

The Civilizing Force of National Competition

U.S. Nationalist Reasoning in the Mid-to-Late Nineteenth Century

Johannes Nagel & Tobias Werron

The United States represents a particularly interesting case in the history of nationalism. Perhaps more than others, U.S. nationalism is a case of ‘nationalism in the world’—not just a national but a global phenomenon. The nationalist transformation of the U.S. took place in the mid-19th to early 20th century, in an era of European domination shaped by the attempt of the great powers to establish a balance among themselves. This was also the period of a New Imperialism, when the Western powers re-discovered large parts of Asia and Africa as targets of their imperial ambitions, colonial exploitation and civilization mission (see e.g. Ballantyne/Burton 2014).

U.S. nationalism did not fit easily into this world. Although the U.S. was a rising power, it was neither defined by imperialist ambitions nor by anti-imperialist resistance. While the nationalism of European powers was connected to imperialist projects, amounting to what Jürgen Osterhammel (2009: 904) calls “expansionist nationalism”, and while Asian and African nationalism was fueled by the mobilizing powers of anti-colonial resistance, or “counter nationalism” (ibid), U.S. nationalists had to find a way of reconciling North America’s history of anti-colonial resistance with its own ambition as a rising international power. Thus, U.S. nationalists faced the challenge of combining the founding narrative of the post-colonial nation with the ambitions of a rising power,—to define their nation as one that rejects imperialism while also starting and legitimizing their own brand of imperialism.

The present paper explores in how far U.S. nationalist reasoning in the mid-to-late 19th century can be understood as an answer to this challenge. Against the background described above, it is clear from the outset that studying U.S. nationalist reasoning requires close attention to the nexus between

nationalism and the wider world. Only then can we see how global connections shaped this world and how nationalist reasoning tried to make sense of those connections. We will do so by focusing on a type of nationalist reasoning that revolves around ideas of scarcity and competition, on the one hand, and ideas of growth, wealth and progress, on the other. Because notions of scarcity are central to this reasoning, we conceptualize it as a type of ‘scarcity nationalism’. This political-economic type of nationalism has been largely neglected in the literature but has played a major role in shaping the U.S. nationalist discourse since the mid-to-late 19th century. We show how contributions to this discourse linked U.S. interests with a vision of a world beneficial to all nations, and thus allowed nationalists to imagine both an increasing competition between nations and a future world beyond competition. By navigating tensions between notions of scarcity and growth, and of national and global development, they were able to define the U.S. as a self-interested competitor in an emerging world of nation-states, while also claiming for the U.S. the role of a standard-bearer of cosmopolitan values and global progress. In a study of the debates about protectionism and navalism we try to demonstrate that studying this type of nationalism is relevant beyond U.S. history for understanding how modern nationalism has established itself as the historical force it is today.

We start by introducing our concept of scarcity nationalism. We argue that scarcity nationalism is a discursive mechanism, which links notions of scarcity to the imagining of competition and which has played an important, though neglected, role in the making of modern nationalism. The second section presents two empirical cases which develop and test this conceptualization by looking at major strands of the U.S. political discourse of the mid-to-late 19th century. We consider first the debate about protectionism, which pitted supporters of ‘free trade’ against the supporters of a protectionist view who—inspired by the German economist and politician Friedrich List—emphasized the need to develop and protect national industrial capacities. We then consider debate about navalism, where questions of naval armament were discussed as part of a wider struggle over the position and role of the U.S. as an emerging major (military) power. In both cases, we focus on how debates about the pursuit of U.S. American interests made use of notions of scarcity and competition and connected them with conceptions of the world. Both studies call attention to ideas that emphasize *transitional stages of development*. By drawing on such ideas, American nationalists could position the U.S. as an emerging power which, though prioritizing its own interest in the

present, would contribute to the development of humankind *in the future*. It was this temporalization of human progress, and its embedding in nationalist thinking, which allowed U.S. nationalists to balance anti-imperial, particularly anti-British, sentiments with U.S. expansionist ambitions as a rising power. The paper concludes with some remarks on how this analysis, beyond our two case studies, could inform our understanding of current variants of nationalism.

Constructing Competition from a National Point of View: Conceptual remarks on ‘scarcity nationalism’

How does modern nationalism relate to the production and transformation of competition in world politics, and how is this relationship reflected in the U.S. discourse of the mid-to-late 19th century? The present section addresses these questions by providing, firstly, a preliminary understanding of the defining characteristics of modern nationalism. In our view, modern nationalism is a discourse that combines particularistic ideas (the construction of collective identities) with universalistic ones (ideas of world order). Secondly, the questions require an understanding of how nationalism can contribute to the social construction of competition. In this part, we show that and why the introduction of competition into the international system relies on historically changing notions of scarcity. In the 19th century emerged a particular type of nationalism which we call ‘scarcity nationalism’.

Modern Nationalism as Global Nationalism: A Working Definition

Building on constructivist contributions to the nationalism literature, particularly Craig Calhoun (1997) and Umut Özkirimli (2017), we suggest an understanding of modern nationalism as a *discourse*. By understanding nationalism as a discourse, we capture both the ideological and institutional dimensions of nationalism. A discourse can be the outcome of aggressive struggles between conflicting ideological positions as well as of routinized ways of writing, speaking and interaction. Both dimensions are relevant for the production and global institutionalization of modern nationalism. We distinguish between a cultural, political and global element in this discourse to draw attention to the historical relationships between them. The construction of collective identities constitutes the cultural element; the legitimization of the

political claims of these identities, such as popular sovereignty, the political element; and the idea of a world order divided into nations, or nation-states, the universal or global element.

