

## 2. Imagining, visualizing, and narrating peace through trade: free trade networks, world exhibitions, and pathways of global cooperation

**Wolfram Kaiser**

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Imagining, visualizing, and narrating the future of global cooperation as a political and cultural practice goes back a long way. This chapter argues that the 1851 Great Exhibition in Crystal Palace in London created an international forum for the material staging of imagined futures and for the communication of the desirable forms of global cooperation, and that this staging had a profound impact on the creation of one particular distinctive pathway of global cooperation: free (or freer) trade as a cornerstone of a liberal global order, which after a period of intense protectionism following the 1929 Wall Street crash, became strengthened once more in institutionalized ‘embedded liberalism’ after 1945.<sup>1</sup>

In 1851, British free traders built on the European tradition of national industry exhibitions in countries like France and the German states (Bouin and Chanut 1980; Cleve 1996) to organize the first international exhibition as a marketplace not just for goods but also for ideas. They expected that exhibiting superior British industrial and cheaper consumer goods would vindicate the move towards free trade of the 1846 Repeal of the Corn Laws and associated legislation; that the world exhibition would showcase the apparent effect of the new policy of fostering social cohesion and domestic stability; and that it would legitimize free trade as a general policy principle creating pathways towards intensified social and commercial exchanges as a new form of global cooperation that would foster technological diffusion, economic growth, and international peace and stability. As Henry Cole, one of the organizers of the Great Exhibition, put it, without creating ‘public confidence and public discussion’ through its representation and narrative legitimation, free trade would remain but ‘a philosophical theory’ (Cole 1851: 423).

Based on research of published documents, media reports, and archival sources about free trade networks and the world exhibitions, as well as their hermeneutical interpretation, this chapter seeks to relate to and integrate three

so far largely unrelated sets of literature about what contemporaries at the time called ‘internationalism’ (Paulmann and Geyer 2001), and what others have conceptualized as a first phase of globalization. This phase lasted from the 1820s until the First World War. Despite once more rising tariff barriers after 1879–1880, this phase was characterized by greater growth and integration of global trade flows than gross national products (O’Rourke and Williamson 2001, 2002).

The first set of literature is concerned with the history of economic ideas and economic integration. Traditional ‘history of ideas’ approaches had a more biographical interpretation and predominantly studied the impact at the national level. Inspired by notions of cultural transfer and entangled history (Middell 2000; Werner and Zimmermann 2006) and, in the social sciences, diffusion of ideas and policies (Marsh and Sharman 2009), more recent literature has explored how political ideas like free trade travel across space and time, become adjusted to local traditions and circumstances, or are rejected as being incompatible with them. As this chapter demonstrates, however, it is crucially important to analyse the role of social and political mobilization and the material representation of ideas in order to assess their transnational scope and impact.

The second set of literature is concerned precisely with transnational contacts, exchange, and mobilization in the broader sense of crossing cultural or political borders (Kaiser 2005) but has mainly focused on their impact upon the 1848 revolutions as European and not merely national events (e.g., Kaelble 1999; Kelly 2014). As this chapter shows, however, Radicals and Liberals, while often sharing many of the revolutionaries’ demands for political reform and democratization, also created cross-border networks in the 1840s. They continued to cultivate them at a time of political restoration in continental Europe, and in conjunction with the Great Exhibition, to foster economic liberalization as an alternative, non-revolutionary pathway towards political reform and a liberal global order.

The third and final set of literature is the history of material culture and representations that developed the older and more ‘technical’ history of technology through the lens of cultural history. The historiography of the world exhibitions, while extremely eclectic, has addressed, for example, how states used national pavilions and their contents, which became prominent from the 1870s onwards, for staging particular narratives of the nation and its future destiny in global competition (e.g., Kaiser 2003; Rydell et al. 2000). Only a few studies have explored connections between political economy ideas, material representations, and future narratives, however. Moreover, these studies have largely been confined to the national context, as in the case of British free trade culture with its ‘intense and widely popularized version of a dark age of barbaric conditions under tariffs’, which kept those who advo-

cated a preferential Empire tariff system at bay for a prolonged period of time (Trentmann 2008: 42). This chapter, in contrast, highlights the transnational (cross-border) meaning of material representations in the exhibition spaces acquired during personal visits or via media reports, and the importance of the resulting narratives for strengthening notions of peace through trade and the imagination and actual creation of pathways towards a liberal global order.

The chapter develops its arguments in three steps. The first section briefly sets out how free trade ideas systematized by Adam Smith and David Ricardo, among others, travelled, and how the particular British political context of the 1830s and 1840s became loaded with Radical evangelical and universalist visions of global peace. This section also shows how Richard Cobden, alongside John Bright – the most popular Radical leader – forged closer transnational ties during his travels in continental Europe during 1846–1847 and became the political hero of European free traders.

The second section then analyses the origins and staging of the 1851 Great Exhibition in London. It demonstrates how free traders controlled everything from the innovative design of the building to the exhibition's spatial structuring and associated representative events, such as its opening ceremony. The free traders interpreted the material representations in the Great Exhibition as a clear vindication of their doctrine. Overcoming both protectionist conservative and revolutionary Marxist opposition, they pointed to the lessons to be supposedly learnt from the exhibition so as to propagate changes in tariff policy in continental Europe and beyond.

