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State, individual and political culture

Raffaella Baritono

«Government Is No Holiday Affair» U.S. Public Opinion and the Rethinking of the American State (1870-1900)

Abstract

The article analyses the political and cultural debate emerging through academic reviews and cultural and literary magazines from the 1870s to the 1890s, where the focus was on the transformation of the state in light of the rise of the United States as an economic power. While both academic and cultural publications tended to emphasise the exceptional nature of the U.S. republican experiment, they also raised critical questions regarding the desirability – and indeed necessity – of adapting to new and often unprecedented challenges impacting the economic and political future of American society. The debate consistently addressed not only domestic issues but also international dynamics, particularly in the 1890s when social scientists and public intellectuals increasingly directed their attention to the evolving role of the United States within the changing international system.

Keywords: The United States, American State, Gilded Age, Political Culture, Empire.

«Government is no holiday affair», proclaimed Henry Wilson in «The Atlantic Monthly» in 1871, addressing the challenges confronting the Republican Party in the wake of the Civil War and its aftermath. The Union's response to the Southern states' rebellion had been decisive, slavery was abolished, and, for the first time since the establishment of the Constitution, he argued, «the government of the United States [is] consistent with its creed»¹. Yet, it was crucial to consider «the leading facts and features» of the significant changes looming on the horizon – from the expansion of suffrage through the 15th Amendment, which granted voting rights to formerly enslaved individuals, to the rising influence of «money-aggregated capital», and the territorial expansion driven by increased immigration, which presented new challenges to the «“composite nationality” of the great Republic»².

Wilson, who would later serve as the 18th Vice-President under Ulysses S. Grant during his second term until his death in 1875, was addressing several significant issues that marked the crucial transition from the 1870s to the dawn of a new century. However, the initially optimistic and celebratory tone of a nation emerging from the trauma of the Civil War gradually began to shift.

¹ H. Wilson, *New Departure of the Republican Party*, in «The Atlantic Monthly», January 1871, p. 106.

² *Ibidem*, pp. 107-110.

This transformation is clearly evident in the articles featuring in prominent public and scholarly discourse journals and discussed in this essay. Notably, the debate was stimulated not only by key academic reviews but also by influential publications such as «The Atlantic Monthly», established in Boston in 1857, and the «North American Review», the first literary magazine founded in 1815 by Bostonian journalist Nathan Hale. Alongside emerging academic journals within American social sciences, such as «The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science» and the «American Political Science Review», these publications targeted an educated audience and are crucial for understanding the shaping of U.S. élite political culture. Thus, analysing articles from these journals and magazines sheds light on the shifts in the circulation of ideas and demonstrates how new perspectives became integral to the cultural and political dialogue. From this perspective, both academic and cultural magazines reinforced the exceptional nature of the U.S. republican experiment while simultaneously raising critical questions about the desirability – and indeed, the necessity – of adapting to new and often unprecedented challenges concerning the economic and political future of American society. The debate maintained a consistent focus not only on domestic issues but also on international dynamics. Beginning in the 1890s, social scientists and public intellectuals increasingly turned their attention to the leadership role the United States was expected to assume, as well as the notion that the experience of U.S. federalism could serve as a model for the global community.

In the context of this debate, key issues such as the role of the state, the interplay between individualism and collectivism, and the dynamics of society and political community, as well as the relationship between legislative and executive powers, became foundational axes through which the transition from the nineteenth-century model of the American state to that of the twentieth century was accomplished. This transition marked a shift from a polycentric and diffuse model within a horizontal political landscape to one characterized by political centralization, reinforced decision-making structures, and a continuous emphasis on society's goals as a complex and artificial organism that could no longer be understood solely through presumed natural laws. While the individual remained central to intellectual discourse, there was a departure from the tenets of classical liberal thought, evolving into a perspective that situated the individual within a dense web of relationships, fostering increasingly intense forms of interdependence at national and international levels.