The relation between the first two has been discussed in the literature on nationalism for quite some time and is famously captured in Ernest Gellner's description of modern nationalism as aiming at a "marriage" between nation and state (Gellner 1983). The third, global element has attracted less attention. However, it explains best why nationalism, irrespective of differences of opinion between 'modernists' and 'anti-modernists' in the nationalism literature (Gorski 2000; Smith 1998), should indeed be considered a modern institution, by calling attention to the historical process in which nationalism has helped transform the early modern state system into a global nation-state system over the last two centuries. By establishing the principle of national legitimacy as a universal model, nationalism has transformed the European 'international society' in two ways: It has helped expand the outer limits of the state-system "to a point where they are coextensive with those of the globe" and it has encouraged the "penetration of central government activity", both internally, by expanding state power and responsibility, and externally, by increasing the range and density of international relations (Mayall 1990: 33-34).

This conceptualization of nationalism emphasizes the modernity of nationalism and of the nation-state system, without denying continuities with the early modern system. Core institutions of the early modern system such as sovereignty, diplomacy or international law are just as characteristic of today's global nation-state system. Yet, it was nationalism which first introduced a source of legitimacy with universal, and thus potentially global, scope. It therefore attracted all kinds of social groups that were looking to legitimize their state-building projects in an increasingly globalized environment—including anti-colonial movements and potential 'great powers' outside of Europe.

Nationalism, Scarcity and Competition: Introducing Scarcity Nationalism

Competition, too, had been an integral part of the European state-system even before the advent of modern nationalism. As Charles Tilly (1975) and others have convincingly argued, military and political competition was largely responsible for the modernization of state structures in the early modern European state system, particularly by creating a constant need for the refinancing of wars and the bureaucratic organization of tax collection. According to this

view, 'hard' power competition for territories, as well as cultural and human resources, was as important a trigger of modernization processes as other, more peaceful and 'rational', developments like industrialization, differentiation or the division of labor. These insights are reflected in traditional views of competition in the international system, which imagine the nation-state system as shaped by constant competition for power and prestige.

However, the rise of modern nationalism changed the rules and forms of competition in the international system. In U.S. debates of the mid-to-late 19th century, this was reflected particularly in the tendency of U.S. speakers and writers to combine traditional understandings of power competition with novel ideas of economic and political development. These new ideas linked national prestige with the ability of nations to participate in and contribute to the economic, cultural, and political development of mankind. In so doing, these debates reflected the formation of new forms of competition for 'softer' goods such as attention, legitimacy, or prestige of societal development, whose rise can be traced back to the late 19th century as well (Werron 2015; 2020a). These 'soft' aspects seem particularly significant in the genesis of American nationalism, since the United States participated only peripherally in the dynamics of military-political-fiscal competition in the first place and traditionally avoided any 'entanglement' in the European balance of power. The fact that the United States, despite its regionally distinct development, became a modern nation-state and participant in world politics at the turn of the century raises the question of the influence of the world culture of nationalism.

To make sense of these changes, we understand competition as a social form based on overlapping notions of scarcity. In this view, competition describes the case of (at least) two parties attempting to acquire a good at the expense of the other. This requires shared notions of scarcity and, in many cases, third parties observing and constructing the competition (Simmel 1955; Werron 2014). Often, the connection between competition and notions of scarcity appears too obvious to attract scholarly attention. When two nation-states, under the condition of exclusive ownership of territory, compete for a certain piece of land, it appears self-evident that the land can only be acquired by one of the states at the expense of the other. It is scarce because it exists only once and because all parties involved are aware of that.

In other cases, notions of scarcity are less self-evident to nation-states and are subject to historical change. Indeed, nationalism and state competition are connected through changing notions of scarcity and, by implication,

new forms competition. We suggest thinking about such forms of nationalism in terms of ‘scarcity nationalism’ (Werron 2020b: 164, 168-173). In the world-view of scarcity nationalism, the world is a place scarce of resources, forcing all nations to fight constantly for their piece of the cake. Scarcity nationalism introduces notions of scarcity to specify the goods for which nations and nation-states are supposed to compete, and it imagines nations and nation-states as competitors for those scarce goods. There is a long list of goods that can be, and often are, imagined as scarce, ranging from territories, natural and human resources, and selling opportunities on national and global markets to ‘soft’ goods such as attention, legitimacy, and prestige. Moreover, the relevance of these ‘goods’ is not stable, and scarcities are discursively re-imagined all the time. This affects if and how state leaders and nationalist movements around the world perceive each other as competitors.

In the mid-to-late 19th century, an increasingly interconnected world urged nationalists worldwide to redefine their own brand of nationalism in a globalized environment. It urged them to think, in particular, about how to define their own national interests while also conceptualizing their nation as part of a larger world shared with other nations. In the case of the United States, two public debates, about protectionist trade policies and about naval armament and strategy, seem to have been particularly influential in (re-)shaping U.S. nationalism. Both were directly concerned with the role of the U.S. as a rising power in the world, and both addressed this role in terms of scarce resources and competition.

‘Listian Nationalism’ in the U.S.

