

Giulio Segato

Interview with Richard Slotkin

Keywords: *Richard Slotkin, Violence, Gunfighter, Westerns, American Myth*

Richard Slotkin is Olin Professor Emeritus of English and American Studies at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, where he directed the American Studies Center from 1976 until 2009. He is the author of an impressive trilogy on the mythology of violence in American History. In particular, Slotkin's 'Regeneration Through Violence' thesis has become extremely significant in the American Studies of the last forty years both in the US and Europe. He has also written historical fiction.

In the first book of the trilogy, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of American Frontier, 1600-1860*, published in 1973, the historian investigates how the myth of violence has become a structuring metaphor of the American experience. His analysis begins with the Pilgrims settled in Massachusetts Bay, who framed a myth of attaining spiritual regeneration through the violence they brought to bear against the Motherland, the harsh nature of the New World and, above all, Native Americans.

According to Slotkin, American civilization has been deeply influenced by the myth of regeneration through violence. A very significant moment of the mythopoeia is the development of the Indian war and captivity narratives, probably the first original American 'literary' texts. In this perspective, Slotkin dedicates many pages to Benjamin Church and, especially, to the figure of Daniel Boone, a fictional character who would influence many American literary characters of the 19th century, such as J. F. Cooper's Natty Bumppo.

In the second book, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (1985), Slotkin uses the image of Custer's Last Stand as a fundamental emblem in an intricate model of explanation for regenerative violence forming a powerful national mythology in 19th-century America.

In *Gunfighter Nation: Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (1992), Slotkin illustrates the usefulness of regenerative violence to 20th-century popular culture. He begins his study with the examination of two fundamental documents: Frederick Jackson Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" and Theodore Roosevelt's *The Winning*

of the West. According to Slotkin, the idea of the Frontier became important not so much for the specific ambition of conquering territory as for its potency as a symbol of infinite possibility. In this perspective, the frontier became engrained in the nation's collective experience as a symbol of the idea of progress as well as of spiritual and moral renewal.

Much of *Gunfighter Nation* investigates some of the most popular western movies of the 1950s and 1960s and their context: *High Noon*, *Shane*, *The Searchers*, *The Wild Bunch* and many more. Yet, the analysis is conducted choosing a literary and cultural point of view instead of a film studies one. An essential reflection of the book is devoted to the gunfighter who became, in the author's perspective, the most important figure of the postwar Western. By examining many films and documents, Slotkin demonstrates the relevance of the gunfighter ethos to American interventionist policies of the 1960s.

About twenty pages of *Gunfighter Nation* are devoted to *The Wild Bunch* and its connections with the Vietnam War. Among many, this part is one of the most insightful and brilliant. Slotkin argues that Sam Peckinpah's film represents one the most successful metaphors of the American experience in Vietnam; according to this view, the ethical and political dilemmas underlying the *Wild Bunch* are very similar to those that divided the US during the war years. In conclusion, *Gunfighter Nation* is a very well-documented and excellent ending to the trilogy, which will continue to prove its usefulness to numerous disciplines.

On the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the publication of *Gunfighter Nation*, I contacted Richard Slotkin and he kindly agreed to answer some questions about recent political and cultural events concerning the United States and their potential connections to the past. The interview was held through email exchanges between January 15th and March 25th, 2022.

GS: In *Gunfighter Nation* you investigated the Myth of the Frontier and its importance in 20th century America. Do you think this myth of Frontier still has a prominent role in the first twenty years of the 21st century?

RS: The Myth of the Frontier, as I defined it, has two aspects: 'Bonanza Economics' and 'Savage War.' The first derives from the history of the US's spectacular economic growth in the 19th and 20th centuries. It uses the heroic symbolism of the pioneer age to sanctify an economy based on the expectation of extravagant returns from minimal investment of capital in an abundant base of natural resources—land and minerals in the 19th century, industrial productivity and energy in the 20th. The myth also holds that this development occurred in the absence of government regulation (libertarian economics)—an extravagant untruth, considering the powerful role of government subsidies and military support that made Westward expansion and

transcontinental railroads possible. The myth effaces or denies the necessity for exploiting labor to achieve growth. That pattern still characterizes American economic expectations—we count on high growth to deliver us from class conflict, “The Rising Tide Lifts All Boats.” Although there were times when this expectation was fulfilled—especially the post-New Deal era (1945-1975)—it has spectacularly failed in the 21st century, as wealth inequality increases.

