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The Eccentric Utopian: Andrew Carnegie, American Views of the Anglosphere and American Exceptionalism

Fabian Hilfrich

Dreamworlds of Race is a tour de force through Victorian/Gilded Age British and American utopias about the impending triumph of the 'Anglosphere', a variable imagined space dominated by Anglo-Saxons. The dreamworld always incorporated Great Britain and the United States and sometimes extended to the British settler colonies as well. While its institutional makeup and timetable remained in flux, its propagandists predicted global Anglo-Saxon dominance for the benefit of all mankind and an era of permanent peace. In eight chapters, Bell discusses several British and American protagonists of the Anglosphere, contemporary science fiction literature, as well as some of the utopia's core principles, such as isopolitan citizenship and the dream of eternal peace. In a concluding chapter that does much more than summarize the book's main themes, Bell contrasts these Victorian dreams with similar narratives in recent Steampunk literature and with Afro-modernist visions that dramatized how one (Anglo-Saxon) person's dreamworld could be another (non-Anglo Saxon) person's nightmare. It is also in the conclusion where Bell points to the continued political relevance of his topic because the campaign for Brexit has once again engendered a 'celebration of the world-historical role of the Angloworld' (359).

As Bell outlines, this millennialist dream could be religious or atheist, driven as much by God's choice as by the 'natural selection' of social Darwinism. Common to all of them, however, was the underlying conviction that the Anglo-Saxon 'race' had been singled out for fulfilling the world's destiny. Race, as Bell adds, was a very fluid category that could signify anything from nationality and language, from politics and history to biology. To capture this complexity, Bell crafts the fitting phrase "biocultural assemblage," which underlines the extent to which these outwardly universal utopias for the world's benefit were driven by the exclusive – and elusive – category of race.

In his introduction, Bell emphasizes that he is neither interested in exhaustively sketching the Anglosphere debates nor their impact on politics because it is the boldest visions that will help him outline the potency of this 'racial utopianism'. While I have no objections to that remit, I want to contextualise these utopian visions in order illustrate their reach and importance, but also the limits of their appeal (maybe that is just the historian in me!). For that purpose, I want to focus on the American versions of the Anglosphere, which Bell discusses in the second chapter by focusing on Andrew

Carnegie's dreamworlds. Adding personal context for Carnegie will help explain the hyperbole of his visions, whereas a juxtaposition with more specifically American utopias suggests that the attraction of the Anglosphere may well have been greater in Britain than in the United States. Even so, these utopias were no less racially determined than the Anglosphere.

Carnegie's Anglospheric dreams were undoubtedly grandiose. The legendary steel magnate and second richest man in the world was an outlier and a maverick, full of contradictions, as Bell emphasizes. He was one of the few 'captains of industry' who recognized the right of workers to organise, yet he brutally crushed one of the largest unions in the Homestead Strike of 1892. He opposed colonial domination of the Philippines on principled grounds, but he compromised these principles when he deemed the indigenous population sufficiently small, as in Hawaii, or the targeted territory sufficiently close to the United States and of national interest, as in the Caribbean. His exceptions were so numerous that one historian has referred to him as a "tinsel anti-imperialist" (Beisner, 184). And on utopianism, Carnegie fancied himself 'a dreamer' who could emerge as an agent of global change, but he rejected out of hand as naïve some fellow peace activists who approached him about donations (Nasaw, 693, 716-7).

Bell embeds Carnegie's visions in a wider tableau of similar thinking in the United States at the time. Interestingly, though, while Carnegie shared the dream of an Anglo-Saxon world with these protagonists, he disagreed with most of them on crucial details and contemporary political questions. With an evangelical like Josiah Strong, Carnegie disputed the role of God in legitimizing and bringing about the millennium. With imperialists like Theodore Roosevelt, Henry Cabot Lodge or Lyman Abbott, Carnegie disagreed about the conquest of the Philippines after the Spanish-American War and about what imperialists considered to be the model function of the British Empire. Advocates of increasing military preparedness, such as Alfred Thayer Mahan or, again, Roosevelt, Carnegie chided for their views on the use of force versus the need for arbitration and schemes for global peace (although Bell emphasizes that Carnegie never was a pacifist). The only attribute he shared with them, apart from the utopias, was the affiliation with the Republican Party.