Henry Wilson's article, as referenced earlier, highlighted the significant impact the Franco-Prussian War had on American public opinion and identified two «great necessities of the country at the present time»: «UNIFICATION and EDUCATION» (emphasis in the original text)³. While the Civil War had definitively resolved the debate over the interpretation of federalism and silenced advocates of the «states' rights» theory upheld by the secessionist South, it also set the stage for a transformative change that profoundly affected the U.S. political and constitutional landscape. This shift demanded that the nation look towards a future capable of healing the wounds inflicted by the war. Furthermore, in the June 1871 issue of «The Atlantic Monthly», an unsigned editorial noted that «without any change in the written form of our institutions, the

³ H. Wilson, *New Departure of the Republican Party*, cit., p. 109.

spirit and practice of them have undergone a veritable revolution in the last nine years, or may be only in the midst of a revolution not yet accomplished». The Civil War and the Reconstruction era thus redefined the relationship between the federal government and individual states. Moreover, they had severely strained that principle of checks and balances on which the constitutional arrangement had been built. The war and postwar emergency had produced «an enormous and an almost unendurable increase of Executive power» but also a conflict between the Senate and the Presidency and, to a lesser extent, between the House and the Senate⁴. The reference was to the clash that also led to the initiation of impeachment proceedings against President Andrew Johnson, who had opposed policies enacted by the Republican-dominated Congress to secure civil rights and the integration of formerly enslaved people. Johnson, a Unionist Democrat from Tennessee who had opposed secession, was, however, also in favour of restoring control of the old Southern ruling class, convinced of the racial inferiority of African Americans. However, while the fiery postwar political climate influenced the analysis proposed by the magazine, it also hinted at longer-term developments. Above all, it questioned the fact that the arrangement which had enabled the growth and development of the American state was no longer adequate: «We are in advance of all the world in the absolute equality of civil rights,» it read – with an excess of optimism given the real climate of terror that was leading to the reinstatement of white supremacy in the South –, though continuing «but we are behind every free parliamentary government in the world with our constitutional machinery and practice for bringing the executive and the administrative will of the government into harmony with the popular and legislative will»⁵.

By the end of the 1870s, it was apparent that «the character of our nation is highly complex.»⁶ Moreover, the compromise of 1877 that allowed the Republican Party to retain control of the presidency in exchange for a decision to give the Democratic Party in the South a free hand to restore white supremacy at the expense of the rights of African Americans – what David Blight has described as a racial pact⁷ – sanctioned the overcoming of the travails that followed the Civil War, and the nation now seemed to be moving towards an economic growth that would transform it towards the end of the century into a world-class economic power.

The economic, political, and social changes that observers had pointed out during the 1870s could not be seen merely as the product of the war, the result of the war emergency, but as harbingers of a new political and social order that had to deal with another emergency, the socio-economic one. Above all, it was no longer possible to assert, as Andrew Jackson had done in 1829, that «The duties of all public officers are, or at least admit of being done, so plain and simple that men of intelligence may readily qualify themselves for their performance»⁸. It had to

⁴ H. Wilson, *The Shifting of Power. Balances and Checks in Government*, in «The Atlantic Monthly», June 1871, p. 665.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 670.

⁶ H. Wilson, *Certain Dangerous Tendencies in American Life*, in «The Atlantic Monthly», October 1878, p. 385.

⁷ D. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2002.

⁸ A. Jackson, *First Annual Message*, ed. by G. Peters and J.T. Woolley, in *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/200828>.

be admitted, it was written, that «We had not, before the war, prepared in any way for the tasks or difficulties which we have since encountered. We had little practical knowledge of pauperism or the labor question. Our politicians had but slight knowledge of political economy and generally thought the study of such subjects unnecessary in our country». In particular, there was no longer any illusion that the United States did not need history lessons or the study of other countries' experiences⁹. Instead, «history», with its conflicts, primarily class conflicts (in 1877, there was the great strike affecting the railroad industry, ushering in a season of class conflicts and struggles), was beginning powerfully to shake from the foundations the idea of the exceptionalism of the American experiment. The Second Industrial Revolution radically transformed the nation's economic, political, and social structures. Cyclical economic crises, such as the one that began with the crisis of 1873¹⁰, as well as the emergence of new financial and organizational structures, were challenging the principles on which the relationship between economics and politics was thought to be based: «Much of our wealth consists of houses, furniture, mills, machinery, and railroads which produce nothing, and which cannot be sold. This is not real wealth», as stated in the above article¹¹. Manual labour was considered unnecessary and, above all, «to be despised as a badge of inferiority by many who had always been engaged in it. Multitudes of men who had until then honestly earned or produced their living by the work of their hands now began to live by their wits, by starting and controlling business enterprises for the investment of other people's money, and by taking government contracts and corporation jobs». In this way, «men had no longer any vision for realities, but built upon illusions and impossibilities as if they were the solid facts and laws of nature»¹². In short, the contrast between the «real» economy, the moral economy, and the economy devoted to speculation that did not produce real wealth, as denounced by Henry George in his famous *Progress and Poverty* – likewise published in 1878 –, was emerging.