The third section shows how the 1851 exhibition created pathways for imagining, visualizing, and narrating peace through trade to the world exhibition in Paris in 1855 and subsequently. Staged during the Crimean War, the 1855 exhibition strengthened existing transnational networks formed between Cobden and the French economist Michel Chevalier, shifting the national French and the transnational debate further in favour of freer trade. This process culminated in the 1860 Franco–British trade treaty and a set of bilateral trade treaties negotiated in Europe during the 1860s that shaped the liberal global trading order until the First World War.

The conclusion highlights how free traders framed world exhibitions as global cultural institutions to establish patterns of imagining, visualizing, and narrating global peace through trade as one particular pathway to global cooperation. Their framing appropriated the world exhibitions and made it possible for later forms of advocacy of freer trade to build on their endeavours in order to propagate a particular vision of modernity and global cooperation. Although free trade temporarily became defunct as a global policy paradigm during the world economic crisis in the years after the 1929 Wall Street crash, the 1939 New York World's Fair once more drew on the existing template. This was a US exhibition used to showcase American consumer culture in an imagined

future of plenty for the many, whose lives would be greatly facilitated by modern transportation and household technologies. The 1939 exhibition thus helped people to imagine a new future of global cooperation that was to feature centrally in the economic and political order of what later became known as the US-dominated 'embedded liberalism' during the Cold War.

## INTELLECTUAL EXCHANGE AND POLITICAL NETWORKING FOR FREE TRADE

In his book *Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith (1776) made a compelling argument for free trade. High tariffs, he argued, prevented competition and led to monopolies and higher prices at the expense of the consumer. Free trade, by contrast, would allow an efficient allocation of resources and could create wealth for all. To this David Ricardo (1817) added his theory of comparative cost: free trade would facilitate technology transfer and foster international specialization based on cost advantages. While arguing for some time that temporary tariffs for infant industries could be legitimate, John Stuart Mill, in *Principles of Political Economy* (1848), developed a clearer notion of how free trade would not only foster greater commercial exchange but also social connections and collective learning. It was essential, he argued (Mill [1848] 1909: 581–582), 'to be perpetually comparing [one's] own notions and customs with the experience and example of persons in different circumstances [...] There is no nation which does not need to borrow from others.' By the time of the 1848 continental European revolutions, free trade had become a coherent doctrine and was the new 'orthodoxy among economists in Britain' (Irwin 1996: 97).

Founded in 1831 and developing into a popular mass movement of the liberal middle classes in Britain after 1839, the Anti-Corn Law League transformed the doctrine into a political programme for the non-revolutionary transformation of British society and politics as well as new forms of European and global cooperation. Led by Cobden and Bright, the movement pushed hard for the abolition of the Corn Laws that protected the interests of the landed aristocracy and, in the view of the Radicals, were responsible for pauperism, or structural poverty among workers and other city dwellers, which could lead to civic unrest and revolution. The League's agitation transformed the political debate in Britain (Grampp 1987; Schonhardt-Bailey 1997), and the Liberal Tories under Prime Minister Robert Peel, with Radical and Whig support, ultimately abolished the Corn Laws in 1846. This in turn led to a split among the Tories, Peel's downfall, and a wholesale realignment in British politics (Burns and Innes 2003; Howe 1998; Schonhardt-Bailey 2006).

Thereafter, Cobden's advocacy of free trade shifted more and more from its alleged material advantages to its potential contribution to securing world peace. 'I believe that the physical gain will be the smallest gain to humanity

from the success of this principle', he argued in a speech in Manchester on 15 January 1846 (cited in Henderson 1937: 317). 'I see in the free-trade principle that which shall act on the moral world as the principle of gravitation in the universe – drawing men together, thrusting aside the antagonism of race, and creed, and language, and uniting us in the bonds of eternal peace.' In future, commercial interchange for the common good of mankind would replace diplomatic negotiation and war over narrowly defined national interests.

Cobden's advocacy of free trade as a new universal approach to global cooperation was embedded in non-conformist social mobilization in Britain, which comprised non-Anglican protestant Dissenters as well as evangelical Anglicans (Bebbington 2003). Excluded from public office until 1828 and still discriminated against in other ways, Dissenters formed a particularly strong social and electoral force in industrial regions of the United Kingdom. They also played a prominent role in many benevolent and reformist societies across the country, which propagated social behaviour such as hard work to please God and reducing alcohol consumption. They similarly dominated multiple British peace societies, which forged transnational connections and held four international congresses between 1848 and 1851 (Ceadel 2014; Tyrrell 1978). Like many Dissenters and evangelical Anglicans, who generally voted for Liberal and Radical candidates like Cobden and Bright in elections, Cobden's political thought and style was heavily influenced by a strong moralist impulse and agenda, which also helps to explain his near-messianic commitment as 'the international man' (Hobson 1919) who would spread the free trade doctrine and political practice (Hilton 1988). To him, free trade was no longer just the ideal strategy for reforming Britain but for changing international politics.

