

Carnegie's Model Republic



*Triumphant Democracy and
the British-American Relationship*

A. S. Eisenstadt

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and the British-American Relationship

A. S. Eisenstadt

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Dedicated
in loving memory to my beloved wife Paulette
and my son Jonathan
and with love to my daughters Laura and Elizabeth

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Introduction

ANDREW CARNEGIE, a world-famous industrialist and philanthropist, was also a highly renowned writer and political activist. Apart from two diaries of his travels that he published, he wrote many essays that arose out of his experience in becoming America's greatest steelmaker and amassing the prodigious wealth that making and selling steel produced. He is best known for his essay on wealth, in which he suggested how men of vast fortunes should disburse their money. While he was still in business, he himself followed several of the routes he suggested; when he left business, he called on the guidance of experts to help him make philanthropy his biggest industry. But in the central decades of his life, particularly in the 1880s, as he was making steel and money, he was also making politics. He did this without any notable prominence in the United States, where he achieved his goals through state agents and business associations, but far more overtly and actively in Britain, where politics was national and London-based and where he tried with greater involvement to shape the course of public affairs. An emigrant from Scotland, he retained his ties with his motherland throughout his life. About his politics he wrote many essays. Yet for all that (apart from a brief biography of James Watt) he wrote only one book, *Triumphant Democracy*, in which he posed the American republic as a model for remaking British political institutions. He considered the book his most important written work.

Triumphant Democracy was part of the larger current of British-American politics and of the dialogue between Britain and the United States about the virtues and deficiencies of their respective nations. The dialogue became intense in the 1760s, flared up in the American Revolution of the 1770s, and proceeded with varying degrees of vitality from the years the United States became independent. To put *Triumphant*

Democracy in its proper context, one has to explore the British-American antithesis out of which it arose and how that antithesis was changing during the years in which Carnegie was formulating his own approach to the two nations. Carnegie's ideas are best understood as part of the transforming politics of the kindred nations, which indeed shaped his particular contribution to the dialogue between them.

The book burst upon the transatlantic scene in mid-April 1886, a massive tome of over five hundred pages, bound in red buckram, its theme boldly announced on its cover. Stamped in gold were two triangles: one of an overturned monarchy, the second of a firmly standing republic. Printed in heavy black were two quotations from the respective leaders of the British Liberal and Conservative parties: William Gladstone's tribute to the American Constitution and the Marquess of Salisbury's tribute to the role of the American Senate. Never was it more clear that here was a book that could be judged by its cover.

Beneath that glittering surface ran the deeper currents of the British-American relationship. Ever since America had declared its independence, there had been an ongoing colloquy between the Americans and the British about the virtues of their respective polities. The colloquy was always intense because it was always self-justificatory, and for the Americans particularly so because it touched the very issue of their identity. The degree of intensity fluctuated from decade to decade, depending on at least two factors, external and domestic: the waters of diplomacy that each polity had to navigate to ensure its own best interest, and the class and ethnicity of groups in both Britain and America that defined their status in their respective societies. To Britain's aristocracy, democratic America represented a model to be questioned and guarded against. For the same reason, to those in Britain who stood outside the governing establishment, America was a model of desirable reform and a beacon of improvement. For Americans, the debate with Britain was less divisively conducted: with a continent to master, the energies of diplomacy and internationalism were largely internalized. The U.S. borders had to be secured. As to domestic pressures, however they expressed themselves, American identity was largely subsumed under a banner of national civism.¹ It hardly covered internal fissures, but it transmuted them into a sentiment of patriotism, the primal element of America's ongoing colloquy with Britain.

The American Civil War brought to a head the antithesis between the ideals of the kindred polities. In the United States, the war was a conflict

for the survival of the democratic ideal; for the governing authorities in Britain, it was a chance to challenge the Union's survival and thereby to validate Britain's aristocratic rule. The triumph of the Union ended the antithesis of ideals that had for a century run through the debates between the kindred nations. The new ideas of the postwar decades found many expressions. Most important was the emergence of a Pan-Anglian sodality, a transatlantic group of younger men in both societies who espoused a new policy for conducting British-American relations. This Pan-Anglian persuasion found voice in the newer seats of power and influence both in the United States and Britain.

