The Case for Norman Angell

By Jacob Heilbrunn

Over a century ago, a talented British newspaperman sent a manuscript on the irrationality of war to numerous London publishers. It was uniformly rejected on the grounds that the public was uninterested in the topic. After he paid a well-known firm to print his opuscule, it quickly garnered praise, and then, a few months later, an expanded edition became a publishing sensation. It sold several million copies and was almost immediately translated into twenty-five languages. At a moment when a highly nationalistic imperial Germany was arming itself to the teeth and Edwardian England was, in turn, bolstering its naval program, the book's thesis was as revolutionary as it was sweeping—that growing economic interdependence among nations rendered renewed conflict a thing of the past.

Norman Angell's triumph was not adventitious. Much of it was owed to the unstinting efforts of Lord Esher, a close friend of King Edward VII and chairman of the war committee, who touted Angell's *The Great Illusion* as a profound work. Others agreed. The volume became the subject of a cult following, and study groups and societies in England and Europe were formed to discuss and propagate its views. Reviews in the popular press were seldom less than adulatory. The *New York Times* declared, "The author is enjoying the almost unlimited praise of his contemporaries, expressed or indicated by many men of eminence and influence, by countless reviewers who have lately hungered for a hero to worship." The *Boston Herald* stated, "This is an epoch-making book." A French economics journal called it "profound," and it was hailed in Germany as "an invaluable contribution." Edward VII read the book and an institute called the Garton Foundation was established to disseminate its message. Lord Esher wrote the author, "Your book can be as epoch making as Seeley's *Expansion of England* or Mahan's *Sea Power*. It is sent forth at the right psychological moment, and wants to be followed up." Esher himself did just that: he lectured at the Sorbonne as well as to a group of high-ranking military officers, which included Sir John French, the chief of the General Staff, to explain that growing economic ties meant that armed conflict "becomes every day more difficult and improbable."

Yet only four years after this volume appeared, the improbable occurred, severing the very economic ties that were supposed to render conflict among nations nugatory. In August 1914, Europe plunged into World War I. By war's end, the Austro-Hungarian, German and Russian monarchies had been toppled. Dictatorships emerged. And so the heady acclaim that Angell had experienced on the eve of the Great War was replaced by withering scorn. Perhaps the most lasting verdict came in

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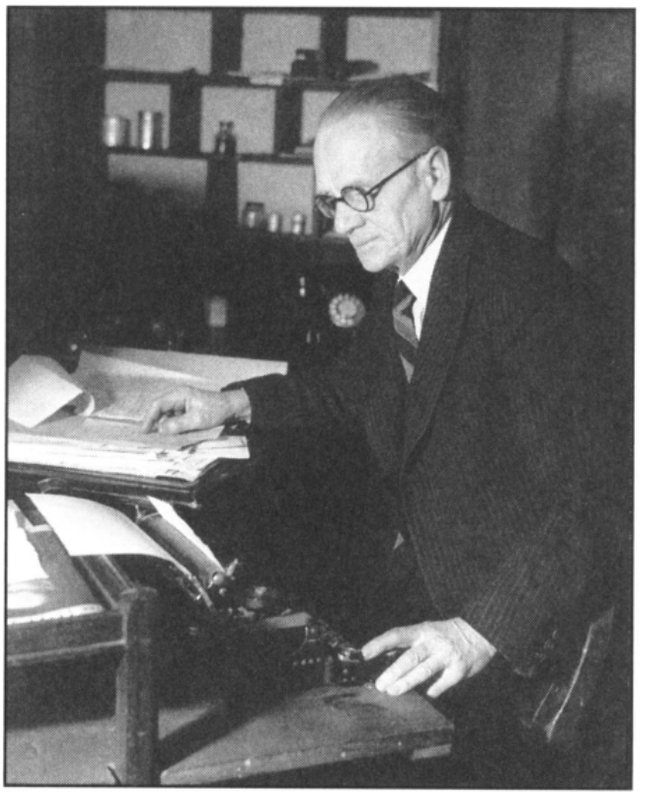
1962 with Barbara Tuchman's popular history, *The Guns of August*:

> By impressive examples and incontrovertible argument Angell showed that in the present financial and economic interdependence of nations, the victor would suffer equally with the vanquished; therefore war had become unprofitable; therefore no nation would be so foolish as to start one.

