** | Early romantic interpretations based on ideas of the West as a ideal of America. Wilderness an important element, an area of savage nature to be “tamed” | | | | |  |  |  | |  | |  | |  | |  | |  |
|  |  |  |  |  | After the Depression of the 1930s the West comes to symbolise something pure from the past. Here the romanticism centres on the “nation of farmers” concept & rugged individualism. Now white western culture is as much part of the romanticism as the “wilderness”. | | | | | | | | | | | | |
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| **“Old Western”** |  | Turnerian histories based on Turner’s thesis stress the impact of landscape and inherent Anglo-Saxon characteristics in explaining the westward expansion. Germ theory which explain the development and break from Europe to create an unique America. | | | |  |  |  | |  | |  | |  | |  | |  |
|  |  |  |  |  | For Hollywood Turner’s ideas now become the bedrock of a love affair with the Western. Turnerian ideas are brought to the masses. Germ theory and individualism win the day. | | |  | |  | |  | |  | |  | |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  | Billington and the pro-Turner school return to Turnerian ideas after victory in WW2 – a more buoyant mood meant a triumphant West was popular again. Engaging stories of “rugged individuals” make this an enduring interpretation – especially for the film industry. | | | | | | | | | | |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | Increasing focus on previously neglected groups such as natives or women leads to an explosion in “micro-histories”. Many approaches for example see the plight of the Native Americans across the history of the West. For the most part however, these still see their topics in terms of Turner’s frontier – especially true of early feminist studies which follow almost the same “grand theory”. Others lack a “grand theory” at all and don’t seek to explain the American West. | | | | | | | | |
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| **Revisionist** |  |  |  | Turner’s theories are widely discredited after they are published. Historians such as Pierson heavily criticise Turner’s vague use of evidence and try to show that frontier as a process is nowhere near as neat as Turner himself has suggested. This is spurred on by a general feeling that America is in a bad place due to the Depression of the 1930s – Turner’s West was not the Zion America had been hoping for. | | | | | |  | |  | |  | |  | |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  | A disparate group of people begin rewriting Western history without reference to a single, all powerful frontier element. It is suggested that frontier might not be unique, more an extension of colonialism. Questions raised over concept of “free land” and its implicit dismissal of Native Americans | | | | | | | |  | |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  | Economic historians such as North begin to look at how Westward expansion can be explained by economic means – Marxist historians also take this approach. | | | | | | | |  | |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | |  | |  | | New Western History seeks to bring together many of the micro histories and revisions of Turner and begin the process of redefining and re-examining the West for a new age. Often accused of not bringing anything “new” to the table and, due to a wide range of cross-disciplinary work, of not writing “history”. | | | | |