By the 1830s, the British free trade creed was already well known and influenced debates about trade and international politics elsewhere (Magnusson 2008). In the United States, which required no translations, advocates of freer trade drew on Adam Smith early on (Liu 2018). Cobden's reception was mixed, however, as free trade advocates were concentrated in the South but normally also supported slavery (Belko 2012). Under the influence of another evangelical movement, the slave trade had been abolished in Britain in 1833 and slavery was anathema to British Radicals like Cobden.

Beyond the British Isles and the US – that is, in countries that required translations of free trade texts – more protectionist economic ideas initially prevailed and enjoyed widespread political support. Mercantilist thinking was deeply embedded in the political economy of France; leading liberals like Adolphe Thiers opposed free trade, and when Napoleon III established his authoritarian regime in December 1851 the Conseil Supérieure du Commerce had a strong protectionist majority. In the German states, the economic thought of Friedrich List (1841) was influential (Tribe 1988). He advocated tariff protection to develop new industries for what (much later) became termed

‘different paths to modernity’ (O’Brien and Keyder 1978). From this perspective, he saw free trade as a British strategy to establish and maintain economic hegemony. Agitation against lowering tariffs in the revolutionary Paulskirche Parliament in 1848–1849 demonstrated the political power of the protectionist agenda in integrating traditional trades, smallholder farmers, rural workers and the bourgeoisie of the south-western German states in particular (Best 1980: 285).

Free trade as an economic doctrine and political movement thus faced an uphill struggle in the Europe of the 1840s and 1850s. However, its cause was bolstered by translations of key works, the personal experience of leading protagonists, and attempts at transnational mobilization for free trade. To begin with, the works of Adam Smith and other British political economists were regularly translated into European and other languages, facilitating their reception outside the Anglophone world (Lai 2000). Frédéric Bastiat, who corresponded regularly with Cobden, was among those who popularized the British free traders’ ideas and political activism through his writings (Bastiat 2014), and he himself became a fashionable economist across Europe (Raico 1999: 52) with many translations of his principal works (e.g., Bastiat 1847, 1850). Books and pamphlets of other authors with more applied interests in reducing tariffs were also regularly translated (e.g., Blanqui 1851).

Many advocates of free (or freer) trade in continental Europe also had personal experience of the United Kingdom, the free trade movement there, and the apparent effects of the new free trade policy after 1846. Thus, the leading German free trade advocate John Prince-Smith was actually from Britain, where he had already forged links with free traders. He initially came to Prussia as an English teacher in 1831, later translated Bastiat into German, and was the long-time chairman of the Volkswirtschaftlicher Kongreß, or Economic Society (Hentschel 1975). Although of French origin, Julius Faucher, who met Prince-Smith in 1844 and cooperated with him to organize Cobden’s visit to several north German cities in 1847, worked as a correspondent for German newspapers and as a journalist for the free trade *Morning Star* in London in the 1850s. It was in this role that he was also Cobden’s secretary for a period (Faucher 1870). In 1861, he returned to Germany and was immediately elected to the Prussian parliament for the new left-liberal German Progress Party.

Other transnational experiences that shaped or strengthened positive attitudes to reducing trade barriers included those of the future Napoleon III. While in exile in London in the late 1840s, he observed at first hand the effects of the abolition of the Corn Laws, which seemed to have pulled the plug on the socialist Chartist movement and to have created sufficient social stability for the 1848 European revolutions not to spill over to Britain. Once he had taken power in France and declared himself Emperor, Napoleon III, although not committed to free trade as a doctrine, saw tariff cuts as the best measure to

fight pauperism, stabilize the Second Empire, and avoid renewed revolutions (Anceau 2008; Milza 2004).

The free traders, finally, also sought to foster the creation of transnational networks and political mobilization. Cobden took the initiative when he embarked on a 14-month tour of Europe in 1846–1847 (Taylor 1994). In a private letter to Salis Schwabe (1895: 2) he announced his ambition: ‘I will be an ambassador from the Free Traders of England to the governments of the great nations of the continent.’ During this tour, Cobden met free traders in Paris and Bordeaux – then a centre of French free trade activism – as well as in several cities in Spain and Italy, before moving on to Vienna, Dresden, Leipzig, Berlin, several German coastal cities, and Russia. He met leading free traders like Bastiat, Prince-Smith, Faucher, and others, as well as several monarchs and leading government ministers, such as the King of Prussia, and the Austrian Prince Metternich. In so doing he made new contacts and reinforced existing networks. Large banquets were held in his honour, culminating in one in Hamburg, the hotbed of the free trade doctrine in the German territories. This gathering was held on his return from Russia and was attended by some 1,000 people (Taylor 1994: 204–205; *The Times*, 9 October 1847). In some cities in Italy, such banquets accompanied by political speeches constituted an entirely new form of political meeting and agitation (Romani 2006). Moreover, they were widely reported in the press locally, nationally, and in Britain, thus helping to disseminate the free trade narrative further.