The mid-to-late 19th century U.S. debate about trade policies pitted supporters of free trade policies against proponents of protectionist policies, forming two political camps that are still relevant today. The debate did not follow party lines but took place within the new Republican party. Founded in 1854, this went on to dominate U.S. politics on the federal level until the First World War, and has remained a part of the two-party-system ever since. In his seminal book about this debate, Marc-William Palen (2016: xvi) argues that economic historians have long focused on the free trade proponents of the time, even though the protectionists were as active in the debate as the former and arguably more successful in shaping actual politics. Palen calls the protectionists “Listian nationalists” to emphasize that they were heavily influenced by

the works of the German economist and politician Friedrich List. In this section, we briefly describe the key elements of List's view (including its arrival in the U.S.) and then show how they were reflected in the U.S. debate of the mid-to-late 19th century.¹

Friedrich List's Economic Nationalism: the Core Ideas

Friedrich List's view on political economy developed over the course of two decades before his major work, *The National System of Political Economy* (Originally *Das nationale System der politischen Ökonomie*) was published in 1841 (List 1922). List agreed with liberal economists that the long-term goal should be free trade between all nations, but argued that underdeveloped nations should employ short-term protectionist policies to be able to catch up with the developed nations. Since David Ricardo's work on comparative advantages (1817), the liberal doctrine assumed that free trade was mutually advantageous under any circumstances. In contrast, List held that selling opportunities on global markets were scarce and that competition between nations for their share of these markets was unavoidably fierce. In other words, he saw *scarcities* where the free traders saw nothing but opportunities for common growth and wealth. Therefore, developing nations should be allowed to help domestic companies to develop their products and production capacities on national markets before entering global competition. Only after having developed a viable 'people's economy' (*Volkswirtschaft*, in contrast to the 'national economy' as understood by British economists), would these countries be able to join the global system of free trade and participate in common growth. On these grounds, he opposed the theory of free trade as a political ideology used by Britain to legitimize its own interests and force its superior industry on its competitors.

It is essential to grasp the *temporal* element of this view: List combined a short-term emphasis on scarcities and national competition with a long-term belief in common growth and prosperity. He was able to merge these ideas by arguing for protectionism *without* buying into the old mercantilist worldview of permanent zero-sum competition and without buying completely into

1 The following section is heavily indebted to Palen's (2016) analysis, building on both his sources and historical interpretation. It aims, however, to add a sociological interpretation that draws attention to the role of scarcities, or constructions of scarcity, in the debate.

the liberal concept of free competition. Instead, he defined free competition on *global* markets as an ideal that could only be reached by establishing free competition on *national* markets. The combination of these ideas afforded List with the ability to integrate his protectionist nationalism into a cosmopolitan vision: the former to be practiced in the present, the latter to be pursued in the future. In this temporal sense, List took pride in having discovered the ‘national principle’ as the basis of a functioning *global* economy.

Nationalists around the world quickly recognized that these ideas could be applied to different geographical, political and cultural contexts (e.g. Bayly 2004: 300–302). Before his arguments could influence the U.S. debate, List’s thinking was influenced by his own experiences in the U.S. List’s influence in the U.S. even preceded the publication of *The National System*. Born in 1789, List worked as a public servant and as a professor of economics in the German state of Württemberg from the late 1810s to the early 1820s. Based on his administrative experiences, he argued for the abolishment of customs within the German states to advance industrialization in Germany. In the realm of foreign trade, the young List by and large was a proponent of free trade, though he was growing sympathetic to protectionist ideas. However, he was also a liberal constitutionalist who pushed aggressively for political reforms. Exiled from Württemberg for his liberal activism, List went to the U.S., where between 1825 and 1832 he worked as a coal and railways entrepreneur as well as a political publicist (he had entered the U.S. on recommendation from Marquis de Lafayette, a prominent figure of both the American and the French revolutions). In his *Outlines of American Political Economy in a Series of Letters*, published in 1827 and addressed to Charles J. Ingersoll, Vice-president of the “Pennsylvania Society for the Promotion of Manufactures and the Mechanic Arts”, he gave the first systematic explanation of his protectionist ideas, promoting them as a contribution to the building of an “American System”.²

It was here that List for the first time developed his theoretical argument that the national element had been neglected in political economy.³ He pointed out a curious gap in the thinking of the British economists, which he

2 The expression “American System” likely alluded to the fact that List’s thinking at this stage was influenced by Alexander Hamilton’s late 18th century writings.

3 The exact timeline of List’s theory development is hard to determine, but it appears that the first mature version was indeed developed, at least published, in the U.S. Later on, in the 1830s, when he was working on *Das nationale System*, List was also influenced by Adolphe Thiers and other French liberal protectionists (cf. Todd 2015: 146–153).

referred to as “Adam Smith and Co.” “In consequence of my researches,” wrote List, “I found the component parts of political economy to be—I, Individual economy; 2, National economy; 3, Economy of mankind.” Of these, however, Smith treated only the first and the last, and did not account for the national element in the global political economy: “he has entirely forgotten what the title of his book, ‘Wealth of Nations,’ promised to treat.” (List 1827: 7)

List went on to explain why accounting for the national element implied criticism of the teachings of free trade. Specifically addressing his U.S. audience, he started his reasoning with a comparison between the United States and the world:

“If the whole globe were united by a union like the 24 States of North America, free trade would indeed be quite as natural and beneficial as it is now in the union. There would be no reason for separating the interest of a certain space of land, and of a certain number of human beings, from the interests of the whole globe and of the whole race. There would be no national interest, no national law contrary to the freedom of the whole race, no restriction, no war.” (ibid)

For List, modelling the political organization of the world after the current state of the U.S. described a desirable future, “a postulate of reason, that nations should settle their differences by law as now the United States do among themselves.” (ibid). However, he also argued that, *for the time being*, the world was indeed separated by national interests. In such a world, it would be as unwise for the U.S. to embrace the ideology of free trade as it would be for a secretary of war to refuse to arm his soldiers (ibid).