Angell enjoyed a career that included writing a total of forty-one books, winning the Nobel Peace Prize and becoming a member of Parliament—"It is the only gate before which I have ever stood filled with envy," wrote Anthony Trollope in *Can You Forgive Her?*, "sorrowing to think that my steps might never pass under it"—but his popular reputation never really recovered. Instead, his name became a synonym for naive utopianism. Shakespeare's description in *Julius Caesar* of Casca as belonging to the kind of men who "construe things after their fashion, / Clean from the purpose of the things themselves" comes forcibly to mind when considering Angell's posthumous reputation. As the Canadian writer Dan Gardner sympathetically observed in his study of expert opinion, *Future Babble*, "No one has ever suffered more for a prediction that failed."

But as the hundredth anniversary of World War I looms large—and a spate of books arguing about its real origins appears (was Germany the culprit? Russia? England? Austria?)—a fresh look at Angell, too, is surely warranted. Indeed, his remarkable life has attracted fresh scholarly scrutiny. Perhaps no one has done more to rescue Angell from the condescension of the past than Martin Ceadel in his punctilious study, *Living the Great Illusion*, which this essay draws upon. What emerges is an intriguingly contradictory character with a flair for self-promotion. A canny operator, he steadily sidled toward realist principles, abandoning some of his own illusions, even if he never quite explicitly acknowledged his transformation. He embarked upon a prolonged intellectual journey—from opposition to war to an appreciation of the centrality of power in international relations—that indicates he was a restless and, more often than not, insightful student of world politics.

The school of thought that this intellectual gladiator helped found—liberal internationalism—has demonstrated a remarkable perdurability. All along during the Cold War, the United States attempted to use a web of economic ties to create closer relations with and prosperity for



Europe and Asia. But, when the conflict with the Soviet Union ended, the thesis of globalization, harking back to Angell's heady pre–World War I argument, reemerged. It reached its apex during the 1990s, in the time of the Clinton administration, which emphasized, or tried to emphasize, economic ties with other nations over the exercise of military force. Walter Wriston, who was head of Citicorp, heralded the information age in his 1992 book *The Twilight of Sovereignty* as marking a new era of global convergence, rendering national borders impotent and obsolete. Wriston saw the fax machine as the "pamphleteer of the late twentieth century." Today the most prominent globalization cheerleader is *New York Times* columnist Thomas L. Friedman, who announced in 1999 that Angell was "actually right." In *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, he promulgated his "Golden Arches Theory of Conflict Prevention," which held that no two countries that had a McDonald's would go to war with each other because getting a Golden Arches franchise signified membership in the new, globalized order of international cooperation. But, after war between Serbia and its Balkan neighbors put paid to that theory, Friedman amended it slightly in another best seller, *The World Is Flat*, by introducing the "Dell Theory of Conflict Prevention."

Now, with the economic collapse that began in 2008 lingering on in Europe and America, the theory of globalization is under siege. This has led inevitably to dismissive references to Angell as the ultimate progenitor of delusions about international affairs (though it was, of course, Karl Marx who first discussed the phenomenon of the newly emerging global capitalism in *The Communist Manifesto*: "In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations"). But a look at Angell's full career indicates that his story is more complicated—and more enlightening—than the caricature of many of his detractors would suggest.

Perhaps Angell's most outstanding characteristic was his relentless desire to puncture conventional thinking. He went from foe of World War I to friend of Winston Churchill and vigorous opponent of the appeasement of the great dictators. After World War II, he warned about the Soviet threat. He never fully left the Left, but he didn't hesitate to chastise it for its own naïveté about power politics.

