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Review: “The ‘Conspiracy’ of Free Trade. The Anglo-American Struggle over Empire and Economic Globalization, 1846–1896” by Marc-William Palen

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Stable URL: <http://www.globalhistories.com/index.php/GHSJ/article/view/68>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/GHSJ.2016.68>

Source: Global Histories, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Oct. 2016), pp. 96–99

ISSN: 2366-780X

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Publisher information:

‘Global Histories: A Student Journal’ is an open-access bi-annual journal founded in 2015 by students of the M.A. program Global History at Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. ‘Global Histories’ is published by an editorial board of Global History students in association with the Freie Universität Berlin.

Freie Universität Berlin

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The “Conspiracy” of Free Trade: The Anglo-American Struggle over Empire and Economic Globalization, 1846-1896

By Marc-William Palen, Cambridge UK; New York:
Cambridge University Press, 2016. Pp. 331, Hardback \$99.99,
ISBN: 978-1-107-10912-4

REVIEWED BY DENNIS KÖLLING

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While in the last few decades the United States was regarded by many as the most vocal proponent of neoliberal economic policy and international trade deregulation, recent criticisms arising from heated debates around trade agreements such as TTIP, TPP, and CETA, as well as the Sanders and Trump 2016 campaigns’ flirtation with protectionism, have shown that US free trade policy still remains a divisive and relevant issue today. Marc-William Palen, in his book *The “Conspiracy” of Free Trade*, explores this historic struggle, framing his study around free trade and protectionism in the United States during the nineteenth century, and contextualizing the rise of liberal economic thinking within Anglo-American relations. Palen’s monograph aims at deconstructing common historical depictions of the nineteenth century as a ‘laissez-faire era’ in domestic economic policy with little control by a ‘weak’ state. Palen instead emphasizes the prevalence of economic nationalism and restrictive policies aimed at protecting the American market, including high protective tariffs, restrictions on immigration, and federal subsidization. He then follows a growing movement of British-influenced cosmopolitan free traders, opposing protectionist policies in the public discourse and in the government’s policy conduct. Palen’s work ultimately serves as a major contribution to the economic and imperial history of the United States, as he lays out a variety of original claims, challenging the way the rise of American informal empire has been portrayed in historiography.

The genesis of the division between prevalent protectionists and struggling free traders in American history has been widely overlooked by the dominant strand of scholarly publications in economic and diplomatic history, advocating the narrative of the US as an ‘open door’ empire. Notably, the Wisconsin school of diplomatic history and its revisionist founder William Appleman Williams have es-

established the tradition of describing the US as an 'empire of free trade', pursuing liberal economic policies in world politics in order to maintain informal, capitalist imperial ambitions.

Palen's foremost and most original claim stresses that the idea of an 'empire of free trade' neglects the prominence of protectionism in the United States government during the nineteenth century. He proposes instead that US economic policy in that period is better described as the 'imperialism of economic nationalism', forcing access to foreign markets while staying protective at home.

Palen supports his argument by tracing the debate surrounding free trade and protectionism to an ideological battle between 'Cobdenites' and 'Listians'. 'Cobdenites' subscribed to the economic thinking of British reformer Richard Cobden, leading thinker of the Manchester school of economic liberalism. 'Listians' on the other hand drew inspiration from the German economist Friedrich List, main proponent of the German *Zollverein* and one of the first economists to argue for an *Entwicklungsökonomie* – proposing that economically underdeveloped nations like France, Germany, and the US would be able to catch up with developed nations like the British empire inside a system of protective tariffs only. Palen illustrates how both Cobdenites and Listians saw free trade as a sort of economic goal, but Cobdenites wanted to establish a free trade economy modeled after the British system right away, while Listians stressed the importance of only establishing free trade policies between equally developed countries.

Palen successfully links Cobdenite ideology to intellectuals like William Cullen Bryant, Edward Atkinson, and Henry Ward Beecher, all of whom were in the latter half of the nineteenth century organized into the so-called 'Cobden Clubs' that were founded in England and the US. He furthermore argues that these intellectuals were invested in abolitionism and then traces the rise of free trade sentiment in the Republican Party before and during the Civil War in connection to the party's abolitionist stance. He finally identifies an estrangement of free traders from the Republican Party following the end of the Civil War resulting in a party realignment that became widely visible in the 1884 elections when many former Cobdenite Republicans voted for the Democrat Grover Cleveland.

Palen's book is structured chronologically and greatly illustrates the ideological battle between Cobdenites and Listians in the American party system, the press, and even popular culture. Palen's narrative draws upon a wide variety of sources ranging from personal communication between intellectuals involved in the ideological battle, various press articles from newspapers engaging in the debate, to the writings of authors such as Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Edward Bellamy. *The "Conspiracy" of Free Trade* contributes widely to the history of the American party system by connecting the realignment of the Republican Party to its prevalent protectionist members, with the Cobdenites as "mugwumps" moving to the Democratic Party as a result.

As a second big claim, Palen links the ideology of Listian protectionism to a sentiment of Anglophobia, which served as the basis of various ‘conspiracies’ surrounding free traders in the US during the 19th Century. While Palen’s use of archival sources illustrates greatly how Listians linked Cobdenites to British money and accused them of promoting free trade as agents of the British empire, he falls short of defining the very term ‘conspiracy theory’ and connecting it to the wide array of scholarly research in that respective realm. In the end, Palen’s allusion to conspiracy, already present in the title, fails to be properly addressed in his monograph.

Another shortcoming of his book is its failure to provide a truly global narrative of the intellectual networks he proposes. While Palen connects the story of the battle between Cobdenites and Listians to the globalization of ideas and elaborates widely on the influence of American tariff policies on a global scale, he fails to address perspectives from countries outside the Anglo-American realm. He discusses Canadian and Australian Cobdenites and Listians in detail in the sixth chapter of his book, but neglects to look into more detail as to how reformers in Latin America reacted to the US imperialist policy of forcing access to markets. He acknowledges the influence of Listian economics on the Meiji period in Japan but then does not provide any further information about how the Japanese reformers interacted with the network of globally connected Listian thinkers he proposes. However, it has to be said that Palen does state from the beginning that his focus will center on the influence of Cobdenism and Listian economics on the Anglo-American relationship. Ultimately, the globally-connected network approach he chose deserves further academic attention and the integration of intellectuals from a wider array of national backgrounds.

Despite these shortcomings, Palen very originally ties the debate within the US to the history of American imperialism, keeping in mind its global implications. He succeeds in showing how Cobdenites, despite their adherence to worldwide free trade, were very much invested in cosmopolitan anti-imperialist movements. His evaluation therefore does not only serve as a great contribution to the history of domestic economic policy in the United States but also challenges the way American empire building is perceived in a global history of modern imperialism. Scholars of global history should especially embrace Palen’s eighth chapter *Free Trade in Retreat* in which he traces the global implications of the protectionist McKinley Tariff of 1890 and furthermore links the policy to rising demands for a ‘Greater Britain’ pursuing protectionist policies all over the British empire.

The *Conspiracy of Free Trade* serves as a fresh take on the history of the American party system and the economic relationship with Great Britain. Its compelling narrative illustrates greatly the struggle around trade liberalization and empire that was prevalent in the nineteenth century United States. The book challenges the traditional notion of an ‘open door empire’ and instead proposes a new take on US imperialism by emphasizing protection at home and the forced access to

markets abroad. Global historians and practitioners working on the history of the American party system alike should consider this publication when researching historical economic dynamics in the United States and positioning these in the context of a globalizing Anglo-American realm.