Cobden’s tour of Europe instigated increased transnational networking and mobilization. In conjunction with his visit, French free traders created the Association centrale pour la liberté des échanges in 1846, and he became one of two British corresponding members (Tyrrell 2006: 99–100). Free traders also organized a European congress in Brussels in September 1847 coinciding with the completion of his tour. The wider public appeal of free trade initially remained limited, however, as nationalistic sentiment as well as democratic revolutionary demands mobilized the masses. Cobden underestimated the force of nationalism in the case of Italy (Edsall 1986: 187) and generally regarded it as being detrimental to free trade and global peace. Free trade and its benefits remained difficult to imagine and popularize for the time being, however.

## REPRESENTING AND EXPERIENCING FREE TRADE AT THE GREAT EXHIBITION

The Great Exhibition was designed from the start to constitute a unique space both for the material representation and for the actual experience by visitors of the free trade doctrine and policy. This experience underwent narrative development and interpretation and was further disseminated in print. While its

success was far from clear in the beginning, not least due to the enormous time pressure under which it was built and filled with exhibits, the resulting Crystal Palace eventually created a global sensation. It proved to be an astounding success not just in terms of the machinery and other products of industrialization assembled there, but also as a social and communicative space with its apparently peaceful mingling of people of different social classes and nationalities.

When the Royal Society of Arts debated the possibility of an exhibition, they initially focused on the interface of art, design, and industrial production and conceived of it as national in scope. From 1846 onwards, however, free traders increasingly appropriated the plan with their joint goal to showcase free trade and represent the world in an exhibition. In the process they co-opted others, such as the architect Jeremy Paxton, who gave the Crystal Palace a Victorian form but combined this with the revolutionary innovation of using only iron and glass as building materials in order to underscore the future-oriented free trade message. The 24 members who composed the Royal Commission tasked with preparing the 1851 exhibition also reflected the powerful new political agenda. They included, alongside Cobden, Lord John Russell (then Whig Prime Minister), Robert Peel, Henry Labouchere, the President of the Board of Trade, who had been responsible for the 1849 Navigation Act which gave foreign shipping companies equal access to British ports, and Samuel Jones-Loyd, one of the founders of the modern Bank of England and a leading member of the free trade Political Economy Club (Davis 1999: 1–51; Haltern 1973: 1–40).

Opening the planned exhibition to other states and companies came naturally to the free traders. According to his own commentary, Henry Cole returned from visiting the 1849 French national exhibition deeply convinced that the British had to organize the first international exhibition. He suggested the idea, which had been propagated unsuccessfully by free traders in France (Picard 1903: 12), to the German-born Prince Albert, President of the Royal Society of Arts, who was enthusiastic about it (Cole 1884: 123–125). When Cole, Francis Fuller, and others visited regional industrial centres in Britain during August and September 1849 to gauge interest in the planned exhibition, moreover, they found that most trade associations and businessmen were keen on the prospect of Britain flying the banner of industrialization, internationalization, and progress by adopting a globally focused stance for the future exhibition (Fuller 1851: 35–36).

In line with the free traders' universalist narrative, which connected technological innovation, free trade, cultural exchange, human progress, and world peace, Prince Albert originally envisaged a purely thematic order for the exhibition. When this proved to be unrealizable for lack of time, the organizers superimposed a complex classification system with 30 categories of exhibits



to be judged by juries, with some participation by foreign specialists, onto the basic, nationally themed spatial structuring, with the United Kingdom occupying 50% of the space. Crucially, the universalist narrative was also symbolized by the Crystal Palace itself, a building that was 560 metres long. It was not just an architectural sensation, falsely predicted by many sceptics before the opening never to be completed or to collapse instantly upon the first gust of wind; it also encompassed all exhibits in one building, thus avoiding a more obviously hierarchical spatial structuring of countries of origin, for example. At the same time, the use of glass maximized the impressive effect of natural light filling the huge cathedral-like building. In these ways, the exhibition's material character strongly amplified the quasi-religious character of the underlying free trade doctrine.

The timely opening of the Great Exhibition on 1 May 1851 constituted an emphatic victory in and of itself for free traders and seemed to sound the death knell for protectionism in Britain. Misjudging the public mood, protectionists organized a public meeting on the same day, which was badly attended, hardly reported in the press, and ridiculed by the satirical *Punch* magazine as an embarrassing 'separate exhibition [of protectionists] of themselves' (*Punch* 20/1851: 173). At the same time, the Great Exhibition, although mainly a private, for-profit exercise, received the blessing of Queen Victoria, who opened it in a grand ceremony in the presence of some 20,000 invited guests – something that greatly helped legitimize it as a prestigious national as well as international event. In the words of a German commentator, 'what Cobden and his associates wanted to construct in a doctrinal manner, is there, as a completed feat' in the form of the Crystal Palace (Sartorius 1851: 2). Thus, the imagination of a unified world was materially represented by the Crystal Palace. With its amazing architecture and prefigurative meaning, it succeeded in mobilizing support for the idea of free trade as a pathway to world peace.

