

## Book Review

Palen, Marc-William. *The “Conspiracy” of Free Trade: The Anglo-American Struggle over Empire and Economic Globalization, 1846-1896*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

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Can one write without hate and zealousness about a subject so charged with ideologies and emotions as much as globalization? Marc-William Palen’s recent monograph *The “Conspiracy” of Free Trade* (hereafter *TCFT*) is such an attempt exploring the ideological, political, and economic struggles witnessed in U.S. politics during the Gilded Age. As the title suggests, what lies at the crux of Palen’s narrative are not only the *economic* concerns about globalization, but also the *political*, the Anglo-American contention over empire. In the nine chapters of *TCFT*, imperial and global history intersect, illuminating the imperial background of the first wave of globalization.

Chapters 1 and 2 deal with the transatlantic development of two ideological visions of globalization during the mid-nineteenth century: Cobdenite cosmopolitanism and Listian nationalism.<sup>2</sup> Starting with two anecdotes of Richard Cobden (1804-1865) and Friedrich List (1789-1846) during the heyday of the Anti-Corn Law League (hereafter ACLL), Chapter 1, “Globalizing ideologies: economic nationalism and free-trade cosmopolitanism” illustrates how the two opposing European ideologies travelled across the Atlantic. American abolitionists would visit London to witness the activities the ACLL lead by Richard Cobden and return as eager Cobdenites acclaiming the slogan “free trade and free labor” with fervor.<sup>3</sup> In the case of Listian nationalism, List himself visited Pennsylvania and advocated the “American System” of economic nationalism, defending American “infant industries” against British free trade.<sup>4</sup> In Chapter 2, “‘The most successful lie in history’: the Morrill Tariff and the Confederacy’s free-trade diplomacy,” the author traces the

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<sup>2</sup> For an excellent account of the history of U.S. trade policy, see Douglas Irwin, *Clashing over Commerce: A History of U.S. Trade Policy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Marc-William Palen. *The “Conspiracy” of Free Trade: The Anglo-American Struggle over Empire and Economic Globalization, 1846-1896*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 15.

<sup>4</sup> Marc-William Palen. *The “Conspiracy” of Free Trade*, 18.

transatlantic repercussions of the Morrill Tariff of 1861. This protectionist legislation received vitriolic comments in Britain because of its high tariffs, leading to the British confounding the true cause of the Civil War.<sup>5</sup> As the Confederacy’s rhetoric gaining wider audience in Victorian Britain, the Union became alarmed by the increasing possibility of British recognition of the Confederacy.<sup>6</sup> What reversed the tide to the Union’s favor was in part the “antislavery counteroffensive” of the transatlantic Cobdenites.<sup>7</sup> Palen successfully illustrates how the Cobdenites across the Atlantic broke the Confederacy’s spell by claiming that the British aspiration for free-trade U.S. can only be realized under free-labor America; Confederacy’s free-trade diplomacy was in fact chattel slavery in disguise.<sup>8</sup>

Chapter 3, “Mobilizing free trade: the post-bellum American free-trade movement, foreign policy, and ‘conspiracy,’ 1866-1871” examines the Cobdenite movement in the postbellum U.S. Compounded with the scandalous conversion of former protectionist David Ames Wells (1828-1898), the American Cobdenites’ ever-tightening relationship with their English counterparts increasingly became the subject of public resentment. “Free trader” was labelled as an equivalent to “traitor” and thus arguments against free trade intermixed with Anglophobic sentiments.<sup>9</sup> Within the Republican Party, the American Cobdenites were on the defensive as the Liberal Republicans, the free-trade sympathizers remained the minority. In such adverse conditions within and without Congress, the American Cobdenites mobilized against accusations of British “conspiracy” by creating the American Free Trade League (hereafter AFTL) in New York.<sup>10</sup>

Chapter 4, “Fighting over free trade: party realignment and the imperialism of economic nationalism, 1872-1884” attentively retraces the activities of the Liberal Republicans during the 1870s and their eventual conflict with the imperialistic turn of the Grand Old Party (hereafter GOP). Here, Marc-William Palen introduces the term “imperialism of economic nationalism,” which conceptualizes the Republican protectionist policy not only to defend domestic producers from foreign competitions, but also to secure the Western Hemisphere under the aegis of the newly triumphant