Angell's penchant for upsetting intellectual apple carts began at an early age. Born on December 26, 1872, into a prosperous family that lived in Holbeach, Lincolnshire, he soon rebelled against his mother's Christian faith. As a lad, he immersed himself in political debates at a time, as he recalled later, "when George Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells were just beginning to come into prominence." These influences, along with the Fabian Society of that era and, as he recounted, "all the fermentation of socialism and what not," transformed him into a "socialist, an agnostic, a republican." Politics, he mused, was "entertainment"—there weren't the distractions of football or movies, let alone video games. Then his father sent him abroad to Saint-Omer to study at a lycée. By age seventeen, he was editing an English-language newspaper while enrolled at the University of Geneva.

A young idealist, Angell came to regard Europe as suffused with parochial, nationalistic feuds and hopelessly backward when it came to power politics. He headed for the New World. He worked as a cowhand and prospector before becoming a homesteader in 1892 in California, where he also began writing essays about

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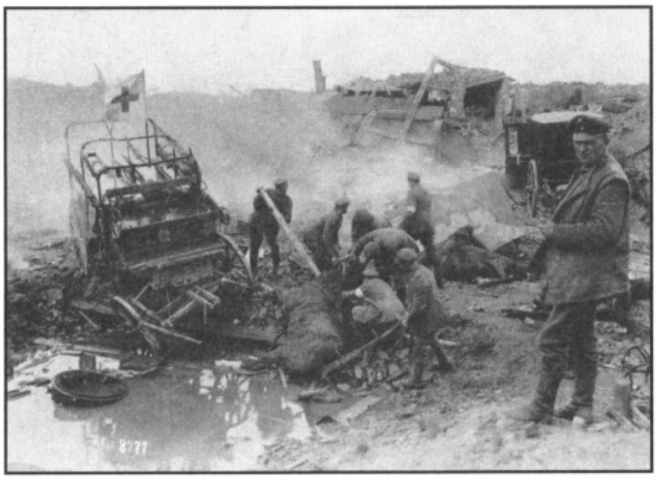
economics. He defended free trade and attacked Massachusetts senator Henry Cabot Lodge for espousing protectionism. He observed, "One may say without exaggeration that whole States in the West owe their prosperity to the British market." Later he took a swipe at Theodore Roosevelt's praise for the strenuous life, which Angell depicted as a reversion to the nasty habits of Europe that the New Eden was supposed to shun: "The superiority of this country to the Old World lay in our freedom from the burden of militarism, from the mischief of the military ideal." Engaging in foreign quarrels, he said, was a sideshow for America and prompted it to "prefer indulgence in a sentiment of hostility to the furtherance of our interests." The "our" indicates that Angell had come to see himself as something of an American. But for all his solicitude for his adopted country, he failed to make it financially and ended up accepting a well-paid position in Paris in 1897 as a newspaper editor for the *Daily Messenger*, where he continued to observe and write about international affairs. He was also deeply influenced by Gustave Le Bon's new book, *The Crowd*, which heightened his conviction that the masses were susceptible to being manipulated by crude appeals to nationalism. In 1903, he published his first book, *Patriotism Under Three Flags: A Plea for Rationalism in Politics*, which drew on his experiences in England, America and France to argue against jingoism. This maiden effort went nowhere.

Angell was undaunted. The next decade saw what Ceadel terms an "astonishing improvement in Angell's fortunes." The newspaper magnate Lord Northcliffe, who was impressed by Angell's knowledge of Europe, appointed him manager of the *Daily Mail*'s continental edition. So far, so good. But what really made Angell's name was the publication in 1909 of a book called *Europe's Optical Illusion*. At a moment when Europe seemed headed toward conflict, Angell offered a rosier scenario, suggesting that financial links had made conflict unlikely. This gave hope to England's peace camp, which warmed to his blasé attitude about warfare. He wrote that "our defeat cannot advantage our enemy nor do us in the long run much harm." This of course signified a woeful misunderstanding of Kaiser Wilhelm's aims, particularly his desire to rule over a German-led *Mitteleuropa*.