On a more theoretical level, List contrasted these insights with “the Scots theory”, which, by ignoring the significance and interests of nations, had in fact ignored the ‘political’ in political economy by jumping straight to a ‘cosmopolitical economy’. As opposed to “individual and cosmopolitical economy”, which are only about wealth, “national wealth is increased and secured by national power, as national power is increased and secured by national wealth. Its leading principles are therefore not only economical, but political too.” (List 1827: 10)

On this basis, to make his point for protectionism and, again, connect his arguments to the U.S. discussion, List described protectionist policies in the U.S. as a means of preparation for times of war: In times of peace, he argued, “it may be quite indifferent to a Pennsylvanian whether the manufacturer who gives him cloth in exchange for his wheat, lives in Old England or in

New England; but in time of war and of restriction, he can neither send wheat to England nor import cloth from there, whilst the exchange with New England would forever be undisturbed.” (ibid). With arguments like these, List managed to draw an immediate connection between economic nationalism and the security interests of the U.S.

British-American Relations and the Repeal of the Corn Laws (1846) as a Catalyst of the Debate

List's ideas gained traction in the U.S. discourse in the 1850s, when they became useful arguments against the increasingly influential proponents of free trade. The latter were called ‘Cobdenites’ by their critics, referring to the leading British ideologist of free trade, Richard Cobden, who had become (in)famous as the leading figure of several major free trade initiatives, including the Anti-Corn Law League (1838) and the Cobden-Chevalier Treaty (1860).⁴

The conflict between ‘Cobdenites’ and ‘Listian nationalists’ shaped the development of ‘Listian nationalism’ in the second half of the 19th century. The supporters of free trade in the North were closely aligned with the antislavery movement, which in turn was supported by British antislavery activists. Partly for this reason, the lines of the debate neither followed the north-south pattern of the Civil War nor party lines. This would have suggested alliances between the protectionists and the industrial North, on the one hand, and, on the other, between free traders and the agricultural, trade-dependent South. Rather, in the 1830s to 1850s, British abolitionists such as George Thompson went to the U.S. to help link the antislavery cause with the cause of free trade and to join forces with American activists (e.g. Joshua Leavitt, William Cullen Bryant, William Lloyd Garrison, Reverend Henry Ward Beecher, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Charles Sumner)—to the point that leading “Anglo-American Cobdenites [were] a regular *who's who* of radical abolitionists” (Palen 2016: 15).

The rise of Listian nationalism in the newly founded Republican party can be understood as a counterreaction to the influence of these abolitionists-cum-free traders. The opposition was fueled by a general skepticism of British power politics, and sometimes outright Anglophobia, that was rooted in the founding of the United States and was present across political debates

4 We should note that the term ‘Cobdenite Cosmopolitans’ was used by economic nationalists to attack their opponents, whereas ‘Listian nationalists’ was introduced by Michael Palen after the fact.

in the 19th century (including, most notably, over the Mexican-American War in 1848). Opposition was also sparked by sheer success: from the mid-1840s onwards, the influence of proponents of free trade on politics became noticeable. The first concrete evidence that the ‘Cobdenites’ were a force to be reckoned with was the repeal of the British Corn Laws in 1846. This had tangible consequences for the North of the United States: it meant that the U.S. lost their backdoor trade route through Canada, which, as a British colony, had been protected by the Corn Laws (implying that the U.S., too, had been indirectly protected by the Corn Laws). The repeal of the Corn Laws, therefore, in the late 1840s led to increasing competition between U.S. and European agricultural exports to the British Empire and to a considerable fall of agricultural prices in Canada and North America (Palen 2016: 27). U.S. farmers and their political representatives could experience the price-drop as a negative consequence of free trade. More generally, they could see it as evidence for the protectionist argument that international trade opportunities were, in fact, a scarce good, and that the advantages of free trade were primarily enjoyed by the British empire—at the expense of producers in North America.

Protecting American Interests While Furthering Human Progress: Fortifying the American System

These experiences help explain why ‘Listian nationalists’ gained a stronghold within the young Republican party. Since the 1850s, Republican politicians continued List’s intellectual work on an ‘American system’. Leading figures of the new party like Henry C. Carey, James G. Blaine and William McKinley attacked the cosmopolitan ideology of free trade on all levels of the domestic debate—from systematic book-length studies to the daily infighting in Congress—as a vehicle of British imperial power politics. As an alternative, they made the case for an ‘American System’ that would effectively protect U.S. interests.

The leading theorist of the American School was Henry C. Carey (1793–1879), a political economist who became chief economic advisor of President Abraham Lincoln (1860–1865). In the 1850s and 1860s, Carey wrote a number of influential books in which he harshly criticized what he called ‘the English System’ and in which he outlined the characteristics and virtues of ‘the American System’. Both his critique of the British economists and his use of the term ‘American System’ are clearly reminiscent of Friedrich List. In contrast to List, though, he presented himself as an admiring supporter of Adam Smith, fo-

curring his critique on Smith's successors, particularly on David Ricardo and on what he called "the tendency of the Ricardo-Malthusian system to produce intensity of selfishness" (Carey 1851: 64).