As awareness grew regarding the complexity of an increasingly multifaceted and conflicting reality, concerns about political parties began to emerge. These parties were evolving into entities dominated by unscrupulous leaders, which led to doubts about the founding principles of the U.S. democratic system, particularly concerning universal male suffrage. This initiated discussions between the 1800s and 1900s that resulted in a revision of electoral laws and the introduction of measures to ensure the «transparency» of voting. However, these changes excluded large segments of the electorate, particularly immigrants and those from poor backgrounds¹³. In an article titled *The Failure of Universal Suffrage*, historian Francis Parkman articulated his concerns about this transition, which he believed was turning the expression of the people's will into a challenge for the «Demos». He stated, «A vast industrial development, an immense prosperity, rested safely for a while on the old national traditions, love of country,

⁹ H. Wilson, *Certain Dangerous Tendencies in American Life*, cit., p. 385-386.

¹⁰ G. Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of Our Times*, New York, Verso, 2000.

¹¹ H. Wilson, *Certain Dangerous Tendencies in American Life*, cit., p. 386.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 387.

¹³ On this see A. Testi, *La politica dell'esclusione. Riforma municipale e declino della partecipazione elettorale negli Stati Uniti del primo Novecento*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1994; A. Keyssar, *The Right to Vote. The Contested History of Democracy in the United States*, New York, Basic Books, 2000.

respect for law, and the habit of self-government. Then began the inevitable strain. Crowded cities, where the irresponsible and ignorant were numerically equal, or more than equal, to the rest, and where the weakest and most worthless was a match, by his vote, for the wisest and best». Parkman continued, noting «two enemies, unknown before, have risen like spirits of darkness on our social and political horizon – an ignorant proletariat and a half-taught plutocracy. Between lie the classes, happily still numerous and strong, in whom rests our salvation»¹⁴. The widening of social inequalities and the development of these two opposing factions – «an ignorant proletariat» and the «half-taught plutocracy» – threatened to create disorder and introduce class conflict, something previously seen as alien to the U.S. experience. This starkly contrasted with the situation in unequal and oppressed European societies, a perspective that often-dominated American public opinion. In this transformative process, universal (white male) suffrage had led to good governance, exemplified by the «New England village of olden times [...] well governed by the votes of every man in it». However, as these villages transformed into a system of crowded towns, «with its factories and workshops, its acres of tenement-houses, and thousands and ten thousands of restless workmen, foreigners for the most part, to whom liberty means license and politics means plunder [...] the case is completely changed, and universal suffrage becomes a questionable blessing». Parkman claimed that not only individuals possessed rights, but a community also had rights and responsibilities. Among these responsibilities was the obligation «to provide good governance for itself». If voting became ineffective due to improper exercise, then its misuse must be curtailed. Universal suffrage should only be exercised by those who «by character and training are prepared for it»¹⁵.

It is no coincidence that the 1880s marked a significant period of reflection and policy proposals within the U.S. discourse, focusing on the need to rethink the American state as the primary instrument for managing and directing economic, political, and social modernization. Central figures in this debate included pioneers in political and social sciences in the United States – such as William Graham Sumner, John Burgess, Richard Ely, William Willoughby, and Woodrow Wilson – who recognized that the discussions surrounding the theoretical and methodological foundations of emerging political and social disciplines were inseparable from the imperative to translate these ideas into workable policies and reforms. These efforts aimed to establish a political, economic and social order undermined by workers' conflicts and the harmful competition of trusts and corporations.