It found its own unique voice in the writings of Andrew Carnegie. No one was better qualified to express the newer attitude than the Scottish-American who was literally a citizen of both countries. He had been raised in the radical doctrines of Scottish Chartism. His family had arrived and settled in the United States as the conflict of ideals—between the democratic North and the slaveholding South—erupted into war, in which he himself had served in the Union cause. Finding in the North a career open to ambition and talents, of which he had long heard about in Scotland, he soon rose to great enterprise and wealth. Always affiliated to the cause of radical Liberal reform in Britain, he made heavy contributions to the Liberal Party. These soon led him into the company of the party leaders and to a personal meeting with the party's chief, Gladstone. When Carnegie told him about the gigantic productivity of American industry, the Liberal leader's surprised response led Carnegie to spend his next four years writing his only major book, *Triumphant Democracy*. Its preachment to the British was simple: adopt the American model and you will achieve America's productivity. The book naturally evoked strong responses on both sides of the Atlantic, which can best be explored in the many reviews the book evoked. Very much part of the ever-vital British colloquy was the fact that Carnegie was a devout Pan-Anglian. He wished for nothing more than a renewed amity between both branches of the Anglo-American nations. Indeed, he inscribed his book to a revived connection of the United States and Great Britain.

Wishing to understand Carnegie's *Triumphant Democracy* in its multiple aspects—as his comparative assays of the different aspects of life in the kindred nations, as an evolving statement of his views of the disposal of wealth in the new industrial age, and as a product of the British-American relationship—I have accordingly sought to answer the following

questions. What was the focus of Andrew Carnegie, particularly in its American and British aspects, that led him to write *Triumphant Democracy*? What were the major themes of the book? Setting the book in its larger historical context, what were the elements of the debate over their respective ideals between the kindred polities up to the Civil War and in the transforming decades after the Civil War? The many book reviews of *Triumphant Democracy*, a fount of materials, offer a significant aspect of the intense colloquy between the intellectual classes of the two nations—and the diverse interests they represented: What did the British reviewers say, and what was the American response? Of supreme importance in the British-American relationship of the late nineteenth century was the Pan-Anglian persuasion: What were its constituent tenets? In what respects did it enter the closer diplomatic affinity of Britain and the United States? And in what ways was *Triumphant Democracy* a major document of the Pan-Anglian persuasion? The concluding chapter indicates how, after his book's publication, Carnegie often reiterated its arguments, and contemplates as well other aspects of Carnegie's life and intellect that further illuminate his very important publication.

From what I have said thus far, it will be clear enough that I have nowhere undertaken a biography of Andrew Carnegie or a study of many of his informing ideas. I have not sought to write a book about the great world of his benefactions, many of which survive and indeed shape our world today. Nor have I attempted to canvass the broad spectrum of the British-American relationship, on which the historical literature is prodigious. Using *Triumphant Democracy* as my point of departure and of analysis, I have delved into as much of Carnegie's life and of the British-American relationship that shaped it as would help understand the book's substance and importance and I have availed myself of as much of the scholarship on both subjects as would enhance my study of Carnegie's book.

Though the literature about Carnegie is considerable, an analysis of *Triumphant Democracy* has entered that literature only marginally or to a very limited degree. Its singularity and importance have hardly received the attention they merit. It was, after all, Carnegie's only book. It adumbrated his almost unstinting investigation for four very busy years. Reflecting his active involvement, it summarized both the Anglo-American relationship and Carnegie's role in that relationship. A major transatlantic document, it throws a revealing light on the critically changed connection between the kindred nations. It foreshadowed and explained the doctrine

for which he is best known: the gospel of wealth. It laid out the modes of his philanthropy, those he was already practicing and those he would practice on a vast, indeed entrepreneurial scale when he retired from business. It came, in a way that is inadequately recognized, at a revolutionary time in British politics, offering British leaders a way out of the confusions of their domestic problems. As an inhabitant of both nations, Carnegie was uniquely qualified to offer Britain the teachings of the American republic. Without in any way inflating its significance, *Triumphant Democracy* is in fact a valuable assay in comparative political sociology.