Carey developed the notion of the 'American System' into a proper system of thought. He aimed at protecting American interests and claimed for the U.S. the role of a standard-bearer of human progress. In *The Harmony of Interests, Agricultural, Manufacturing and Commercial* (1851), Carey explained what in his view distinguished the American system from the British:

"[T]wo systems are before the world; the one looks to increasing the proportion of persons and of capital engaged in trade and transportation, and therefore to diminishing the proportion engaged in producing commodities with which to trade, with necessarily diminished return to the labor of all; while the other looks to increasing the proportion engaged in the work of production, and diminishing that engaged in trade and transportation, with increased return to all, giving to the laborer good wages, and to the owner of capital good profits." (Carey 1851: 228; emphasis in the original)

The 'American system' was beneficial to everyone, because it focused on expanding production and on reducing the number of 'unproductive' middle men.

According to Carey, this system was not just a superior guideline for U.S. economic policies, but a model for the world at large. This instilled the U.S. with a mission and responsibility that reached beyond its own interests while, happily, not contradicting them:

"One looks towards universal war; the other towards universal peace. One is the English system; the other we may be proud to call the American system, for it is the only one ever devised the tendency of which was that of ELEVATING while EQUALIZING the condition of man throughout the world. Such is the true mission of the people of these United States. To them has been granted a privilege never before granted to man, that of the exercise of the right of perfect self-government; but, as rights and duties are inseparable, with the grant of the former came the obligation to perform the latter. Happily their performance is pleasant and profitable, and involves no sacrifice. To raise the value of labor throughout the world, we need only to raise the value of our own." (Carey 1851: 228-29; capitalisation in the original)

By introducing protectionist policies as part of an 'American System', which positions the U.S. both as a rising power in international politics and as a

beacon of the progress of human civilization, Carey had devised a powerful ideological weapon: a theory of political economy that managed to reconcile national selfishness with global responsibility. The theory acknowledged the necessity of competition now and aimed at a future with common growth and mutual cooperation—allowing for the pursuit of national interests without bad conscience. This clearly met a demand within the Republican party, where morally conscious movements like abolitionism were hugely influential and where the strong rejection of British imperial power politics was shared by many. It thus comes as no surprise that this line of argument was used extensively within the Republican Party in the decades to come, culminating in the McKinley Tariff of 1890 and the presidency of William McKinley at the conclusion of the century.

Listian Nationalism as a Case of Scarcity Nationalism

Listian economic nationalism in the 19th century U.S. can be seen as a form of scarcity nationalism. In tracing the development of this economic nationalism, we have shown how it introduced the ‘the nation’ as a central concept of political economy, built on negative experiences with free trade (after the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846) that reflected a scarcity of trade opportunities, flourished as part of an on-going conflict between proponents of free trade and proponents of protectionist policies, and was integrated into a theoretical model of national economic policies (“American system”) which argued that such a national system was necessary not just to protect the short-term interests of the U.S., but in the long run to advance the wealth and progress of humankind. In this worldview, economic nationalism, based on ‘realistic’ insights into scarcities of trade opportunities, was at the same time a vehicle of an ‘idealistic’ vision for the world at large that argued for protectionist policies in the present to advance a cosmopolitan world of free trade in the future. In other words, it saw economic nationalism as a necessary stage in the development of humankind.

While this view united all ‘Listian nationalists’ in their struggle against the ‘Cobdenites’, they had considerable disagreements about its wider implications. Among the matters of contention was whether the ‘American System’ could be combined with imperial power politics of the military kind, that is, whether it could be part of an “imperialism of economic nationalism” (Palen 2016: 100). Henry C. Carey, the leading thinker of ‘Listian nationalism’, clearly opposed any such combination, as he thought that “to improve the political

condition of man throughout the world, it is needed that we ourselves should remain at peace, avoid taxation for the maintenance of fleets and armies” (Carey 1851: 229). Other economic nationalists in the Republican Party were much less cautious when it came to the pursuit of power politics—as the case of navalism will illustrate.

The Case of Navalism

The debate over naval reconstruction and strategy is another example that shows how scarcity nationalism played a role in the redefinition of the U.S. in the world at the end of the 19th century. Navalists argued for naval reconstruction and a strategic reorientation of the U.S. navy. In their arguments, they also touched on questions of nationalism, scarcity, imperialism, and American participation in world politics. Previously, the U.S. navy had been seen as a tool of a lesser power primarily concerned with commercial diplomacy. Since the mid-1880s, however, navalists redefined American interests in the world and the navy’s role. Like previous naval thinkers, the new navalists believed in universal progress through commercial interdependence and a special role of the U.S. navy in developing global civilization. Unlike their predecessors, however, they perceived world politics as increasingly characterized by scarcity and competition. They called for a new strategic outlook: if the United States wanted to be an agent of civilization in the future, it had to prepare for war in the present.

The Old Navy: Advancing Commerce and Civilization Within the British Imperial System

To understand what was new about the navalists’ scarcity nationalism, it might be useful to first consider what preceded it. Before the 1890s, the U.S. was a lesser naval power with political interest confined to its own region, but no aspirations outside the Western hemisphere beyond expanding its trade. U.S. foreign policy traditionally accepted and even embraced a peripheral status in world politics.

This outsider status was a result of both geography and ideology. On the one hand, America enjoyed “free security” after the Civil War, since potential enemies were either too weak or too remote (Woodward 1997: 2). On the other hand, U.S. republican exceptionalism actively rejected the idea of par-

ticipating in great power struggles. Politicians throughout the 19th century affirmed the guiding motto: “Peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations—entangling alliances with none.” (Jefferson 1801, cited in Cleveland 1885) This also included a rejection of peacetime military buildup and power competition. One secretary of the navy stated: “It is not now, and it never has been, a part of that [national] policy to maintain a fleet able at any time to cope on equal terms with the foremost European armaments.” (Chandler 1883: 8-9) As “a powerful though peaceful nation” (Robeson 1874: 24), the U.S. was also not supposed to participate in any competition over colonies.