At the heart of this debate lies the concept of «sovereignty» and the necessity to reevaluate the boundaries and powers of a state that can no longer be viewed as «out of sight» or merely a «state of courts and parties», to take up some of the definitions that have been introduced by the historiographical debate that has been questioning these issues¹⁶. Competing and contrasting perspectives encountered one another. On one side, John Burgess, influenced

¹⁴ F. Parkman, *The Failure of Universal Suffrage*, in «The North American Review», 127, 263, 1878, p. 4.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 7-8.

¹⁶ B. Balogh, *A Government Out of Sight. The Mystery of National Authority in Nineteenth-Century America*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012; S. Skowronek, *Building a New American State*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982.

by Hegelian thought, argued that sovereignty could only be comprehended as «original, absolute, unlimited power over the individual subjects and all associations of subjects»¹⁷. Conversely, political scientist Westel Woodbury Willoughby maintained that the state, viewed «as simply an institution», was not endowed with moral responsibility; instead, that responsibility resided entirely with individuals, whether public officials or private citizens¹⁸.

In the late 1890s L.S. Rowe, professor at the University of Pennsylvania, argued while reviewing (and criticising) Willoughby's book, that «the clear recognition of the facts of modern industrial life bids fair to give us a new theory of economic progress. A like situation confronts political science»¹⁹.

One could not simply remain stagnant with the philosophical assumptions of the eighteenth century; it was essential to adapt analytical tools and methodologies to suit the realities of transformative processes. This approach emphasised the importance of contextual understanding, as Rowe cautioned, «it is impossible to formulate a terminology applicable at all times and to all countries»²⁰.

A transformation was necessary to conceptualize a «dynamic politics» aiming «to seek their basis and the laws of their development in the subjective and objective forces influencing national ideas and standards.»²¹ While American institutions «have inherited a system of political thought which grew out of the English conflicts of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries», it is also evident that the local framework rooted in «town government» has become ineffective. According to Rowe, «municipal questions require positive action. The system of «checks and balances» which we have consistently applied, diminishes public interest in city affairs, wastes energy, prevents the consideration of questions on their merits and weakens civic ties. Political responsibility is not individual but social in character»²².

In summary, it became imperative to address the challenges of administration and the capacity of institutions to deliver a management response to the complex issues arising from the processes of modernization at political, economic and social levels. Solutions could no longer rely solely on legislative bodies providing tools to manage the myriad technical details that demanded professionalism and expertise commensurate with the problems at hand.

Rowe was writing during a decade when reflections and proposals for policy solutions were evolving, having begun to take shape in the 1880s, amidst the height of the Gilded Age. This period was marked by huge concentrations of wealth and increasing inequality, characterized by the dramatic social ascent of what were known as «robber barons». Consequently, many individuals faced «proletarianization», losing the chance to become self-governing and

¹⁷ Quoted in S.A. Korff, *The Problem of Sovereignty*, in «The American Political Science Review», 17, 3, 1923, p. 405.

¹⁸ W.W. Willoughby *The Right of the State to Be*, in «International Journal of Ethics», 9, 4, 1899, p. 481.

¹⁹ L.S. Rowe, *The Problem of Political Science*, in «The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science», 10, 1897, p. 17.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 23-24.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 28.

²² *Ibidem*, pp. 30-31.

self-improving, which had been an essential vision of nineteenth-century American democracy²³. Additionally, there was a stark contrast between large enterprises' organizational and managerial practices, particularly the railway companies, and the incompetent and corrupt political management perpetuated by machines controlled by party bosses²⁴.

In the «Contemporary Review», British journalist Robert Donald elucidated the distinctive nature of emerging economic entities such as trusts for English and European audiences. He noted that these entities are «not a corporation made up of individuals, but a combination of corporations governed by a directorate of trustees». Furthermore, he highlighted that «the Federal system of the United States is particularly favourable to the creation of Trusts»²⁵, attributing this to both the intense level of competition and the decentralized nature of the political and institutional framework.

The reference pertains to the Standard Oil Trust, established in 1882 as a response by American capitalism to both economic crises and competitive challenges, serving as a model for similar economic consolidations. The article emphasized that efforts by various states to combat combinations and monopolies had been largely ineffective, noting that «trusts were too subtle and too far-reaching in their organisation to be dealt with effectively by the law as it stood». The article concluded that the only viable solution was not to seek their abolition – an impossible and unattainable goal: «The real remedy is not abolition, but Government control»²⁶.