Still, Angell was right to debunk the bogus notion that capitalism was responsible for war. This was not an insignificant contribution. Angell was entering the lists at a time when competing liberal and radical theories about imperialism were flourishing. Richard Cobden and John Bright, champions of a "little England" that focused on trade and didn't intervene abroad, had argued that financiers were essentially interested in peace. But J. A. Hobson, who viewed finance capital as the main motor of imperial expansion and war, would have none of it. He offered a much more radical critique in *Imperialism*, which Lenin relied upon in composing his own misbegotten tract, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. Angell offered a different

critique that focused on the irrationality and hubris of various nations: "Vanity and all its concomitants: national pride of place, of mastery; coerciveness, that conception of 'honour' which demands



vindication by force of arms, the lust of rule and dominion, the pride of territorial possession, and the jealousy of like possessions in others."

Europe's Optical Illusion led a few months later to his breakthrough book, a revised and expanded version titled *The Great Illusion*.

How does this much-derided study hold up in retrospect? Angell's primary gift was his journalistic talent—the ability to deliver sweeping statements in clear prose. He explained everything. The explanation for the armaments rivalry in Europe, he said, was not difficult to discern. The states' motives were all too obvious:

> They are based on the universal assumption that a nation, in order to find outlets for expanding population and increasing industry, or simply to ensure the best conditions possible for its people, is necessarily pushed to territorial expansion and the exercise of political force against others. . . . The author challenges this whole doctrine.

Angell warned that the heads of European states risked becoming the caricatures that Hobson and others depicted.

It was a commonplace that military success was the precondition for economic prosperity. "The fact that Germany has of late come to the front as an industrial nation," he wrote, "making giant strides in general prosperity and well-being, is deemed also to be the result of *her* military successes and the increasing political power which she is coming to exercise in Continental Europe." But this was turning things on their head. The belief that material advantage could be derived by conquering another country or by adding fresh territories to an empire was wrong: "It is universally assumed that national power means national wealth, national advantage; that expanding territory means increased opportunity for industry; that the strong nation can guarantee opportunities for its citizens that the weak nation cannot."

This was the optical illusion of Angell's initial title. He saw it as a snare and a trap, nothing less than a superstition that threatened to plunge the nations of Europe into a senseless war. In his eyes, a war would have such convulsive effects on international trade that it would render the aggressor prostrate almost immediately. He declared:

> Even where territory is not formally annexed, the conqueror is unable to take the wealth of a conquered territory, owing to the delicate interdependence of the financial world (an outcome of our credit and banking systems),

> which makes the financial and industrial security of the victor dependent upon financial and industrial security in all considerable civilized centres; so that widespread confiscation or destruction of trade and commerce in a conquered territory would react disastrously upon the conqueror.

Angell argued further that the fact that small states—Switzerland, Belgium or Holland—were as well off as larger ones with big militaries showed that armaments were no road to wealth. Even the direct occupation and confiscation of a foreign country's assets would have no beneficial effect. According to Angell:

> If the British could annihilate Germany, they would annihilate such an important section of their debtors as to create hopeless panic in London, and that panic would so react on their own trade that it would be in no sort of condition to take the place which Germany had previously occupied in neutral markets, leaving aside the question that by the act of annihilation a market equal to that of Canada and South Africa combined would be destroyed.

Angell was fascinated by markets. He subordinated everything to capital, and his worship of it led him to advocate a kind of international arrangement in which various countries would maintain financial order by accepting spheres of influence. He wrote, "It is more to the general interest to have an orderly and organized Asia Minor under German tutelage than to have an unorganized and disorderly one which should be independent."

At the same time, Angell dismissed the idea that politics has to consist of a ceaseless struggle for power. Humans, he said, could change. Religious dogmas had been shed. So could militaristic ones. The notion that human bellicosity was irredeemable was mistaken. As he put it:

> Man's pugnacity, though not disappearing, is very visibly, under the forces of mechanical and social development, being transformed and diverted from ends that are wasteful and destructive to ends that are less wasteful, which render easier that co-operation between men in the struggle with their environment which is the condition of their survival and advance; that changes which, in the historical period, have been extraordinarily rapid are necessarily quickening—quickening in geometrical rather than in arithmetical ratio.