Nevertheless, American republicanism had a strong universalist component. On the one hand, the U.S. was supposed to be a model for the world. On the other hand, American elites in the late 19th century believed it to be the vanguard of an “industrial civilization” that would eventually overcome the European-led “militarist civilization” and form a better global civilization (Ninkovich 2009: 316-323). As a result, U.S. foreign and naval policy focused on the promotion of economic interdependence around the world.

The navy served as a tool for this commercialist foreign policy, while also contributing to the construction of a global maritime infrastructure. It was dispersed into regional squadrons across the globe, protecting U.S. citizens abroad, “showing the flag” in foreign ports, and negotiating trade deals. This was a technologically modest “cruising navy,” not designed for fighting great wars, but for participating in a global order upheld by the Royal Navy. Especially in East Asia, the U.S. acted as sidekick of British power, based on the assumption of a Euro-American harmony of interests (Burk 2018: 158-159, 203). If the U.S. navy employed force in foreign waters, it used it against ‘semi-civilized’ powers or groups designated as criminals and pirates, and in cooperation with European navies. The U.S. navy also contributed to exploration, hydrographic mapping, the construction and maintenance of submarine telegraph cables, and other responsibilities of a power contributing to global civilization. There was no security competition between the U.S. and European powers and both wealth and security were perceived as plentiful.

The traditional ideology of the U.S. navy of this time is exemplified by Commodore Robert W. Shufeldt (1850-1934). As a naval officer, commercial agent, and diplomat, Shufeldt sailed to Africa and Asia between 1878 and 1880 and negotiated the ‘opening of Korea’ in 1882. The purpose of the U.S. navy, according to Shufeldt, was “[...] cruising abroad among the semi-barbarous peoples, because a navy not only protects commerce, it creates it.” Gunboat imperialism—the opening of foreign markets with the help of naval

power—was “the secret of half the success of the British commerce” which should be emulated (Shufeldt 1884: 21-22). In his quest for access to overseas markets, Shufeldt did not shy away from employing force. Like most naval officers during the 1880s, however, he was opposed to European-style colonialism (Hagan 1973), which was “not employed to ‘civilize’ orientals—but to subordinate them [...]” U.S. foreign policy, however, “should take higher grounds [...]” (Shufeldt 1880, cited in Drake 1984: 252).

Shufeldt opposed both colonial imperialism and great power competition. In his view, the U.S. should focus on expanding its trade abroad, while cooperating with European powers and avoiding military conflicts. Most naval politicians and officers shared this view before the 1890s, which explains why the U.S. maintained a comparatively weak and outdated fleet. For its strategic purpose of commerce protection and gunboat diplomacy, the old wooden navy was entirely adequate (Buhl 2008). The contribution this small navy was to make to global civilization was not military, but commercial and developmental. Since security was seen as a given and trade as plentiful, there was no need to compete with European navies. Great power prestige was of no concern to most naval decision makers (Hagan 1973: 188).

According to ‘old navy’ thinking, the navy served the protection and expansion of U.S. commercial interests. This included occasional ‘gunboat diplomacy’ vis-à-vis underdeveloped parties, but not competition and conflict with other naval powers. Naval politicians and officers did not perceive any threat to U.S. security but enough economic opportunities at the periphery of the Eurocentric world system. The navy shared in the American foreign policy objective to remain outside of the European ‘balance of power’ and avoid competition.

The New Navalism: Choosing Competition

Traditional ideas about the purpose of the navy were challenged by navalists such as Captain A. T. Mahan (1840-1914) and his mentor Rear Admiral S. B. Luce (1827-1917), who took up many established ideas from professional naval discourse but reinterpreted them based on the assumption of scarcity nationalism. Since the mid-1880s, navalists publicly argued that in an increasingly interdependent world, wealth and security were becoming scarce and the U.S. had to compete with other powers to secure its position in world politics. Subsequently, naval reformers in the legislative and executive branches advocated for the construction of a ‘big navy’ centered on battleships and a strategic shift

towards an offensive defense. In 1890, Mahan published the first volume of "The Influence of Sea Power Upon History", which contributed to popularizing navalism across the U.S. and global public. Mahan's ideas were not entirely original but synthesized years-long professional debates on naval policy. His book and many articles show how the new navalism redefined U.S. nationalism by framing global politics as a zero-sum game and legitimizing the participation of the U.S. in great power competition. This competition, however, would eventually contribute to universal progress. In this, navalists followed established discourses of American exceptionalism and global-developmental optimism, but they argued for a temporary necessity of participating in great power naval competition.