In 1890 Donald reported on a discussion that had dominated the preceding decade. A pivotal development during this time was the establishment of the American Economic Association in 1885, initiated by figures such as Richard T. Ely, Henry Carter Adams, and John Bates Clark, among others. Many of these individuals were social scientists who had either studied in Germany or been influenced by the Historical School, particularly its prominent representative, Gustav Schmoller. In recounting the discussions within the association, Richard T. Ely emphasised the strong connection between theory and practice, underscoring the importance of fostering «independent economic inquiry» while simultaneously striving to «disseminate knowledge».

In an article that would later feature in the «American Economic Review», the first point of the association's manifesto articulated a definitive policy proposal: «We regard the state as an educational and ethical agency whose positive aid is an indispensable condition of human progress». This assertion positioned the state as a crucial actor in facilitating progress, simultaneously expressing a clear repudiation of the laissez-faire doctrine, which was deemed «unsafe in politics and unsound in morals». This doctrine had proved inadequate for addressing

²³ R. Wiebe, *Self-Rule. A Cultural History of American Democracy*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1996.

²⁴ A. Chandler, *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business*, Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press, 1993; W. Novak, *The Myth of the «Weak» American State*, «American Historical Review», v. 113, n. 3, 2008, pp. 752-72; D.T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Era*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1998.

²⁵ R. Donald, *Trusts in the United States*, in «The Contemporary Review», 57, 1890, p. 830.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 842 and 844.

the fundamental conflict highlighted in 1886, a year that was significantly marked by the Haymarket Square massacre in Chicago – namely, the struggle between capital and labour²⁷.

The text summarized the discussions that characterized the first meeting. A key point of contention was the positive role of the state, which led to a rejection of laissez-faire economic principles. Notably, the position of Boston intellectual and historian Henry Adams was of particular interest. He did not contest the dismissal of laissez-faire or the notion that the state should play a more active role in social matters; rather, he challenged «the German view of social relations». If the «English political philosophy (or what goes by that name), which regards the state as a necessary evil» was to be rejected, «German political philosophy which presents the state as the final analysis of human relations»²⁸, should likewise be dismissed.

The question of how to theoretically and politically establish an idea of the state that serves as an instrument of positive action, in alignment with the founding principles and the U.S. constitutional framework, has been a significant concern for intellectuals, political and social scientists, historians, and economists since the 1880s. Pastor Washington Gladden, a proponent of the Social Gospel, acknowledged the complexity of addressing this issue, because as he argued, «It might as truly be said that we have no «State» in this country because there are so many states». He further emphasised the need to understand the term «state» in a broad sense, describing it as a «political society»²⁹.

In his work *The Study of Administration*, future U.S. President Woodrow Wilson proposed a potential solution that addressed the need to consider both the state and its administration while also respecting the constitutional principles inherent in the U.S. system. Wilson wrote: «There is scarcely a single duty of government which was once simple which is not now complex; government once had but a few masters; it now has scores of masters [...] Where government once might follow the whims of a court, it must now follow the views of a nation. And those views are steadily widening to new conceptions of state duty». In Europe, in response to technological innovations in communication and transportation, the railways and the telegraph pursued a path of nationalization or public ownership. This approach was not viable in the United States; however, it is clear that «no one can doubt that in some way it [the state] must make itself master of masterful corporations».

A significant step was taken in 1887, when the article was published, through the establishment of the first federal commission, the Interstate Commerce Commission. Although initially ineffective, this commission addressed issues related to monopoly and the lack of competition in the railroad industry. For Wilson, the term «state» primarily referred to the «conscience of administration»; thus, there was a pressing need for a «science of administration» able to «to strengthen and purify its organization, and to crown its duties with dutifulness»³⁰. It is important

²⁷ R.T. Ely, *Report of the Organization of the American Economic Association*, in «Publications of the American Economic Association», 1, 1, 1886, pp. 5-7.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 21.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 24.

³⁰ W. Wilson, *The Study of Administration*, in «Political Science Quarterly», 2, 2, 1887, pp. 200-201.

to remember how that discipline had «its origins in Europe. It is not of our making; it is a foreign science, speaking very little of the language of English or American principles»³¹.