This makes Carnegie an anomalous spokesperson for American Anglotopias and the only other shared attribute, party loyalty, is more significant than Bell acknowledges. It delimits the reach of Anglo-American fantasies in the Gilded Age United States – to white Anglo-Saxon Protestant elites (the proverbial WASPs) who made their home primarily in the Republican Party. The Democrats, on the other hand, were the party of more recent immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe and from diverse

religious backgrounds who felt excluded from these Anglo-Saxon dreams – even though, as Bell rightly emphasizes (p. 33), American propagandists always left the definition of the Anglo-Saxon race vague enough to include most *white* immigrant groups. Nevertheless, as far as I can see, neither prominent Democrats nor many other recent immigrants from non-English parts of Europe took up the baton of the Anglosphere.

More importantly, in the United States, the Anglosphere always had to contend with millennialist visions inspired by American exceptionalism, the notion that the country was unique because of its democratic founding. These ideas informed propagandists like Josiah Strong at least as much as the Anglosphere. This narrative was strongly predicated on the juxtaposition of the unburdened New World with the corrupt, monarchical and socially hierarchical Old World. Contemporary observers may have viewed Great Britain as the most kindred and “advanced” part of the Old World, but nevertheless a part of it. To such a nationalist millennialist vision all Americans could subscribe, even though it was still strongly racially determined and did not usually extend to the non-white inhabitants of the United States.

A stronger contextualisation with this particular utopia, I would argue, would have been helpful in hypothesising that the Anglosphere (not unlike the “special relationship”) was more of a British than an American obsession in the Victorian era. Carnegie himself is an instructive example in this context because he seemed torn between American, Anglosphere and global visions of the perfect future.

This ambivalence emerges best in the juxtaposition between two of his most important publications: *Triumphant Democracy*, published in 1886, and ‘A Look Ahead’ six years later. As Bell acknowledges, the book’s first edition glorified the United States and castigated the United Kingdom (pp. 47-8; also Nasaw, 273-7). Carnegie emphasized flat social structures and the absence of feudalism as distinguishing advantages of the United States, features emphasized by advocates of American exceptionalism. Although Carnegie already championed a union between both countries at the time, he left no doubt that Great Britain would have to follow the American lead and discard its monarchical shackles for ‘race imperialism’ to triumph. The book was both, a paean to American exceptionalism and an invitation to the mother country to follow its offspring into a union after divesting itself of its “Old Europe” moorings. It is the latter reading that Bell emphasizes.

Nevertheless, the book’s reception history underlines the first reading. Contrary to Carnegie’s expectations, his heavy-handed criticism of Great Britain guaranteed a frosty response to the volume.

British critics did not dwell on the invitation to a united Anglosphere, but the criticism of their traditions and institutions. Even Carnegie's idol Herbert Spencer denied that republican institutions accounted for American successes.

This is the context in which we must read 'A Look Ahead', not least because it was also intended as a postscript to a new edition of *Triumphant Democracy*. Bell considers this the centrepiece of Carnegie's Anglospheric dreamworld. The article seems targeted at a British, rather than an American audience, and it relativised much of the book's criticism. The significance of the American Revolution was belittled as an 'involuntary' accident and the reasons and conditions of future reunion outlined. Carnegie emphasized that the scheme would materially benefit Great Britain, while harming American manufacturers, and he even found an – albeit transitory – role for the monarchy. Before fading away, the Queen could effect reunion. Carnegie still envisaged American leadership of that union, but this time, he derived its legitimacy simply from the superiority in numbers, rather than from superior institutions. 'A Look Ahead' toned down both the criticism of Great Britain and the exceptionalism of the United States. How much of that was due to a realistic assumption that praise might be more conducive than criticism to effect the utopia – and how much of it was due to the fact that a vain author was hoping for a more sympathetic reception of the new edition of *Triumphant Democracy* in the United Kingdom?