Savage War uses the history of the Indian Wars to link the progressive dynamic of growth to a heroic and *racial* conflict. This aspect of the Myth defines America as a White man’s country, and marks all enemies (actual and potential) as racially other and ‘primitive’ in moral character and development. This aspect of the myth still underlies American ideas of the link between race and nationality—you can see it in Trump’s MAGA movement, which is ethnonationalist. It also underlays our concept and pursuit of the Global War on Terror (2001-2021).

GS: In your Trilogy you also present a very detailed and accurate history (or archeology) of the gunfighter hero. I think this figure still exerts a ‘force of attraction’ on the Western public (I’m talking about movie spectators as well as fiction readers), and we can realize it just looking at the new Hollywood films or the new popular fiction novels. Do you agree?

Even Donald Trump has cast himself (and he is still doing it) as a Lone Ranger, even if he has an opposite background (as a businessman from New York), because he probably thinks this formula works in politics, too.

RS: There are of course figures who still follow the gunfighter model of the lone hero, the vigilante. But I don’t think the gunfighter is a central figure for the Trump mystique. Westerns and their analogs have been replaced in pop culture by super-heroes, either comic book style or super-secret-agent as in the Bourne franchise and Liam Neeson’s recent films.

There is no single super-hero whose character has the broad cultural and historical resonance of the frontiersman, the cowboy, or the World War II soldier, or the deep pop culture roots of the tough cop or private eye. Rather, comic-book and movie superheroes offer a menu of radically different types: some pure of heart like Superman, others troubled by teenage angst like Spiderman, or by darker impulses like *The Dark Knight* version of Batman. They are lone geniuses, slightly (or more than slightly) bizarre in origin, manners or appearance, men (usually) whose wisdom and special powers are (at the start) either unknown to or unappreciated by the masses, disbelieved and often disapproved by officialdom and the cultural elite of journalism and the universities. Nearly all are White men. Some are also fabulously rich (Batman, Iron Man, The Punisher).

They do not live in a historical frame, or even a frame that pretends to be historical like the Western gunfighter, the soldier, the cop. Rather, they inhabit a pseudo—or ‘alt-history,’ an entirely imaginary time and place artificially constructed to display their superiority. And that is precisely Trump’s understanding of the proper use of history: as a stage for the display of his powers. In the super-hero world, as in Trump’s, *all* conflicts are existential. Every villain has his own super-powers which make him capable of destroying America, civilization or planet Earth as we know it. Such extraordinary threats can only be met by extraordinary men wielding extraordinary powers, Trump’s ‘Only I can fix it,’ so you must trust me with everything. Moreover, the superheroes’ enemies are usually some combination of perverse intellectual genius, with a distortion of body and mind that makes them, visually, freaks or monsters, an alien race—nice analogies for the preferred villains of Trump and the GOP, the liberal cultural elite and their racially marked clients.

The closest analogy to Trump-as-hero is Marvel Comics’ *The Punisher*. *The Punisher* is revenge driven, and sees no reason to be politically correct in his methods which include all the techniques of coercion: torture, extortion, threats of extreme violence—all staples of Trump’s rhetoric. In fact, the Punisher was adopted by the Q-Anon conspiracy theorists as a symbol for the role Trump would play in their fantasy of retribution against the “Satanist” liberal elite.

GS: According to several historians, the experience in Vietnam was unique and produced a cultural, ideological, and moral fracture, like perhaps no other traumatic event in American modernity, with the exception of the Civil War, whose historical distance makes comparison difficult. Do you agree?

RS: I do agree. Taken with the cultural transformations of that period in race relations, sexuality and gender, and popular culture, that period marked a definite turn in American culture and politics. It was followed, politically, by a turn against liberalism; but culturally it led to greater liberalism on race, sex, and gender. This led in the end to a conservative political reaction, dubbed the ‘culture war’ in the 1990s, which aims to acquire and use political power to restore the cultural authority of conservative beliefs on religion, sexuality, race, economic ‘freedom,’ family structure. Trump and “Make America Great Again” (MAGA) represent the political triumph of culture war politics.

The key mythological referent here is the ‘Lost Cause Myth.’ It originated as the White South’s revision (1865-1900) of Civil War history, to assert that the South was morally right to secede, that slavery was a benevolent institution—and to use these beliefs to motivate the restoration of White supremacy through the policies known as Jim Crow. The MAGA ideology is similarly

‘restorationist,’ in seeking to restore the culture of White supremacy and patriarchy that prevailed before the 60s and the civil rights movement. Trump’s campaign to overturn the 2020 election is the most dramatic reassertion of Lost Cause Mythology.