The foundations and principles were crafted to focus on a «compact state» model, which was highly centralized and characteristic of nations like France and Germany. Clearly, the concept of administration needed to be adapted to suit a context as complex, multifaceted, and decentralized as the U.S. system. To use a fitting description, the traditional state «of courts and parties»³² had to evolve into a different arrangement or assemblage³³.

While highlighting the diverse experiences of statehood on both sides of the Atlantic, Wilson nevertheless left an opportunity open: «If we would employ it, we must Americanize it, and that not formally, in language merely, but radically, in thought, principle, and aim as well. It must learn our constitution by heart; must get the bureaucratic fever out of its veins; must inhale much free American air»³⁴.

Furthermore, he asserted, «English and American political history has been a history, not of administrative development, but of legislative oversight, – not progress in governmental organization, but of advance in law-making and political criticism»³⁵. Nevertheless, it was now essential to acknowledge that establishing an effective administrative apparatus had become crucial for those who cared about the welfare of both government and state. Above all, it needed to be emphasised that «the field of administration is a field of business»³⁶.

As a result, it was deemed necessary to position it apart from the «hurry and strife of politics» and, in some respects, beyond the «debatable ground of constitutional study»³⁷. Wilson, echoing Bluntschli, stressed that «administration lies outside the proper sphere of *politics*. Administrative questions are not political questions»³⁸. This assertion stemmed from reappraising the executive's role and the tools it could employ to navigate situations of chaos and inefficiency. The spoils system could not serve as an effective mechanism for governing the state.

To establish an administrative framework capable of addressing the challenges, it was necessary to implement «civil-service reform». Such reform introduced recruitment criteria founded on merit and professional expertise: «We must go on to adjust executive functions more fitly and to prescribe better methods of executive organization and action. Civil-service reform is thus but a moral preparation for what is to follow»³⁹.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 202.

³² S. Skowronek, *Building a National American State*, cit. The definition, fortunate as it was, has since been challenged by historians who, since that pioneering work, have tended to a more nuanced and dense view of further developments in the nineteenth-century American state. See, just to name a few, B. Balogh, *A Government Out of Sight*, cit.; N. Barreyre, *Gold and Freedom: The Political Economy of Reconstruction*, Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2015; N. Maggor, *Brahmin Capitalism. Frontiers of Wealth and Populism in America's First Gilded Age*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2017.

³³ S. Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblage*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006.

³⁴ W. Wilson, *The Study of Administration*, cit., p. 202.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 206.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 209.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 209-210.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 210.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

Not everyone was inclined to reconsider long-standing and established principles. In the «North American Review», David Dudley Field reaffirmed the foundations of the «American Creed», underscoring the communitarian values that had taken root and reached their zenith in New England towns. In response to the claims made by social scientists who founded the American Economic Association, Field reiterated his perspective on the rightful purposes of government: «The end of government is not the development of man’s social nature, but the maintenance of his rights; the rights which God and nature gave him. [...] Government is a political machine, not a charitable institution»⁴⁰.

To betray these principles was place oneself outside the community, an almost sacrilegious affront to American ideals. It undermined belief in the unique nature of the American experience: «There are some Americans, I am sorry to say, not very many I hope, but ignorant and noisy, who repudiate the principle on which the government of their country is founded, scoff at the inalienable rights of man, mistake the abuses for the uses of our institutions, and think and speak of Europe as a fairer land with more benign institutions... These are illegitimate children of the Republic»⁴¹.

Field reflected on a statement made by one of the founders of American political science and a proponent of social Darwinism, William Graham Sumner, in 1883: «It is not at all the function of the State to make men happy. They must make themselves happy in their own way and at their own risk»⁴².

However significant these positions were, they eventually had to bow to different principles, largely due to the reality of expanding exchanges of ideas, models, and political practices within the Atlantic region⁴³. Field felt nostalgic for a nineteenth-century vision of local democracy that was giving way to a more national and centralized model. In contrast, Albert Shaw pointed out how, at the state level, we were witnessing the emergence of new practices and procedures: not only have they «taken the social rather than the individual view,» but he continued: «The Western States took the lead in asserting the principle of public regulation and control over corporations, especially of those performing the functions of common carriers; and the Western Constitutions are becoming more and more full of provisions declaring that railroads are public highways and the companies common carriers [...] This feature of Constitution-making is still in the experimental stage, but unquestionably it has an important future before it»⁴⁴. Board commissions that regulated railroads, managed working conditions in industries, or oversaw charitable institutions run by «executive officers» and experts, were early experiments in what would later be implemented on a national scale. Shaw’s deliberate emphasis on the «western» states – often agrarian and focused on farming, yet becoming more integrated into the national and international marketplaces – was deliberate. These

⁴⁰ D. Dudley Field, *Theory of American Government*, in «The North American Review», 146, 378, 1888, pp. 548-549.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 556-557.