While the organizers refrained from overly political official 'public' statements advocating free trade, the exhibition's overriding rationale was clear to everyone. In a fictional visit to London undertaken in 1851, one Frenchman noted (*A Frenchman's Visit* 1851), 'you have [...] put yourselves in a glasshouse, and made yourselves public property of the world'. Seeing this glasshouse and its contents allowed some 60,000 foreign visitors, who undertook the expensive and strenuous journey to London, to study the British, their customs, and their public policies, including free trade. This they did alongside some five million British citizens, some of whom would have visited more than once. As a German observer commented retrospectively, the Great Exhibition was obviously anchored to the 'modern conception of free trade'. Internationalizing the exhibition allowed that 'everybody would return enriched from the event to which he contributed the best he had to also take away the best of all other peoples' (Lessing 1900: 6–7). It did this not just

in terms of technology, art, and design, but also through formal and informal institutions. For the pro-free trade *Economist* journal (*Economist*, 7 May 1851), such mutual learning would naturally result in ‘making trade a common pursuit of all nations, and giving them all a common interest in having it as extensive as possible, and, therefore, in having it perfectly free’.

With some exceptions, such as French worker delegations sponsored to visit the Great Exhibition and report on their findings, most foreign visitors were academics, politicians, or company owners, engineers, and others hoping to benefit from seeing and comparing so many exhibits as well as cultivating old or creating new social and business connections. Visitors from the German states included, for example, August von der Heydt, the Prussian trade minister, who had been encouraged to attend in person by Christian von Bunsen, the Prussian Egyptologist and Ambassador to the United Kingdom since 1841 (Bunsen 1896), and Alfred Krupp who promoted his rapidly growing steel and machinery works and also travelled to visit companies outside of London (Wolbring 2000). From France, Chevalier and Blanqui were sent to London by the Institut de France explicitly to ascertain the reasons for Britain’s success at technological innovation and industrial production and the effects of the new free trade policy. Both used their long stays to strengthen existing links with free traders and to report extensively on their own lessons learnt from the Great Exhibition (Blanqui 1851; Chevalier 1851b).

Even visitors, who unlike Chevalier and Blanqui had no sympathies for free trade, could not escape routine repetitive references to it as the key to economic progress, social stability, and global peace. The American writer and journalist Horace Greeley (1851: 346) continuously felt harassed while visiting the Crystal Palace:

[t]he manufacturing and trafficking classes [...] seize every opportunity, however unsuitable, to commend that [free trade] policy to the strangers now among them as dictated by wisdom, philanthropy and beneficence, and to stigmatize its opposite as impelled by narrow-minded selfishness and only upheld by prejudice and ignorance [...] No consideration of time or place is regarded; in festive meetings, peace conventions, or gatherings of any kind [...] the disciples of Cobden are sure to interlard their harangues with advice to foreigners.

Experiencing the exhibition and becoming familiar with the free trade narrative was not limited to those who could afford to travel to London, however. The Crystal Palace, its contents, and narratives about it were widely disseminated through socio-economic pamphlets, fictional texts, and reports in newspapers. These media evaded post-revolutionary censorship in continental Europe due to the exhibition’s apparently non-political character. Technological improvements in printing made newspapers cheaper, and the spread of workers’ associations and reading clubs made them more widely available. At the start

of the exhibition, the *Economist* (17 May 1851) observed that ‘the exhibition would be a comparatively feeble instrument for helping forward improvement, without the assistance of illustration and letter-press to convey a knowledge of its wonderful palace and its contents to the many millions who cannot possibly visit it’. After its closure, the same journal argued that the effects of the exhibition ‘will be more widely diffused and surpass in extent the effects of any similar or corresponding event to be found in the whole history of mankind’ (*Economist*, 18 October 1851). Moreover, the exhibition’s own iconic culture outlived its closure. When he visited England in 1852, for example, the German writer Theodor Fontane found that dealers were still selling ‘one thousand and one pictures of the Exhibition House’ (Fontane 1963: 11), which became distributed across the world.

In these different ways, interested observers’ experiences in the exhibition grounds or through consumption of the widespread reporting allowed them to take two core lessons from the Great Exhibition that later proved central to facilitating trade liberalization. The first was that while the Great Exhibition confirmed the general expectation that British industry, globally speaking, was superior to that of other nations, many observers commented that the exhibition was not intended to undermine foreign competition. British businessmen and politicians were actually aware of their own limits and saw social communication at, or in conjunction with, the exhibition as facilitating a mutual learning process (e.g., Dussard 1851: 5). The limits not only concerned issues of taste and quality of design, where the superiority of French luxury products, for example, was widely acknowledged (e.g., *The Times*, 15 May 1851), but also meant that British observers could see for themselves the innovative products that foreign companies were developing, highlighting that continental manufacturers could compete with their British counterparts on technology, quality of design, price, or all three, as in the case of the iron products exhibited by Krupp, for example (*Times Supplement*, 1 May 1851).