GS: Even though the context, duration and the impact of these two events are totally different, do you think the assault on Capitol Hill (January 2021), incited by former President Trump, could represent another cultural rift for US history?

RS: It marks the projection of the culture war I noted above into the center of American politics. Culture war differences now define the difference between the two political parties. These differences are deep and serious, and have the potential to produce social violence.

MAGA is developing into an authentically American fascism: based not on European ideologies or Wagnerian myth, but on a combination of the modernized Lost Cause Myth and the closely allied Christian nationalist movement, with the peculiar blend of violent vigilantism and ‘libertarian’ economics associated with the Myth of the Frontier.

MAGA has become the political expression of several ‘cultures of grievance,’ different in their social bases, sharing a common set of anxieties and resentments: a loss of traditional cultural status as urban and mass culture become more liberal, and the population share of racial and ethnic minorities rises; of economic security, and of the hope of future betterment for themselves and their children in an era of wage stagnation or decline, globalization and de-industrialization.

The core of Trump’s personal appeal, and of MAGA ideology, is the presumption that only ruthless prosecution of a culture war can save America from destruction by a Democratic Party devoted to socialism, secularism, and multiculturalism. The elements of his agenda are not linked by logical thought or the logic of policy, but by the passionate anger with which they are espoused. Hence the word salad of Trump’s rant at an Ohio rally in 2020: that Biden is “following the radical left agenda. Take away your guns, destroy your Second Amendment. No religion, no anything, hurt the Bible, hurt God. He’s against God, he’s against guns, he’s against energy, our kind of energy [*i.e.* fossil fuels].”

People who willingly embrace the use of violence to maintain their party’s power, and do not find it shocking that a mob of ‘patriots’ should attack the Capitol to prevent Biden’s election, have already rejected the ethics of democratic politics. They also have asserted an ‘insurrectionary’ version of gun rights which entitles them to block the execution of laws they deem unconstitutional, and to overthrow government at any level if it ‘usurps’ their liberties. The MAGA movement has used harassment or the threat of violence to intimidate critics and

opponents at every level, from medical professionals and public officials engaged with the fight against the pandemic, to election supervisors, to citizens addressing public meetings or town halls. ‘Patriot militias’ threaten to become the Red Hat equivalent of the fascist Brown Shirts. Hate crimes rose to record levels in 2019-2020.

It seems likely that, no matter who wins the presidency in 2024, the losing side will regard the result as illegitimate—the Right would see it as another ‘stolen’ election, the Left would point to the state laws that suppress voter turnout or politicize the certification process. The result will be a rise in civil violence. It will come from White nationalists, whether frustrated by defeat, or encouraged by a Rightist victory to assault civil rights; and from left-wing demonstrators protesting political rule by a conservative minority. These things will occur in a country whose people, on both sides of the political divide, are more heavily and lethally armed than they were in the 60s.

GS: Last summer Joe Biden was hardly criticized for the way he handled the departure from the ‘forever war’ in Afghanistan. Do you think this event will be remembered by historians as a paradigm shift of the US International Relations?

RS: No way to tell. I think our internal culture war will be the center of concern, foreign engagements less attractive, but I don’t think our basic ideas about foreign policy have changed. What we did in Iraq and Afghanistan shows that we learned nothing from Vietnam—we kept repeating it, with variations, hoping this time we’d win. So—no long-lasting paradigm shift.

GS: Could you comment on the Russian Federation’s aggression on Ukraine? Do you think President Biden has done well so far?

RS: I do think Biden has handled the Ukraine crisis well so far. It is too early to say whether or not this is a crisis so severe that there is no entirely ‘good’ way to handle it. From the perspective of my work on American myths I would note the rather cautious use being made of analogies to the events leading up to the Second World War. In the past, crises like this led to invocation of the failure of ‘appeasement’ in the Czech crisis of 1938, with the implication that war should have been engaged or threatened then to stop Hitler. The stakes in the nuclear age are different—Biden’s caution is warranted.

GS: In recent months, Italian newspapers and magazines have often talked about the ‘cancel culture’ phenomenon, referring almost exclusively to events that took place in the United States (often badly reported, to be honest). In particular, Italian newspapers focused on the removal of

the statues. Is it right to remove some statues or is it better, as some suggest, to 'keep and explain them'? As a historian, what is your point of view on this so-called 'cancel culture'?