⁴² W.G. Sumner, *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other*, New York, 1883, <http://archive.org/details/whatsocialclasse18603gut>.

⁴³ D.T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*, cit.; J.T. Kloppenberg, *Toward Democracy: The Struggle for Self-Rule in European and American Thought*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2016.

⁴⁴ A. Shaw, *The American State Legislatures*, in «The Contemporary Review», 56, 1889, p. 564.

were the states where opposition to the monopoly power of railroad companies and banks was most pronounced. In the 1890s, social and economic discontent forces would later coalesce, giving rise to the populist movement and the People's Party⁴⁵.

In summary, during the 1880s, discussions and proposals began to emerge, focusing on the issues of the state and sovereignty. Such dialogue drew its inspiration from the European debate, particularly the theories articulated by the philosophers of the English Historical School, partly influenced by idealism. The critique examined the positive role of the state, the necessity for a more proactive executive, and the urgent need to develop an administrative apparatus capable of handling the responsibilities of a nation poised to become a significant economic and industrial power.

In the 1890s, the discussion turned to emphasizing the importance of looking beyond national borders. This shift in perspective coincided with the Census Bureau's declaration in 1890 marking the closing of the western frontier line – a defining element of nineteenth-century American history which differentiated «civilized» regions from those still «empty» and yet to be explored. By this time, the frontier had extended to the Pacific Ocean, leading to a notable absence of affordable land available for pioneers and economic ventures on the North American continent. Consequently, it was no longer the safety valve for social tensions that had once been encapsulated in the phrase «Go west».

For a scientist like Woodrow Wilson, the closing of the frontier, the healing of the Civil War's wounds and the gradual reintegration of the South into the nation's fabric, indicated a trend towards an increasing homogeneity characteristic of a rising nation. This called for identification of a strong leadership, which could only be embodied in the figure of the president. Once again, Wilson addressed the issue of governmental structure. The administration required experienced and stable leadership. For Wilson, «The President can lead only as he can command the ear of both Congress and the country [...] Only under a national leadership, by a national selection of leaders, and by a method of constructive choice rather than of compromise and barter, can a various nation be peacefully led»⁴⁶.

Wilson was writing on the eve of the 1898 war with Spain. The theme of leadership was imbued with nuances reflecting not only the national context but also its implications on the international stage. Earlier in the decade, Alfred T. Mahan, one of the theorists advocating a new role for the United States as it approached the turn of the century, had published an article in «The Atlantic Monthly»⁴⁷. He urged the United States to adopt an «outward» perspective, noting that «For the past quarter of a century, the predominant idea, which has successfully asserted itself at the polls and shaped the course of government, has been to preserve the home market for the home industries»⁴⁸.

⁴⁵ E. Sanders, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State, 1877-1917*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999; M. Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: an American History*, New York, Basic Books, 1995.

⁴⁶ W. Wilson, *The Making of the Nation*, in «The Atlantic Monthly», July 1897, p. 14.

⁴⁷ (Alfred) A.T. Mahan, *The United States Looking Outward*, in «The Atlantic Monthly», December 1890, pp. 816-823.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 816.

It was becoming increasingly clear that a segment of the American ruling class could not settle for an industry that served solely domestic needs. Faced with rising competition and European powers actively seeking new markets – such as Great Britain, France, and Spain – as well as Germany’s ambitions in Samoa, the Pacific Islands, and even Central and South America, it was evident that the Monroe Doctrine, a foundational element of U.S. foreign policy since 1823, was being called into question. The ocean was no longer sufficient to ensure American dominance. Mahan warned: «Whether they will or not, Americans must now begin to look outward. The growing production of the country demands it. An increasing volume of public sentiment demands it. The position of the United States, between the two Old Worlds and the two great oceans, makes the same claim, which will soon be strengthened by the creation of the new link joining the Atlantic and Pacific»⁴⁹.