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>8</sup> The economic grievances caused by the Civil War and the British flirtation with the Confederacy during the initial stage of the War have been subjects attentively studied by historians of the Civil War, the British Empire, and nineteenth-century capitalism alike. For a global history of “King Cotton” and its central role within the history of capitalism, see Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (London: Penguin Books, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Marc-William Palen. *The “Conspiracy” of Free Trade*, 59-60.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

American Empire. Led by Listian nationalists like John A. Kasson (1822-1910) and James G. Blaine (1830-1893), the “imperialism of economic nationalism” embodied both formal and informal measures to ensure that American influence over Cuba, Mexico, Hawaii, and Latin American countries overwhelms those of the European powers combined.<sup>11</sup> The Liberal Republicans and the Cobdenite colleagues outside the Congress were fierce opponents of the GOP’s imperialistic turn, even backing the Democratic presidential candidate Grover Cleveland (1837-1908) to victory.

The first Cleveland presidency was an aberration of U.S. imperialism. In Chapter 5, “The Great Debate: the first Cleveland presidency, free-trade culture, and the anti-imperialism of free trade, 1884-1889,” the rise and fall of the Cleveland administration is illustrated alongside the political fate of Cobdenite cosmopolitans. Indeed, Cleveland’s cabinet was filled with affiliates of the broader free trade movement. Members of the AFTL especially made into the unofficial advisory circle of the administration.<sup>12</sup> What ended the free-trade euphoria were bursts of Anglophobia. During the “Great Debate” over the tariff question, Republicans like James G. Blaine linked Cleveland’s free-trade policies and anti-imperialist diplomacy as evidence of pro-British “conspiracy.”<sup>13</sup> Such interplay of internecine party politics, trade issues, and nationalistic sentiments was not limited to the U.S. Chapter 6, “The cosmopolitan demand for North American commercial union, 1885-1889” provides a contour of the North American dimension of the Listian-Cobdenite debate by incorporating the Canadian struggle between a *cosmopolitan* vision of forming a commercial union with the U.S. and a *nationalistic* vision of federal union among the white settler countries of the British Empire.

While the former two chapters examine Cleveland’s anti-imperialist free trade and its transatlantic repercussions, chapters 7 and 8 focus on Benjamin Harrison’s imperialist protectionism, the McKinley Tariff of 1890, and the British reactions toward the expansionist measures of the U.S. Chapter 7, “‘A sea of fire’: the McKinley Tariff and the imperialism of economic nationalism, 1889-1893” highlights the role of the protectionism’s second wave during the late nineteenth-century. While the German Historical School of Economics gained much influence within American academia – the establishment of the Wharton School in 1881 is

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 100-105.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

recognized as evidence of Listian nationalism's advancement<sup>14</sup> – Republicans responded with protectionist trade policies and imperialist foreign policy within Congress. The McKinley Tariff of 1890, named after the charismatic congressman and future U.S. president William McKinley (1843-1901), was the cornerstone of Harrison's "imperialism of economic nationalism" and the "reciprocity" clause that of the McKinley's legislation.<sup>15</sup> With the reciprocity provision, the U.S. was able to retaliate against incompliant foreign nations and open foreign markets for U.S. economic advantage. The global reaction to the "imperialism of protectionism" of the U.S., as depicted in Chapter 8, "Free trade in retreat: the global impact of the McKinley Tariff upon the British Empire, 1890-1894" was a tit-for-tat, bringing back protectionist measures with equivalent protectionism. The McKinley Tariff ignited demands for "imperial unity" across the British colonies.<sup>16</sup> A contemporary commentary cited by Palen well explains the fervor brought by the American measures of protectionism: "It is not too much to say that the shock caused by the McKinley Tariff did more than ten years of Fair Trade agitation to bring discredit to the Cobdenite school."<sup>17</sup> As much as Anglophobia and British "conspiracy" flared up economic nationalism in the U.S., fear against U.S. imperialism and "conspiracy" of annexation ignited worries in the hearts of the Australians, Canadians, and subsequently the whole British Empire.

Chapter 9, "Republican rapprochement: Cleveland's free traders, Anglo-American relations, and the 1896 presidential elections" sheds light on the sudden rebound of Cobdenite cosmopolitans and their eventual demise with the Republican Party winning the crucial 1896 presidential elections. Again, as in the first presidential term, Cleveland and his free-trade cabinet overturned protectionist and imperialist policies passed by the earlier Republican administration. However, with the Democratic nomination going to the Jeffersonian populist William Jennings Bryan (1860-1925), the American Cobdenites once again failed to continue its momentum.<sup>18</sup> The 1896 Presidential election was filled with Anglophobia, accusations of "conspiracy," and hardline economic nationalism. Consequently, amidst the dust of electoral campaign, the one who rose

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>16</sup> The nineteenth-century debate over a closer union of United Kingdom and its settler colonies has been widely neglected. For an excellent historical investigation of the subject, see Duncan Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860-1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> Marc-William Palen. *The "Conspiracy" of Free Trade*, 212.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

triumphant was no one other than William McKinley.