Navalists argued for naval buildup on political-economic considerations but introduced a new argument about scarcity. Since political discussions of foreign and naval policy had traditionally focused on commercial interests, navalists expressed their agenda in similar terms. Their view of the global economic system differed from their predecessors', however, in that they perceived economic interdependence as the basis for a zero-sum, not positive-sum commercial politics. According to Mahan, sea power determined the rise and fall of great powers. Sea power was not a purely military concept since it included a power's capacity to participate in and (if necessary) control parts of global maritime trade routes and access to overseas markets. Mahan took a zero-sum view of commerce-as-power: "The history of sea power is largely, though by no means solely, a narrative of contests between nations, of mutual rivalries, of violence frequently culminating in war." At the center of this lay the struggle over the sources of "growth and prosperity" and every nation tried to "secure to one's own people a disproportionate share of such benefits" (Mahan 1890: 1). This understanding of economic and naval power, which he derived from his analysis of the 17th and 18th centuries, Mahan applied to his own time. In the late 19th century, he perceived another cycle of great power competition: "Everywhere nation is arrayed against nation; our own no less than others" (Mahan 1917a: 18). It was not just access to trade routes and markets, however, that Mahan—in opposition to traditional naval commercialism—conceptualized as scarce. The infrastructure of globalization itself made conflict more likely and U.S. isolationism an anachronistic strategy: "[...] Proximity, as has been noted, is a fruitful source of political friction, but proximity is the characteristic of the age. The world has grown smaller. Positions formerly distant have become to us of vital importance from their nearness" (Mahan 1917c: 148).

Similarly, security could no longer be taken for granted. A new wave of imperialist competition increased other powers' interests in the Western hemisphere and the technology-aided shrinking of the world transformed the oceans from strategic barriers into highways. Potential adversaries included not just traditional European powers, but also the rising naval powers Japan and Germany, which became increasingly active in the Atlantic and Pacific (Millelt/Maslowski 1994: 317). On the other hand, the conversion of fleets to steam propulsion made all naval powers more dependent on naval bases. Whereas sail ships had been able to operate independently for months, steam navies were reliant on a network of bases (and supply lines) for weekly maintenance and refueling (Hobson 2002: 29). Because "fuel is the life of modern war [...]," wrote Mahan, around logistical questions would "cluster some of the most important considerations of naval strategy. In the Caribbean and the Atlantic we are confronted with many a foreign coal depot [...]" (Mahan 1917a). The U.S., too, needed to establish such bases as long as locations were still available. There was only a limited number of islands in the Pacific and Atlantic where such stations could be established. A race for such islands seemed imminent which increased the danger of European intervention in the Western hemisphere.

Another technological development that seemed to make hemispherical security into a scarce good was the anticipated construction of a Central American canal. Such a canal, navalists reasoned, would increase maritime commerce and create a new source of tension between the naval powers, akin to the Suez Canal completed in 1869. It would be "nothing but a disaster to the United States, in the present state of her military and naval preparation. It is especially dangerous to the Pacific coast" (Mahan 1890), which could be reached more easily by European naval powers once the canal would be completed. (In today's security parlance, the Central American canal is one of multiple "maritime chokepoints", which are today characterized as "increasingly scarce natural resources" (Nincic 2002: 144).) This situation required a new strategy focused on gaining command of the sea and confronting other naval powers with an offensive battleship fleet. The coercive acquisition of coaling stations was seen as a legitimate move in ensuring strategic and operational autonomy for the U.S. navy. Therefore, the increasing scarcity of security necessitated a strategic shift and reconstruction of the navy.

Since interdependence increased scarcity and the potential for conflict, the U.S., according to the navalists, had no choice but to give up its traditional isolation and prepare for war. The main political obstacle to this was the tradi-

tional U.S. isolationism and distrust of expensive standing militaries. To overcome this, navalists redefined the role of the U.S. in the world and legitimized great power competition in the context of American ideology. By focusing on the prestige that would come with naval power, navalists tried to reconcile American universalism with a militarist agenda that might otherwise have been perceived as too European. Navalists argued that in order to “take rank” in the world, the U.S. required a European-style battleship navy (Tracy 1889: 3). The navalists’ focus on battleship-building (rather than cheaper alternatives such as torpedo-boats) suggests the importance of modernity prestige in naval reconstruction. Mahan tried to overcome the contradiction between traditional and new naval policy by temporalizing both America’s earlier “policy of isolation which befitted her infancy”, and, to a lesser extent, his own proposed naval strategy (see further below): “[...] whereas once to avoid European entanglement was essential to the development of her individuality, now to take her share of the travail of Europe is but to assume an inevitable task [...]” (Mahan 1917b: 122-123). Although there is little to suggest that Mahan closely followed discussions on political economy or was involved with the business world, it is noteworthy that he chose to make a temporally defensive argument similar to Listian protectionist reasoning.

Great Power Competition and America’s Contribution to Global Civilization

Despite his embrace of power competition, Mahan also retained the traditional American belief in global progress and America’s special role as agent of civilization. Mahan’s starting assumption was that great power competition itself was a mechanism to bring about peace and development. Ridiculing the liberal internationalism of the ‘Cobdenites’ he claimed that “[n]ot in universal harmony, nor in fond dreams of unbroken peace, rest now the best hopes of the world [...]” Instead, he identified “the competition of interests[,]” the “reviving sense of nationality” and “the jealous determination of each people to provide first for its own, of which the tide of protection [...] is so marked a symptom” as forces which, in the long run, would foster the “common interests of civilization” (Mahan 1917b: 122-123). He suggested at least three specific mechanisms:

First, naval buildup would deter European powers from the Western hemisphere and establish a mutually beneficial regional division of labor, thereby integrating the U.S. into a common global security system with

Europe. Initially, the navalists sought to make the Western hemisphere safe from European intrusion. Their proposed offensive navy was not just designed to counter German and Japanese, but also British naval power. U.S. demands for international recognition of regional autonomy (the Monroe Doctrine) was first and foremost motivated by a desire for security. However, this also made the Americas a zone of influence for the U.S., and the U.S. an “international police force,” as President Theodore Roosevelt, himself a navalist, declared in 1903. Mahan’s reflections on the future Anglo-American relationship show that the claim to regional autonomy and security enabled to think about Anglo-American cooperation on a global scale (Mahan 1917b). Hemispheric security, therefore, implied integration into a global power system.