Mahan’s analysis, which sparked a robust debate beginning in 1898 during the war against Spain, addressed the challenges of empire and the role of American power⁵⁰. His emphasis on the need to face up to new economic and geopolitical challenges inevitably contributed to the ongoing debate as to the role of the American state and the appropriate instruments and structures required to navigate those emerging international challenges.

Just as we have observed in domestic politics, ethnic and racial issues prompted a reassessment of the principle of universal suffrage. Similarly, in the international arena, the matter of the American state and the example it could set for the world reflected a vision rooted in distinct racial hierarchies. For instance, John Burgess regarded the structure of the United States as a «commonwealth», which he described as being «national in its origin, and cosmopolitan in its example». His intent was to illustrate «the ideal of the American commonwealth», asserting that in doing so, «I shall have presented the ideal commonwealth *for* the world»⁵¹. On one hand, he viewed the United States as the pinnacle of a progression wherein «the Aryan race – the Greeks, the Romans, and the Teutons» established «distinct nations». In contrast, he argued that «American Indians, Asiatics, and Africans cannot properly form any active, directive part of the political population [...] They have no element of political civilization to contribute [...] Aryan nationalities alone have created democratic states».

Burgess considered «the prime mission of the ideal American commonwealth to be the perfection of the Aryan genius for political civilization, upon the basis of a predominantly Teutonic nationality»⁵². He criticized those «young professors, filled with European culture»⁵³ – a nod to the influences of German socialism – for neglecting their national heritage. They over-

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 822.

⁵⁰ D. Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States*, New York, Picador, 2020; C. Kupchan, *Isolationism: A History of America’s Efforts to Shield Itself from the World*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2020.

⁵¹ J. Burgess, *The Ideal of the American Commonwealth*, in «Political Science Quarterly», 10, 3, 1895, p. 405. See also A.G. Hopkins, *American Empire: A Global History*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2018.

⁵² *Ibidem*, pp. 406-407.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 411.

looked the fact that the success of the United States stems from a combination of national sovereignty and freedom, expressed through a federalism that served as a global model.

I cannot elaborate on this issue here, but the theme of federalism, world federation, or a world-state model resonated in the last decade of the 19th century, alongside the topic of empire⁵⁴.

In conclusion, historiography has predominantly centred on the progressive movement since the early 1900s in recent years. This focus has emphasised the contributions of social and political scientists, both from theoretical perspectives and through their active involvement in public policies at state and federal levels. Notably, attention has been directed towards how the social sciences examined the mechanisms of operation, administration, and governance challenges, thereby laying the groundwork for the modernization of administrative and institutional frameworks that characterized the transformations of the twentieth century.

The analysis of the debate as presented in the intellectual and academic journals illustrates how the conclusion of the Civil War, along with the subsequent political, economic, and social challenges, already called for critical reflection and revision of the foundational elements of nineteenth-century state-building. This process aimed to identify the transformative approaches which, drawing inspiration from or distancing themselves from European examples, would empower the United States to fulfill the role of economic and political leader that it was believed history, through the lens of exceptionalism, had destined it for.

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⁵⁴ G. Dana Boardman, *Nationalism and Internationalism or Mankind One Body*, in «The Advocate of Peace», 57, 7, 1895, pp. 149-152; G.B. Adams, *The United States and the Anglo-Saxon Future*, in «The Atlantic Monthly», July 1896, pp. 35-44; C.W. Eliot, *Five American Contributions to Civilization*, in «The Atlantic Monthly», October 1896, pp. 433-447. F.H. Giddings, *Imperialism?*, in «Political Science Quarterly», 13, 4, 1898, pp. 585-605; A. Carnegie, *Americanism versus Imperialism*, in «The North American Review», 168, 506, 1899, pp. 1-13; J.W. Burgess, *How May the United States Govern its Extra-Continental Territory?*, in «Political Science Quarterly», 14, 1, 1899, pp. 1-18; R. Olney, *Growth of Our Foreign Policy*, in «The Atlantic Monthly», March 1900, pp. 289-301.