For a man who had climbed to prominence as a writer and publicist, *Triumphant Democracy* was the capstone of Andrew Carnegie's life and work. It distilled all that he had believed and achieved. It was not by chance that the half-century of American progress that was the theme of his book coincided precisely with his own rise and success. It is therefore in a basic respect as much an autobiography as Carnegie—who wrote up a book of memoirs after he had retired from the business of business and the business of philanthropy—ever got to write. His activities and ideas, apparently simple in some ways, were in fact complex. *Triumphant Democracy* was precisely the point of convergence of those activities and ideas. Whoever would try to understand Carnegie, in his many achievements and ideas, must begin with *Triumphant Democracy*.

The special aim of Carnegie's book and the special role of its author in achieving it were best summed up by Bernard Alderson, a young Englishman from Birmingham whose book on the steel master appeared shortly after Carnegie had sold his company to J. P. Morgan. Carnegie had dedicated *Triumphant Democracy* to the reunited states of Britain and America. This, said Alderson, is

the political project which is dearer to Mr. Carnegie than anything else, and to accomplish which he would gladly sacrifice his fortune. Mr. Gladstone once described Mr. Carnegie as so interwoven in his interests between America and England that he formed a living link between them. The one supreme desire of Mr. Carnegie is to weave together the interests of the two nations and form them into one vast confederacy. He is an enthusiastic advocate of the federation of the English-speaking peoples. . . . He looks upon this reunion as the one great hope for the peace and progress of the world.²

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1

The Road to *Triumphant Democracy*

WHEN IT BURST into the British-American world of politics and ideas in mid-April 1886, there could be no mistaking the importance and theme of Andrew Carnegie's *Triumphant Democracy*. Running over five hundred pages, the ornate and massive volume commanded immediate attention. More than the great majority of his fellow captains of industry, Carnegie was conscious and articulate about the role of industry and society. It mattered significantly that Carnegie was enormously wealthy. In 1881, when Carnegie Brothers and Company had been formally organized, and capitalized at \$5,000,000, Carnegie held fifty-five percent of the capital. In 1886 America, steel was king, and Carnegie was steel.¹ When Carnegie spoke, people listened.

Carnegie announced the theme of his book with loud, unqualified clarity in the book's title and subtitle: *Fifty Years' March of the Republic*. He had written a comparative analysis of the progress of the two nations to which he was immediately affiliated: the Britain from which his parents had emigrated in 1848 when he was a teenager, and the United States in which he had flourished. His theme was patent enough. In half a century, the United States had become the most productive and affluent nation in the world. The reason why was no less patent: America's basic principle was democracy. The clear contrast he found between American and British productivity he ascribed to what he considered to be the clear contrast between democracy and monarchy. Democracy rested on the political equality of its citizens; monarchy, on their inequality.

The book's theme was sounded clearly and blatantly on the book's cover, a resplendent binding in red buckram, with figures stamped in brilliant gold and quotations imprinted in heavy black letters. There was nothing unmistakable about the meaning of the four gold figures: a solid pyramid representing the "republic" standing firmly on its base; another pyramid representing the "monarchy," capsized and standing insecurely on its apex; a scepter broken in two; and a royal crown turned upside down. The quotations were tributes to the American political system from the two principal British political leaders of the day. William Ewart Gladstone, the head of the Liberal Party, hailed the American Constitution as "the most wonderful work ever struck off at a given time by the brain and purpose of man." The Marquess of Salisbury, the head of the Conservative Party, celebrated central features of that Constitution: "The Americans have a Senate—I wish we could institute it here—marvelous in its strength and efficiency. . . . Their Supreme Court gives a stability to their institutions which under the system of vague and mysterious promises here we look for in vain." The triangle cartoons were a judgment and a wish. The quotations were major testimonials to the republic for which Carnegie's book was itself a prodigious testimonial.

Carnegie's purpose in writing *Triumphant Democracy* represented his long-standing involvement in British politics. The involvement had grown strong when Gladstone became prime minister in April 1880. Bound to the Liberal Party by his own political convictions and emotionally inclined to Gladstone as a fellow Scotsman, Carnegie was gratified to be introduced to the prime minister at a small dinner party in June 1882. He was more than pleased to tell Gladstone all about America's great economic progress and why the United States was rapidly outstripping the mother country.