If the critical reception of the book's first edition in Great Britain provides some context for understanding the gushing Anglo-American utopia in 'A Look Ahead', contemporary developments help explain why – as I would argue – Carnegie's enthusiasm for this particular utopia cooled from the late 1890s onwards. As Bell emphasizes, the Venezuelan boundary crisis of 1895/6 evoked outwardly contradictory reactions in Carnegie. On the one hand, he thought that the United States would be justified to go to war against the mother country to safeguard the principle of arbitration. On the other hand, though, the optimist in him thought that going to the brink of war could serve as an incentive for closer union between both countries, especially after the British government relented (pp. 76-8; Nasaw, 500). Carnegie's subsidiary hopes for increased efforts at international arbitration were then and again during the Taft Administration when an even more ambitious arbitration treaty was rejected by the US Senate (Nasaw, 752-5, 769-70). Incidentally, this underlines that an exceptionalist and isolationist American tradition continued to have more purchase than the Anglosphere.

Ultimately, it was the United States' flirtation with empire in the wake of the Spanish-American War that weakened Carnegie's infatuation with the Anglosphere to a more significant extent than Bell

concedes. Robert Beisner categorically concluded that 'the war with Spain was the final blow to Carnegie's once grandiose conception of "race imperialism"' (Beisner, 175). This may be exaggerated as Carnegie still invoked an 'alliance of hearts' and a 'patriotism of race' in this period, but he was clearly troubled by imperialists' suggestions that the British Empire served as a model for the US administration of overseas territories, especially the Philippines. No longer confident that the British Empire would just fade away, as he had argued in 'A Look Ahead', Carnegie emphasized that 'India means death to our race' (Carnegie, 'Distant Possessions', 240). The only lesson the United States could learn was to avoid imperial possessions altogether. The Star-Spangled Scotsman passionately argued against an alliance with Great Britain that would surely be needed if the United States thrust itself into the world of competing empires. Such an alliance, Carnegie warned, would be 'humiliating' and only 'a slender thread' of protection, to be revoked at any moment British national interest prevailed (Carnegie, 'Americanism', 3-4).

Carnegie clung to the dream of a future Anglo-American utopia, but he also feared that the direction could be different, i.e. the United States emulating the British Empire, rather than the other way around. That would lead to forfeiting the nation's exceptional geographical and economic advantages and, most importantly, its character as a democratic nation and a champion of freedom. Other anti-imperialists were even more unequivocal in their advocacy of a distinctly nationalist utopia that could only be preserved if the United States refrained from Old World imperial practices and alliances. Most anti-imperialists (and again, many of them Democrats) did not champion an Anglo-American utopia. Nevertheless, their nationalist utopia was still racially determined, as was the anti-imperialism of many of them, namely in order to avoid engagement with 'inferior' races that could only debase the 'superior' one. These utopias were no less racist than the Anglosphere.

Despite his professed continued commitment to the Anglosphere, Carnegie published and talked less about it after 1900. Instead, he focused increasingly on disarmament, arbitration and various schemes devoted to international peace, including the idea of an international league. While it is true that he still spoke of Anglo-American arbitration, for example, as the nucleus of establishing arbitration as a global principle, he increasingly emphasized the roles of other actors as agents of world peace (ironically the German emperor William II among them). His utopian focus had become more global, but again, no less racist because it was still grounded in Northern hemispheric leadership.

Hence, even in Carnegie, but even more so in fellow anti-imperialists, we can see that the Anglosphere had always been more of a British than an American dream. There was always an inherent

tension between this utopia and the exceptionalist American one, which is precisely why Carnegie could only imagine an outcome with Great Britain becoming more like and subservient to the United States. When the assimilation seemed to point in the other direction, towards the British Empire, Carnegie mentioned the Anglosphere less. Had the Anglosphere been more attractive to British observers, at least in part because they worried about the aftermath of the British Empire? Was it a means to preserve and prolong British global significance? After all, utopias are always driven by fear as much as by hope and exuberance; they are always shadowed by dystopias – of which there were also many in the Gilded Age.

Ultimately, it is, of course, ironic if opposition to empire decreased the attraction of the Anglosphere for some Americans because all the different dreamworlds – whether Anglo-American, American or ‘global’ – were predicated on the primacy and leadership of the white races across the globe. In that sense, all these versions were deeply racist and imperialist, even though they may not have envisioned direct rule over independent territories. And this is ultimately one of the most significant insights of Bell’s impressive book.

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