Angell also lobbed some intellectual mortars at the militarists who argued that the West was going soft, succumbing to what in the eighteenth century was known as luxury and effeminacy. Angell's embrace of luxury contradicts Montesquieu and Edward Gibbon, who feared that citizens would happily exchange the freedoms of the republic for prosperity and indolence. As Gibbon put it in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*:

> In the purer ages of the commonwealth, the use of arms was reserved for those ranks of citizens who had a country to love, a property to defend, and some share in enacting those laws, which it was their interest, as well as duty, to maintain. But in proportion as the public freedom was lost in extent of conquest, war was gradually improved into an art, and degraded into a trade.

Where Angell went astray, however, was in underestimating the profits that could be extracted from colonies. Belgium, for example, profited immensely from the brutal exploitation of its territories in the Congo, as Adam Hochschild has vividly shown in *King Leopold's Ghost*. He also was mistaken to suggest that warfare would almost instantly lead to general economic collapse. It did not. Instead, the war ground on for years. But almost

no one had anticipated the emergence of trench warfare. Moreover, it certainly was true that Germany, which, together with Austria-Hungary, started World War I, found itself in desperate straits by 1917 as it became unable to feed its population properly. But this was more a function of the naval blockade of the German Reich than it was of financial upheaval. The true turmoil came after the war, when the Allies sought massive indemnities from the fledgling Weimar Republic, a course that Angell, like John Maynard Keynes, whom he knew personally, correctly denounced as a punitive measure that would boomerang upon England and France. Still, Angell was clearly wrong to suggest that aggression was, as he put it, "out of date." Indeed, several decades later the Nazi empire would be predicated on the notion that aggression could pay, and it did—for a while. The Nazis relentlessly extracted supplies and natural resources from the territories that they conquered in an effort to avoid any shortages on the home front.

During World War I, Angell understandably bridled at the idea that he was "attacking patriotism," as one of his contemporaries put it. This was a canard. He was assailing what he saw as irrationality. But his opposition to it led him astray. The cold, hard truth is that Angell had wrongly deprecated the centrality of power in international relations. In 1914, for example, he announced to an American journalist, "There will never be another war between European powers." Once Germany backed Austria-Hungary's ultimatum to Serbia, British progressives went into overdrive to avert England's entry into the war. They failed. By the end of 1914, Angell was performing ambulance service in France. A year later he was traveling in America seeking U.S. support for Britain in the war. Once President Woodrow Wilson sought congressional approval for war against Germany and the Central powers, Angell became a staunch proponent of a league of nations. Collective security was to become his new mantra and the path back to respectability.

To his credit, Angell deplored the harsh settlement that emerged at Versailles. Like Keynes, he viewed it as counterproductive—why should American goods rot in docks because Germans were arbitrarily rendered unable to pay for them? The notion that an indemnity should be demanded was precisely what he had always opposed in arguing that war should not pay. His book *The Peace Treaty and the Economic Chaos of Europe* was written with his characteristic asperity. By June 1929, Angell had become a Labour MP, but he never achieved the high office he had hoped for from Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald. In 1931, his rehabilitation continued with a knighthood conferred upon him by King George V. Next came the bestowal of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1933—the year Hitler and the Nazis came to power.

Reflecting his new views on international power politics, Angell confronted the Nazi threat head-on. He did not indulge in the illusions of the British Left or Right, which embraced malignant forms of pacifism or appeasement. Angell became increasingly convinced of the need to stop Nazi aggression. And, departing from his pre–World War I outlook, he now embraced the idea of collective security. War could result, he argued, from the failure of well-intentioned policies. He noted in his Nobel address:

> In England at this moment there is a considerable section of the press systematically opposing the League of Nations on the ground that it would involve Great Britain in the risk of war. There is no reason whatever to suppose that

these protagonists of isolationism are insincere in their professions of desire for peace. One of these groups has just organized a war museum for the direct purpose of bringing home to the public an intensified horror of war as an argument against the League. If their policy of destroying the League should ultimately produce war, it is not their intention which would be at fault, but their judgment; not their aims, but their calculations as to the means by which the end may be obtained.