The Great Exhibition thus strengthened the belief among non-British producers that lower tariffs could help them conquer markets (e.g., Blanqui 1851: 13). The Comtesse de Drohojowska (Doncourt 1889: 25) later recalled how in this regard the exhibition served as an eye-opener to French industrialists. In his contemporary analysis of French trade policy, Alexander von Brandt (1896: 113) even went so far as to claim that after the positive experience of the Great Exhibition, previously widespread fears of lacking competitiveness no longer constituted ‘a barrier to trade reform’ in France. At the very least, many visitors had ‘overestimated others [...] To realize this fact through the exhibition increased the self-confidence of other peoples. The much-feared British superiority in industrial production was shown to have been [...] exaggerated’ (Basch 1869: 96). Moreover, the experience of a more level playing field was extended by subsequent world exhibitions in Paris in 1855, London

in 1862, and Paris again in 1867. It became clear in 1855, for example, that French industry was particularly backward in sectors protected by import prohibitions, which were revealed to be ineffective for beating ‘foreign competition’ (Basch 1869: 100–101).

The second lesson concerned the apparent effect of the new free trade policy in enhancing Britain’s social and political cohesion. For a long time, the English had been considered ‘a mad, bad, and dangerous people’, not least outside of the United Kingdom (Hilton 2008). Before the Great Exhibition, British conservative commentators agitated against the revolutionary potential of such a mass event. Thus, Colonel Charles de Laet Waldo Sibthorp, one of the most reactionary conservative members of parliament, warned his countrymen in view of the impending invasion by foreign visitors (cited in Michell 1999: 59): ‘[t]ake care of your wives and daughters, take care of your property and lives’. Sibthorp predicted ‘robbery, rape, riot, whoremongering, mugging, and military and industrial espionage on a truly cosmic scale’ (Altick 1978: 456). As one reader put it in a letter to the editor of *The Times*, it seemed at one point that ‘the respectable classes were to be exterminated’ at the opening (*The Times*, 21 May 1851). Amidst this atmosphere, and in light of the apocalyptic warnings and enthusiastic predictions by Karl Marx that the exhibition would initiate the end of the rule of the bourgeoisie and capitalism (Marx [1850] 1960: 311), Prince Albert even had a difficult time persuading the Prussian king to allow his son Prince William and his English wife Augusta to attend the opening (Jagow 1937: 232–234).

The opening ceremony passed without a single incident, however, and working-class families later discovered the Crystal Palace for themselves. The building was patrolled by plain-clothes officers from Scotland Yard. Despite accommodating six million visitors over six months, a mere 12 incidents of theft by pickpockets were reported and 11 exhibits stolen (Berichterstattungs-Kommission der deutschen Zollvereins-Regierungen 1853: 693). Many visitors put the relative social harmony that they experienced during the summer of 1851 down to the effects of the free trade policy, which had apparently improved the lot of the working class by lowering food prices. Here, gradual reforms within a parliamentary monarchy seemed to go hand in hand with economic and political freedom. Fed up with the tradition of revolutionary bloodshed, Edmond Texier (1851: 53) reported enthusiastically from the Great Exhibition: ‘[t]his is a magnificent spectacle – this tranquility and good order of the English people, a people that appears to be made for the practice of liberty’. Thus, even foreign visitors, who did not share Cobden’s universalist narrative of peace through (unilateral free) trade, could nevertheless come back from London hoping for domestic peace through freer trade negotiated in bilateral treaties.

## FROM IMAGINING LIBERAL GLOBAL ORDER TO NEGOTIATING FREER TRADE

The material representation of free trade in the Crystal Palace established a cultural pattern of imagining, visualizing, and narrating the alleged interdependence of peace through trade and domestic social and political stability. It emotionalized an otherwise rationalistic economic theory and greatly facilitated political mobilization for it both in the United Kingdom and transnationally. Visualizing the alleged positive effects of free trade through their material representation created a normative pathway and made it much more difficult for competing ideologies to attack it politically. The Great Exhibition did not prefigure, let alone determine, the actual institutional tools or economic or spatial scope of the negotiated trade liberalization of the 1850s and 1860s, but it greatly facilitated and legitimized this process.

To begin with, the experience of subsequent world exhibitions actually helped convert some vocal protectionists to the cause of freer trade. One pertinent example is Ferdinand von Steinbeis from the south-western German state of Württemberg. As the state's exhibition commissioner, he still advocated tariff protection in 1851 (Siebertz 1952: 148–149). He then referred to Württemberg industry's strong showing at the world exhibitions between 1851 and 1862 as having convinced him otherwise. Henceforth he supported more drastic trade liberalization in the debate in the German Customs Union about the Franco–Prussian trade treaty (Davis 1999: 28).

Supporters of free trade also interpreted the results of the Great Exhibition and subsequent exhibitions as material proof of its superiority over varieties of protectionism. In his letters about the Great Exhibition, for example, Chevalier (1851b: 4) made the point that the organization of such an event in an impressive building like the Crystal Palace would have foundered in France over the excessive costs of iron as a result of the high import tariffs. In a published lecture he gave at the Collège de France he insisted (Chevalier 1851a: 42) that the Great Exhibition was final proof that the French 'policy of isolation' negatively impacted on the progress of industry, and of civilization more generally. Hippolyte Dussard (1851: 8–9) sang from the same hymn sheet. 'The famous theory of national work', he predicted, 'this grandiose error, will receive a fatal blow as a result of the exhibition'. The most highly protected French industries like glass making were absent from the Great Exhibition for a reason: because they could not produce goods of sufficient quality or at a reasonable price. Import prohibitions and high tariffs, Dussard argued, merely guaranteed that technological innovation happened elsewhere. German commentator Hermann Schulze (1853: 368) similarly claimed in his treatise about the Great Exhibition that it would henceforth be impossible to argue for high tariffs, and

that public opinion as a result was veering strongly towards Prussia's moderate tariff policy in the German Customs Union instead of the more protectionist preferences of Austria and the south-west German states.