RS: 'Cancel culture' is a right-wing rhetorical trick, not a real thing. Its initial use was against 'politically correct' university demonstrators protesting appearances by speakers they deemed fascist, extremist, or racist. Some of these demonstrations were justified, some not. The real effects, in my view, were and are trivial. Far more dangerous to free speech and academic freedom are conservative efforts to ban the teaching of Critical Race Theory, or any books which are or seem critical of conservative values and the white-centered view of US history.

The taking down of Confederate statues is a far more important cultural and political phenomenon. It is best described as *iconoclasm*. The icons in question are not simply, or even primarily, memorials to the Confederate side in the Civil War. They were erected long after the war, mostly from 1890 to 1920, as part of the movement that established the Jim Crow regime of White supremacy, not just in ex-Confederate states, but in all ex-Slave states. They were part of the movement that established racial segregation in the South; deprived Blacks there of civil rights, including the right to vote and sit on juries; and tolerated/encouraged lynch mobs to torture, kill and mutilate Black men, women and children, generally for the crime of defying White people. The taking down of these statues, following movements that included White and Black people within the affected communities, represents an extraordinary act of recognition of the lingering effects of the heritage of slavery and Jim Crow. I'd compare it to the destruction of Nazi symbols after 1945, and Lenin/Stalin statues after the fall of Communism.

GS: What do you think is the role of the historian today?

RS: To pursue the study of the past as systematically and truthfully as possible; and now, to be aware of the ways in which past conceptualizations of national history have been shaped by myths, to critically analyze and move past these myths. We should also be prepared to address the use of history in public and political discourse, at a time when reactionary politicians and activists are trying to seize control of public education, and re-impose the ethnonationalist myths of American history on the modern curriculum. We not only need to write better history, we need to actively defend it in public forums and at meetings of local school boards.

GS: You work as a historian and you wrote historical novels too. Your expertise as a historian has certainly helped your fictional writing, but is the reverse also possible? Do you think writing fictional novels could help your work as historian, or is it something totally disconnected?

RS: I've written an article about this, from which I'll quote:

The novel tests historical hypotheses by a kind of thought-experiment: assume that events are driven by the conditions and forces you believe to be most significant—what sort of history, what kind of human experience, then results? For the thought-experiment to work, the fiction writer must treat a theory which *may* be true as if it was *certainly* true, without quibble or qualification; and credibly represent a material world in which that theory appears to *work*. We should not suppose that thought-experiments, however elegant, make empirical tests unnecessary. But as the history of modern physics shows, without such experiments, the forward movement of knowledge becomes slower and more difficult. Moreover, because the novel imaginatively recovers the *indeterminacy* of a past time, the form allows writer and reader to explore those alternative possibilities for belief, action, and political change, unrealized by history, which existed in the past. In so doing, the novelist may restore, as *imaginable possibilities*, the ideas, movements, and values defeated or discarded in the struggles that produced the modern state. (Slotkin 2005, italics in the original)

GS: In *Gunfighter Nation* there are many brilliant insights. In particular, I found your analysis of Western movies very interesting. Today, American Western films play an even less significant role than they did in the 1960s and 1970s (even if there are some recent really well-done westerns). Do you think they will be destined to disappear from US (and European) cinemas? Or maybe they will be incorporated into other genres, as it happened with the tv series *Westworld*?

RS: I think Westerns as such are a vanishing genre. They've been recognized in film schools as a classic cinematic form, so I think film-makers will continue to go back to the genre and make some interesting and experimental variations on the classic form. *News of the World* is a case in point. But these don't have the social impact of the genre during its height (1946-73), when Westerns made politically relevant statements about race, violence, the Cold War, the uses and obligations of power, gender and sex. That function has been shifted to science fiction, which treats the future or space as a new frontier, incorporating Western motifs; and to the super-hero movie, as indicated above, which does not.

Giulio Segato is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Department of Philology, Foreign Literatures and Communication of the University of Udine, where he is completing a research project on the connections between Italian and American visual poets. He received a Ph.D in Comparative Literature from University of Genova in 2014 and a Ph.D. in Literary Science from Università Cattolica of Milan in 2018. His main fields of interest are American Crime Fiction and Film, Vietnam War Literature (fiction and poetry), and the work of Cormac McCarthy. He has written two monographs (*The Nightmare of my Choice. Guerra del Vietnam e romanzo poliziesco americano*, Aras 2018; *Una commedia Americana. Temi, innovazioni e religione*

nell'opera di Elmore Leonard, *Mimesis 2018*) and several scientific articles and essays. He has recently edited the first Italian edition of Bruce Weigl's poems (*Rumore, a cura di Giulio Segato, Ventura edizioni 2021*).

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