Impressed by the torrent of industrial statistics that gushed from Carnegie's lips, Gladstone asked: "Why does not some writer take up this subject and present the facts to the world—in a simple and direct way?"²

Carnegie had already begun work on *Triumphant Democracy*. Meeting Gladstone was a spur to making it his principal enterprise. He wished to promote the radical Liberal doctrines that coincided with the Chartism to which his family had subscribed. In the early 1880s these doctrines were finding new voices and a propitious moment in British politics. Always in touch with public affairs in the United Kingdom, and especially ambitious to find a vehicle for voicing his ideas and playing an active role in British politics, Carnegie joined with some radical members of the Liberal Party

in starting a chain of newspapers that his money helped underwrite and whose doctrines he subscribed to and dictated. The newspapers accepted as dogma that the British aristocracy should be dismantled and that America could serve as a model for how it was to be dismantled.

Triumphant Democracy, so Carnegie argued, was a ready answer for the major crises, indeed the deep constitutional issues, that were at that very moment rending the British body politic: the role of the House of Lords, the status of the aristocracy, the claims of the new enfranchised classes, indeed, the instability of the whole constitutional order. The book was, in this way, a preachment for conversion, a gospel to the heads of the British establishment, a call by the very wealthy “star-spangled Scotchman” (as Carnegie was dubbed) for them to mend their ways and find a ready salvation.

THE STEEL MAGNATE of fifty-one who sounded his paean to American democracy in 1886 was, in considerable measure, reciting the ideas he had learned at his family table in Dunfermline over a half-century earlier. The ancient residence of Scottish kings, near the Firth of Forth and directly across from Edinburgh, Dunfermline long been the center of the Scottish damask trade, in which his father was a prosperous weaver. But hand-weaving was running into problems brought on by machine production that compelled its being moved from the home loom to the factory. Hard times would very soon force his father to sell his looms and give up his trade. Meanwhile, young Andrew was learning from the teachings of his immediate family—his maternal grandfather Thomas Morrison and his uncle George Lauder, Sr. (his mother’s sister’s husband)—the principles he would cling to all of his life.³ A vociferous orator and head of the advanced wing of the radical party in his Dunfermline district, Thomas Morrison was also a friend of William Cobbett, a passionate British reformer of the post-Napoleonic years. Grandfather Morrison was “radical to the core and an admirer of the American Republic.”⁴

The 1830s and 1840s were the heady decades of Chartism, a collection of radical movements that expressed the great disaffection of those British classes who had been shut out of the advantages of the great reform bill of 1832. The Chartist program—its famous six points—was immediately political of course, but its goal was economic: to relieve the plight of the working classes. Though its principal centers were in England, Chartism also had a Scottish location and definition. The Scots had been disaffected by the 1707 Act of Union, which subsumed Scotland under

English rule. Thus, Scottish Chartism expressed not merely the working-class distress over the economic troubles of the 1830s and 1840s but, however much aristocratic Scots had long since entered the doors of British government, also a patriotic and political disaffection with the hegemony of England over Scotland. In the company of his family members, young Carnegie heard bitter words. "The denunciations of monarchical and aristocratic government, of privilege in all its forms, the grandeur of the republican system, the superiority of America, a land peopled by our own race, a home for freemen in which every citizen's privilege was every man's right—these were the exciting themes upon which I was nurtured."⁵ When at last, in 1848, his father's failing fortune compelled the family to seek a better life in the United States, young Carnegie took these nurturing ideas with him. The question was: How far would they be validated by American realities?

The answer, for the very ambitious, ever-achieving young man, was: very far. And so he kept reiterating to his very close "brother-cousin" Dod (as he called him) in Scotland, George Lauder, Jr. To sharpen their political knowledge and capacity to argue, both cousins had been encouraged by George Lauder, Sr., to debate subjects that engaged their interest. Nothing was more interesting in the years after the "flitting" (as the Scots called emigration) of Andrew Carnegie's family to the United States than whether their hopes in the new land had been realized. In Britain by the early 1850s, the great distress of the earlier decades had abated considerably, so it was fair of cousin Dod to argue the virtues of the British system and to persist in questioning those of the American. Young Carnegie's deservedly famous response, written in 1853 when he was seventeen, bears repeating.