The success of the Great Exhibition not only gave advocates of freer trade arguments that seemed hard to refute; it also pushed them to demand tariff reform and mobilize for it politically. Soon after the opening of the Great Exhibition, the writer and politician Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve introduced a resolution for far-reaching tariff reductions in the French parliament (*Journal des Débats*, 27–28 June 1851), for example. Sainte-Beuve explicitly justified his initiative with reports by Blanqui and Chevalier from the Great Exhibition, which were regularly published in *La Presse* from 3 May 1851 and in the *Journal des Débats* from 27 May 1851 onwards. After a speech by Thiers defending trade barriers, Sainte-Beuve's resolution was defeated by 199 votes to 428 votes for continued tariff protection. In a country where protectionism was deeply ingrained in political culture, however, success in convincing nearly one third of the deputies at least signalled growing demand for tariff reform.

The transition to Napoleon III's authoritarian political system then created a window of opportunity for French free trade advocates. His rule and legitimacy largely rested on the support of the conservative Catholic Church, which he sought to counterbalance by addressing the widespread poverty that acted as a source of mass protests and revolution. Napoleon III not only had personal experience of life in the United Kingdom after the abolition of the Corn Laws; he also had contacts with British free traders like Cobden (Ashley 1904: 298; Palm 1948) and French economic reformers, especially Chevalier and others with a Saint-Simonian background (Ratcliffe 1975). These economic reformers were keen to combine the reduction of external tariff barriers with the centralized administrative modernization of France by experts, including large-scale national and transnational infrastructure projects (Kaiser and Schot 2014: 31–36).

Emboldened by the respectable showing of French industry in 1851, Napoleon III imposed moderate tariff cuts in 1852 and 1855 in the form of decrees. These cuts subsequently became law in 1856, following the success of the second world exhibition in Paris in 1855. In 1856, he also suggested turning all remaining import prohibitions into tariffs, but his government withdrew its proposal after massive protectionist agitation and agreed to a tariff moratorium of five years. Instead of domestic legislation, Napoleon III eventually chose to negotiate a bilateral trade treaty with the United Kingdom to achieve trade liberalization. Such a treaty did not require parliamentary support and constituted a path that was greatly facilitated by the shift in the United Kingdom's trade policy away from unilateral free trade to bilaterally negotiated tariff reductions. Crucially, Cobden and Chevalier, who knew each other very well

and shared the same basic preferences, negotiated the 1860 Franco–British trade treaty, which like later such treaties was routinely justified by pointing to the world exhibitions as having helped corroborate the principle of free or freer trade (Dunham 1930: 24).

France alone concluded similar treaties with Belgium in 1851, Prussia and the German Customs Union in 1862, Italy in 1863, Switzerland in 1864, and Austria in 1866 (Pollard 1974: 117; Rist and Courtin 1957). Through the inclusion of the most-favoured nation clause in the Franco–British treaty, the ‘general Treaty-mongering all over Europe’ in the 1860s (Howe 1998: 129) facilitated a dramatic increase in trade in manufactured goods and capital (Craig and Fisher 1997: 20) and established what constituted a Europe-centric but, through the emerging colonial system, effectively global liberal trade system. Whatever its contested contribution to economic growth (Schularick and Solomou 2011), and despite rising tariffs in countries like Germany and France from 1879–1880 onwards (which were used mainly to protect national agriculture), this system prevailed by and large until the First World War.

## CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

This chapter has shown how the free trade ideas and theories of British political economists built up over time into a pathway towards a liberal global trading order. Their ideas initially spread through translations and intellectual networks, yet they only gained popular appeal with social and political mobilization, which became more transnational in the 1840s and 1850s through the formation of cross-border networks, joint public events like those held during Cobden’s tour of continental Europe in 1846–1847, and their wider dissemination through popular pamphlets and newspapers.

However, as this chapter has also demonstrated, imagining peace through trade and forming transnational networks to propagate such a future for mankind was not enough. Instead, internationalizing the established institutional format of industry exhibitions created great opportunities for advocates of free (or freer) trade to materially visualize and represent their preferred imagined future and make its basic assumptions politically hegemonic across borders. With its spectacular building made entirely of iron and glass, the grand opening by Queen Victoria, and the exhibition’s apparently unifying social effects, the 1851 Great Exhibition facilitated the formation of a strong coherent narrative of non-revolutionary socio-economic progress and peace through trade. At the same time, it could be used to corroborate the predicted beneficial effects of free trade.

