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The Anglo-Saxons and the French: The Build-up to the First World War

Introduction: France, Britain and the United States before 1914

The great American liberal President Seth Low of Columbia University wrote to his old friend the British liberal James Bryce in July 1900 that: ‘[t]he century is coming to its end here among many dark clouds, bloodshed, hatred of nations, a general lowering of the ideas which you and I were bought up forty years ago to cherish’.1 They both understood that the Western civilization they knew and loved was being severely challenged by modernity. The ‘Great War’ of 1914–1918 proved to be its nemesis, a conflict that it is widely accepted bought about a seminal shift in power and influence away from the ‘old’ world of Europe and towards the ‘new’ of the Americas, and especially towards the United States of America itself. This chapter will discuss how even in the supposedly golden period of European dominance that ended in 1914 the balance of power was already swinging from the European shore of the Atlantic towards the American.

Of course it has to be acknowledged that taking 1900 as an arbitrary starting point has its dangers. All of the major figures that we will examine in this chapter had their origins in a nineteenth-century experience. A more logical intellect might well have taken the birth of the ‘Third Republic’ in 1871 as a better starting point for France, given the importance of that upheaval and the associated immediate loss of innocence represented by the suppression of the Paris Commune and the loss of Alsace Lorraine. For the United States the end of the American Civil War in 1865 marked a significant turning point that led to a huge ‘imperial’ expansion within the continent of North America (‘Manifest Destiny’) and overseas, especially the Spanish-American war of 1898. But for Britain the Boer War (1899–1902) or the death of Queen Victoria (1901) makes the turn of the century a useful start date given the symbolic importance of the latter date and the internal ferment about the Empire caused by the former. For both Britain and America 1900 can be seen as marking the beginning of the slow handover of power from one Anglo-Saxon state wedded to the idea of a ‘Greater Britain’

A. J. Williams, *France, Britain and the United States in the Twentieth Century 1900–1940* © Andrew J. Williams 2014
to one increasingly devoted to an extension of the American Imperium.\(^2\) A cartoon of 1905 by ‘Hazelden’ in the *Daily Mirror* portrays a smug looking John Bull with Uncle Sam (‘Jonathan’) astride the globe with various small figures (other states) falling off and saying:

Well, Jonathan, there’s still room for you and me, eh?

To which, Jonathan replies:

That’s so. And not much for anyone else soon I’m thinking.\(^3\)

Jean Jaurès, the French Socialist leader who will be discussed below, also noticed the rise and rise of the United States and worried what it might portend. None of the three countries could have had much idea in 1900 or 1905 that it would have such huge implications.

There was more continuity in international relations than the watershed of 1914–1918 is usually seen as implying. Alexis de Tocqueville made a celebrated defence of the continuities of French politics before and after the French Revolution,\(^4\) and there is a similar case to be made in examining the politics of the countries we are considering for this period. The most striking continuities are cultural. Modernity, which Ernst Bloch defined in 1938 as having ‘chaos as … its intellectual cornerstone’ or Zygmunt Bauman as ‘the breakdown of the traditional order’,\(^5\) predates 1914, and much of what happened as a result of the war confirmed this. The study of modernity is a meditation on the violence done by industrial societies to their own populations and to other societies, and particularly in the colonies that all three countries possessed by 1900. Both conservative American historians and those critical of American actions are agreed that the United States was every bit as expansionist a Power as Britain and France well before its rise to global power in the twentieth century. Wherever the white man went he bought modernity and its handmaidens of cultural change and ‘progress’.\(^6\)

What the Great War in effect revealed were cracks in Western civilization that were evident to many before the conflict broke out. As Frank Field and other writers have pointed out, a revolt against the comfortable liberalism of the nineteenth-century European elites was under way well before 1914. It was not only led by French intellectuals who we will consider here like Henri Bergson, Maurice Barrès, Charles Maurras, Charles Péguy and Georges Sorel, but also strongly echoed by German thinkers like Friedrich Nietzsche and Oswald Spengler and Italians like Benedetto Croce and Gabriele d’Annunzio. In Britain left-leaning or liberal writers and activists like E.D. Morel were equally critical of what they saw as bourgeois hypocrisy about matters of war and peace. British socialist and liberal thinkers, like John A. Hobson and Henry Noel Brailsford, were developing theories of the links between Empire and capitalism that saw their apogee in the