We have perfect political Equality, every one has a voice in the Gov't. [sic]. . . . It is strange that with your immense army and policy you cannot keep the peace. Look at Ireland, for instance. . . . Here [the Irish] find no Royal Family (increasing with fearful rapidity) to squander their hard made earnings, no aristocracy to support, no established church with its enormous sinecures, no electoral districts made for a class to overrule the majority, no primogeniture and entail to curse the land and stop improvements in the soil. . . . They find the various reforms which they struggled for at home in successful operation here—indeed I can think of no reform which you have that we do not

possess. We have all your good traits, which are many, with few or none of your bad ones which I must say are neither few nor far between. But we go ahead. We now possess what the working classes of Your Country look forward to as constituting their political millennium. *We have the charter [for] which you have been fighting for years as the Panacea for all Britain's woes, the bulwark of the liberties of the people.*

The United States, added Carnegie, has had the people's charter "from the very beginning. But we are not at a standstill. We have only begun the great work of reform."⁶ Here, rough-hewn, insistently argumentative, reductive, astonishingly precocious, were all the essential elements of Carnegie's creed of American democracy.

Three factors shaped his life during the 1860s, encouraging him to translate his personal creed into a public political activity. First, the creed was tested and affirmed by the Civil War. The young man, playing a significant role in the War Department by helping to direct railroad and telegraph operations from his center in Pittsburgh, thoroughly espoused the cause of democracy and freedom that, in his mind, the Union clearly stood for. Second, he became very wealthy. Driven by ambition and a remarkable ability to invest in burgeoning industries (particularly those linked to railroads), he very early amassed a great fortune. Third, he arduously sustained his Scottish affinity, and with it his strong interest in British politics. Letters and gifts flowed regularly between Allegheny and then Homewood, in nearby Pittsburgh, where the American Carnegies had settled and their Scottish family, the Lauders and the Morrisons, back in Dunfermline. Overwork and ill health during the early months of the Civil War afforded him time for a vacation back in Scotland, where his success and wealth were celebrated and where his ambitions as to how he might use them took on a certain definition. In his letter of June 21, 1863, he wrote his cousin Dod a remarkable statement of his own plans:

Isn't it strange how little ambition most of our Scotch acquaintances have to become independent *and then enjoy the luxuries which wealth can [and should] procure?* For my part, I am determined to expand as my means do and ultimately to own a noble place in the country . . . and be distinguished for taking the deepest interest in all those about my place. The position most to be envied, outside the ring of great men, I think is that of a British

gentleman who labors diligently to educate and improve the condition of his dependents and who takes an independent part in National politics, always laboring to correct some ancient abuse—to curtail the privileges of the few and increase those of the many. . . . For my part I sometimes think I would like to return to Scotland and try the character myself.⁷

These ambitions he reformulated five years later, after the Civil War had ended, in his famous memorandum of December 1868. He was then thirty-three. His income for the year was \$50,000, an astronomical sum in then current terms. He took stock of his life. What would he do with all his money?

Beyond this never earn [he wrote to himself]—make no effort to increase fortune, but spend the surplus each year for benevolent purposes. Cast aside business forever, except for others. Settle in Oxford and get a thorough education, making the acquaintance of literary men—this will take three years' active work—pay especial attention to speaking in public. Settle then in London and purchase a controlling interest in some newspaper or live review and give the general management of it attention, taking a part in public matters, especially those connected with education and improvement of the poorer classes. Man must have an idol—the amassing of wealth is one of the worst species of idolatry. . . . Whatever I engage in I must push inordinately; therefore should I be careful to choose that life which will be the most elevating in its character.⁸

Burton J. Hendrick, the first of his principal biographers, validly called this memorandum the first edition of Carnegie's "gospel of wealth." But one should not miss the equally important point that, as his wealth accumulated, Carnegie used it to spread his gospel of democracy. Democracy, the creed in which he had been reared, was an idol to which he could wholeheartedly consecrate himself. And, in serving his idol, he spelled out the exact path he meant to follow.

In 1868, he planned to concentrate less on earning and more on learning: to go to the summit of English scholarship, Oxford, rather than to the raucous, internecine markets of American business. But realizing his plan was delayed more than a decade. In the 1870s he built his for-