For students of imperial history and of U.S. foreign policy, Palen's contrast between "Open Door imperialism" and "imperialism of economic nationalism" is subject to much interest. The former term coined by William Appleman Williams suggests that, since the expansion of American capitalism during the latter half of the nineteenth century, U.S. foreign policy continues to target securing foreign markets for its domestic surplus production and capital. In line with Marxist theories of economic imperialism, Williams and his apostles in the "Wisconsin School" of diplomatic history have claimed that free trade is inherently imperialistic, which accounts for the continuum stretching from the American Open Door Empire to the post-World War II liberal trade order. However, Palen challenges the Wisconsin School's "Open-Door imperial narratives"<sup>19</sup> claiming that what they are depicting as "imperialism of free trade" is actually "imperialism of economic nationalism." The author's efforts to delineate the Cobdenite cosmopolitans and Listian nationalists and to trace their respective genealogies across political factions are aimed at debunking the myth of expansionist free-traders versus isolationist-protectionists. According to *TCFT*, Listian nationalists have been capable of effectively advocating economic integration as much as Cobdenite cosmopolitans, since their visions of integration were limited in scope and appealing to nationalistic sentiments. Protectionism, in the history of U.S. trade politics, was not merely an "anti-globalization" movement. It was, claims Palen, a program, which advocated aggressive policy measures to advance "counter-hegemonic globalization" or "regionalized integration."<sup>20</sup>

With the term "imperialism of economic nationalism," Palen convincingly advances his case to supplant the Wisconsin School's dichotomy between informal and formal imperialisms with his tripartite division: informal imperialism, formal imperialism, and non-imperial commercial expansionism.<sup>21</sup> However, some questions still remain to be answered. First, one is still left to inquire about the in-betweens: those who oscillated between "imperialism of economic nationalism" and anti-imperialism of free trade. Why did they change their minds? What aspects of the opposing ideas succeeded in convincing some, while failing to do so with others? In *TCFT*, while figures who deserted their original beliefs in order to embrace others are numerous introduced, what accounts for

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxiii.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxv.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxv.

their eventual conversion are often mere anecdotes. For instance, a disappointing conversation with the era's leading Listian nationalist Henry C. Carey (1793-1879) is sketchily presented as the reason why David A. Wells suddenly discarded his protectionist views and decided to become a free-trade vanguard, or as contemporaries dubbed him "Cobden of America."<sup>22</sup> Moreover, questions still remain over as to what extent the author's own dichotomy of Cobdenite cosmopolitanism and Listian nationalism could be accepted. Is each of the "schools" of thought actually coherent? Where should the Jeffersonians, such as William Jennings Bryan, whom Palen dismisses for the more important Listian-Cobdenite debate, be situated? Palen's justification for reducing the ideological terrain into two ideological camps is mainly for explanatory purposes: "to acknowledge their complexity without making them needlessly complicated."<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, intellectual historians who are more sensitive to a complexity of ideas are bound to question whether the author's choice holds a danger of overlooking important differences among alleged friends *and* similarities between supposedly opposing foes. This, of course, is not an insufficiency in part of the author, but a possible point of contact between imperial and intellectual history.

For the wider audience with interest in global politics, *TCFT* provides an opportunity to rethink the two conventional dichotomies: free trade versus protectionism, and economic expansion versus autarky. Palen's central concept, "imperialism of economic nationalism" illuminates the oft-neglected aspect of protectionism. Whatever guise it may be under – nineteenth-century safeguards against British "conspiracy" or today's rallying cry of "America First" – economic nationalism is equally capable of metamorphosing into imperialism. In the face of globalization's failure to deliver equitable prosperity, free trade seems to have ceded its moral place to protectionism. The merit of *TCFT* lies in its endeavor to debunk such misunderstandings. Reflecting on the U.S. experience during the Gilded Age, the transformation taking place today is not a change from free trade to protectionism, but a change from commercial expansion to imperialism of economic nationalism.

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, xxvi.