The cowboy composite: Theodore Roosevelt and the birth of American cowboy romanticism

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Abstract:
The genesis of the American cowboy figure we know today from literature, film, and television began in the latter half of the nineteenth century largely due to the efforts of admirers of the American West. This group was comprised of easterners and westerners including one particularly energetic New Yorker, Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt and other admirers of the American West, directly or indirectly, facilitated the emergence of this new mythological figure, now considered the classical western archetype: a rugged individualist who is also virile and aggressively masculine. This western figure was part of a larger myth-building construct of the American West, a romanticized, male-dominated version that endures today. Although a host of writers, artists, performers, and others played key roles in creating the cowboy standard, Roosevelt did more than any single individual to establish the cowboy as an iconic figure in American culture. Drawing on both primary and secondary sources, this study explores how Roosevelt slowly rehabilitated the cowboy image from a villain to a heroic figure through his own writings based on his first-hand experience living with cowboys during his sojourns in the Dakota Badlands throughout the 1880s. This study also examines how Roosevelt embraced his public image of a western cowboy and how the public perceived and accepted this image throughout his public life. The cowboy rehabilitation and transformation through the lens of Roosevelt’s own cowboy image unfolded during the late nineteenth century with the ascension of TR as a public figure, a process that culminated in 1901 with his elevation to the presidency. By the time of Roosevelt’s death in 1919, the American cowboy was culturally embraced by the public due in part to the public acceptance of TR as a western figure. Understanding the rise of the romantic American cowboy begins with an exploration of recent scholarship of the American West, cowboys, and the role Roosevelt and his contemporaries played in helping transform this Western figure. This scholarship is reviewed in chapter one and includes perspectives on culture, social theory, gender relations, and nationalism. Chapter two explores the cowboy rehabilitation viewed through Roosevelt’s own western publications and how the public, via the media, slowly accepted this new cowboy image as the nineteenth century came to a close. Chapter three focuses on frontier amusements, the key mechanisms through which Easterners were first exposed to and then led to embrace this new romantic cowboy image through participation in dude ranches, rodeo shows, western literature, and film. Roosevelt’s influence is traced through each of these amusements. Chapter four examines how TR, his family and friends, and the public perceived his cowboy image. The final chapter looks at the legacy of the mythic cowboy into the twenty-first century.

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But the cowboy also represented a more dangerous ideal: the defence of the native WASP (White Anglo Saxon Protestant, or the majority of American even today) American ways against the millions of encroaching immigrants from lower races. Hence the quiet dropping of the Mexican, Indian and black elements, which still appear in the original non-ideological westerns — for instance, Buffalo Bill’s show. It is at this stage and in this manner that the cowboy becomes the lanky, tall Aryan. In other words, the invented cowboy tradition is part of the rise of both segregation and anti-immigrant sentiment. Sailing out of the New York harbor, Theodore Roosevelt had little indication that the journey he was embarking on, which he had referred to as “a delightful holiday” with “just the right amount of adventure,” would be the hardest test of his notoriously strenuous life. Reeling from his recent defeat as the Progressive Party’s nominee in the 1912 presidential election, Roosevelt needed to get away. Near the end of his last term as President, Roosevelt had. Gardner, Mark Lee (2016), Rough Riders: Theodore Roosevelt, His Cowboy Regiment, and the Immortal Charge Up San Juan Hill. Hendrix, Henry J (2009), Theodore Roosevelt’s Naval Diplomacy: The US Navy & the Birth of the American Century. — Rolfe, J Simon (2008), “Under the Influence of Mahan”: Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt and their Understanding of American National Interest”, Diplomacy and Statecraft, 19 (4): 732–45, doi:10.1080/09592290802564536. ———; Thompson, John M (2011), “Internationalists in Isolationist times – Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt a Rooseveltian Maxim”, Journal of Transatlantic Studies, 9 (1): 46–62, doi:10.1080/14794012.2011.550773.