Second, competition would force the U.S. to take up its responsibility as participant in the “outward impulse of all the civilized nations of the first order of greatness” (Mahan 1917d: 225). By this Mahan both referred to a great inter-civilizational struggle between “Eastern or Western civilization” as well as global development more generally. After the Spanish-American War in 1898, when the U.S. acquired overseas territories, he increasingly believed such “duties which must be accepted” to include colonial development in Cuba and the Philippines (Mahan 1907: 324-325).

Third, Mahan argued that great power competition between nations would eventually have to give way to a new world order, in which competition might take a new form and even be reduced. Reflecting on the coming 20th century, Mahan speculated that warfare as a means of naval competition between the great powers might become obsolete since no state could command the immensity of future sea power by itself. He, therefore, envisioned a “multinational consortium” (Sumida 2000) of naval powers which would shape the world together: “it is improbable that control ever again will be exercised, as once it was, by a single nation.” Competition between nations would lay the groundwork for this by encouraging military preparedness and creating “a common standard of moral and intellectual ideas” (Mahan 1917b: 124–125). National interest would thus make international cooperation necessary and therefore inevitable lead to a transcendence of nationalist competition. In the future, the U.S. might act in accordance with European powers to check the rising power of East Asia, or in an alliance with Britain, Germany and Japan to balance Russia (Mahan 1917d: 256-258; Sumida 2000: 95). Paradoxically, while the naval buildup of the 1890s was directed against the Royal Navy, many navalists were also Anglophiles hoping

for Anglo-American naval cooperation in the future. In 1895/1896, such an understanding emerged when Britain recognized U.S. hegemony in the Western hemisphere by accepting the American offer to act as arbitrator in a British-Venezuelan border dispute (Schake 2017: 148). This even gave rise to ideas of supra-national “imperial federation” and “race patriotism” (Mahan 1917d: 225, 243). While Mahan seems to have been unable to conceive a world beyond power competition, he did think nationalist competition might lead to and give way to supra-national cooperation. This did not just serve a global balance of power, but also the protection of maritime commerce, which Mahan saw as the main source of prosperity for all nations.

To conclude, the navalist discourse continued previous naval debates on economic interdependence and the role of the US in fostering global civilization but reframed the problem by conceptualizing both naval security and economic power as scarce. Security depended on the control of limited geographic points, while prosperity depended on the ability to control maritime trade routes and access points to overseas markets. Therefore, the ‘shrinking of the world’ intensified great power competition. If the U.S. wanted to survive this struggle, it had to compete with European naval powers on their terms. To reconcile this ‘realist’ thinking with traditional American universalism, Mahan made a temporal argument both regarding traditional isolationism and the newly proposed navalist strategy. While the former was appropriate to an earlier stage in history, the latter was an adequate response to the contemporary strategic situation. Ultimately, however, competition among nation-states would give way to intra-civilizational cooperation. This way, Mahan reconciled the ‘idealist’ universalism of U.S. ideology with ‘realist’ thinking about scarcity and competition. By entering into competition with the European powers, U.S. nationalism would eventually contribute to global civilization.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have tried to show how U.S. nationalist outlooks on the world in the mid-to-late 19th century built on notions of scarcity. Our analysis of debates in trade and naval policy shows how notions of scarcity—particularly, regarding trade opportunities and security—were used to define U.S. interests, while also embedding these interests in worldviews that, at least rhetorically, cared for the well-being of humankind as a whole. For American

nationalists, conceptualizing national competition as a stage on the road to universal 'civilization' might also have been a way to reconcile the anti-colonial legacy of 1776 with national self-interest and new imperial aspirations.

Based on these historical accounts, there is much to be said for the idea that this tension between 'realist' assumptions of scarcity (and associated ideas of competition) and 'idealist' conceptions of human development and progress characterizes the mainstream of political thought today. At the very least, it is characteristic of nationalist reasoning that is present in current debates about economic nationalism vs. "globalism" around the world, and in the U.S. in particular.

In the field of economic policies, there is even a figure that could be described as a modern-day Friedrich List: the Korean economist Ha-Joon Chang (2002, 2008), who has been arguing for years that the free trade ideology as represented in the "Washington consensus" and similar global policies is oblivious of the fact that today's rich countries were yesterday's 'developing' countries, dependent on the very protectionist policies they now declare as incompatible with enlightened economic thought. By insisting on free trade policies, according to Chang, developed countries are "kicking away the ladder" (2002) they once used themselves. With this thinking, Chang would certainly have found friends and admirers among Listian nationalists of the 19th century.

In the realm of power and military politics, too, variants of nationalism can be observed that resemble developments of the late 19th century. China and the U.S. are now engaged in a competition not unlike that of the great naval powers around 1900, centered around maritime trade routes and scarce strategic points. At the same time, both compete over prestige and influence in the world, with China increasingly presenting itself as another provider of 'global public goods' and its rise to power as beneficial to the world. In the current constellation, then, it seems that it is China which has adopted the kind of nationalist reasoning described here, where national power politics based on notions of scarcity meet cosmopolitan leadership on behalf of human civilization.

As these examples indicate, nationalist reasoning that connects ideas about scarcity, competition, globalization and utopias of human civilization is as prevalent today as it was in the mid-to-late 19th century. In other words, the blueprints of scarcity nationalism as invented in the 19th century are still in use today. Studying them, therefore, is important not just to the history of nationalism, but also its current state.

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