Via their subsequent regular organization, the world exhibitions – as cultural institutions and platforms of global communication – created spaces for reflexivity about multiple futures. The exhibition grounds and connected venues

for speeches and meetings constituted the first, spatial dimension, which facilitated such reflexivity. The second, communicative dimension consisted of widespread reporting about the exhibitions in newspapers, illustrated journals, travel diaries, books, and postcards, some of which became disseminated beyond colonial centres and reached global peripheries. Through largely condensing debate about multiple futures into the six months of each major exhibition, the trade events constituted intense global moments of reflexivity. They allowed backwards comparison of change over time from one exhibition to another as well as forward projections of multiple futures.

Although they also addressed other issues, the world exhibitions remained associated throughout this period with notions of a liberal global trading order. Even from the 1880s onwards, when European colonialism was on show in national pavilions, these representations had to connect to the internationalist narrative of peace and trade, if not always peace through trade – a narrative that the free traders had successfully implanted into the world exhibitions as a cultural institution. Moreover, this was true not only of free traders, but also of governments like that of Napoleon III that could draw on the widespread knowledge and experience of world exhibitions and the free (or freer) trade narrative to legitimize their policies.

Opponents of the peace through trade narrative attacked it also in conjunction with the world exhibitions. On the political left, Karl Marx ([1850] 1960: 311) somewhat prematurely predicted the demise of the ‘global bourgeoisie which with this exhibition is creating its modern Pantheon in which it self-indulgently exhibits the Gods which it has created’. In 1889, socialists even founded their Second International at a congress deliberately scheduled to coincide with the Paris world exhibition celebrating the centennial of the French Revolution.

At the same time, the nationalist right, which often advocated protectionist policies, tried to capture the national pavilions with stories of national greatness – notions that always harboured potential for clashes of a less peaceful nature. Nonetheless, the internationalist narrative remained so strongly associated with the world exhibitions as a space for global communication that alternative imaginations of global futures based, for example, on notions of working-class solidarity or social Darwinist visions of anarchical competition remained marginal. With internationalist-minded individuals, social groups, and political parties retaining a large degree of control over the organization of the most important world exhibitions in the democratic republics of France and the United States until the First World War, these alternative imaginations were relegated for the most part to congresses (like the socialist meeting in 1889) organized in conjunction with the exhibitions or the colonial sections of national pavilions.



The United Kingdom formally surrendered its political leadership on free trade with the introduction of the Commonwealth preference system in 1932, and in the wake of the world economic crisis the fascist regimes began to follow economic policies geared towards greater autarchy. The United States began to fly the banner of freer trade shortly thereafter. Despite the emergence of new media such as radio and television, the US also used the popular world exhibitions as a cultural institution to spread its message of freer trade. This was to be used as an instrument for extracting democratic states from the socio-economic crisis and for recreating a liberal global order. Building on the landmark 1934 Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act, Secretary of State Cordell Hull pushed for the reduction of trade barriers through the globalization of the 'Open Door' policy (which was originally directed at China), as well as through evangelical overtures. The US strategy was not implemented through unilateral free trade as Cobden had advocated, however, nor through bilateral treaties as in the 1860s, but via a new system of institutionalized multilateralism: US-dominated 'embedded liberalism' would become the new global order for the Western world in the Cold War era (Irwin 1998).

In light of rapid change in technology and lifestyles, the imagined future connected to the United States' Open Door Policy had changed compared to Cobden's free trade vision. The new policy no longer focused on lifting workers out of poverty to prevent revolution. Instead, the 1939 World's Fair in New York showcased, in a futuristic manner, how modern means of transportation would sustain boundless mobility; how media like television would further liberalize the spread of information and provide entertainment for all; and how household appliances like the electrical washing machine and dishwasher would simplify domestic life and create much more free time for citizens to enjoy the benefits of modern consumer culture (Zim et al. 1988). This was a prospect that United States policymakers dangled in front of Europeans after the Second World War to encourage them to support the US-dominated multilateral liberal global order and reject the temptations of communism.

As this chapter has demonstrated, the early world exhibitions created a pathway for imagining, visualizing, and narrating peace through trade as a particular and new form of global cooperation. This imagined pathway did not determine how trade liberalization was negotiated and institutionalized, but it held power as a cultural institution to contribute to political mobilization in favour of it, and to its transnational legitimation.

The institutionalization of a liberal global trading order was frequently erratic – new agricultural tariffs became widespread from the late 1870s, and events like the world wars and the world economic crisis severely impeded its continued operation. Moreover, the two 'benign', non-predatory hegemons (Osterhammel 2014: 455) at the origins of the two liberal global trading orders in the second halves of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the United

Kingdom and the United States, were never totally united behind this particular imagined future and associated narrative, and their policies were often pragmatic. In the 1860s, Britain had already moved from unilateral free trade to the use of bilateral trade treaties. In the first decade after the creation of multilateral international organizations like the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, United States policy was heavily influenced by domestic protectionist interests and thwarted by opposition from Western European governments (Milward 1984; Stiles 1995). Nevertheless, the 1851 Great Exhibition clearly helped to create and sustain a pathway to global cooperation that, in spite of recurring crises and multiple challenges, has endured as a powerful force well into the twenty-first century.

## NOTE

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