But of course collective security was no panacea. In 1936, Hitler's reoccupation of the Rhineland and Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia delivered a brutal buffeting to the League of Nations, which proved wholly ineffectual in stopping the dictators. Once again, Angell adjusted his views. As a result, writes Martin Ceadel, "Angell's message was becoming increasingly realist in tone. . . . he was more concerned than ever before with the distribution of international power." Angell established close ties with his former detractor Winston Churchill and inveighed against the dismantling of the British Empire, departing from a position he had previously trumpeted. Now Angell saw the empire as a vital force for stability abroad. Besides, he now believed that England had "an interest in the preservation of order in the area it covers." At the same time, the British economy would be threatened if other countries claimed its resources. This, too, was diametrically opposed to his earlier contention that the assets of a country could not be profitably deployed against it. He attacked both Tory and Labour Party appeasers of Nazism and battled with the mendacious left-wing diplomat and historian E. H. Carr, who hailed the 1938 Munich agreement in his book *The Twenty Years' Crisis*. In it Carr also loftily dismissed the "utopians" such as Angell who failed to understand what "realists" understood. But who was truly realistic about the Nazis? "For the final eighteen months of peace," Ceadel writes, Angell "was to be an outspoken critic not only of the Chamberlain government for its appeasement policy but also of the Labour Party for its hostility to a popular front."

He also insisted that it was essential to make common cause with Russia against the Nazi menace. Sounding like the ultimate realist, he said, "We are not concerned with the internal policy of a nation—we don't care whether it is Fascist or Communist. What we are concerned with is its external policy." During World War II, he championed the cause of the Western Allies. His metamorphosis was almost complete. After World War II, while Angell supported creation of the United Nations, he also became something of a cold warrior, warning of the "frightening communist conquest of the human mind" and favoring a close cooperation between America and England against the Soviet threat. In his autobiography

Angell's career provides an object lesson, not in the absurdity of liberal internationalism but, rather, in its limitations.

After All, which appeared in 1951, Angell complained about the "tendency of Liberals and the Left to subject Churchill to savage attacks while completely exonerating Russia" and to ignore the "doctrinal fanaticism of the Communist creed." A particular Angell bugbear was Colonel Robert McCormick, the tyrannical *Chicago Tribune* publisher who opposed cooperation with the British and preached isolationism even during the Truman years. Angell placed him at the head of what he called the "professional Anglophobes"—the antediluvian remnant of isolationist American conservatives who believed that America was doing the bidding of Britain in opposing totalitarianism abroad.

Although Angell altered his own theories as he went along, his early belief in economic interdependence remains a powerful credo. Today the players may be different, but the realities of global competition are the same as ever. And the debates about them have not changed much either. China is a boisterous rising power that is challenging the international system, much as Wilhelmine Germany once did. What's more, America is eyeing China's rise with a wariness reminiscent of Britain's at the turn of the last century. Japan, long an adherent of pacifism, is now beefing up its military in an effort to safeguard its security. This time, the potential for a military clash between China and the West, with Japan in the mix, is improbable, an exercise in futility and in no one's interest, particularly given the economic interdependence of these nations. Or is it?

Angell I would have said that any move toward war would be self-defeating and hence improbable. But Angell II likely would have acknowledged the military threat that China poses and adopted a more cautious stance. Though he does not provide a road map to the present, he was one of the first modern, sweeping theorists of international relations. The next thinker to have a similar impact was George F. Kennan. Then, at the end of the Cold War, Francis Fukuyama, in the pages of *The National Interest*, offered a modified version of Angell's initial thesis, suggesting that history was coming to an end and detecting the "ineluctable spread of consumerist Western culture." That proved premature as atavistic forces in Afghanistan and elsewhere rose up. Great-power competition has not disappeared. Nor have borders. Angell's career provides an object lesson, not in the absurdity of liberal internationalism but, rather, in its limitations. He was a Davos man before Davos men even existed, but he gradually came to acknowledge the truths that many of his intellectual descendants continue to resist. □