

A world safe for whose democracy?
Woodrow Wilson, ontological security, and the anxiety of settler states

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ABSTRACT

Woodrow Wilson remains an imposing figure in the history of liberal internationalism. Recent turns toward re-examining the role of racism in international politics however has reopened questions about the significance of Wilson's views on race and progressive liberalism: how do these two aspects of his thought and politics hang together? In this thesis I contend that the story of historical progress, race, and liberalism for Wilson was fundamentally an identity narrative. Using an ontological security lens, I interpret Wilson's larger political project as an attempt to manage the anxiety resulting from the United States' ambiguous role as an early settler state in an international society defined by European empire. I develop an ontological security theoretical framework based on the assumption that all politics, but international politics especially, is defined by a constitutive condition of anxiety. This framework enables me to find continuity in Wilson's scholarship, politics, and statecraft. I illustrate how Wilson depended on a notion of historical progress to animate both his liberalism and his views on race and national identity. Wilson drew on this notion of historical progress to both shape American identity to his vision of a nation grounded in shared English civilization, and re-order international politics to make that vision more secure. I contribute to the emerging conversation on anxiety in ontological security scholarship by developing a framework to understand the role of anxiety in the history of settler states. Through this framework I also contribute to the larger conversation (re)interpreting historical liberalism by illustrating how Wilson's identity politics and progressive politics constituted each other.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1939 Paul Hill, an Oklahoman retired high school principal, set out to prove his belief that former American president Woodrow Wilson was "the greatest statesman and world figure of the age."¹ He sent out five hundred letters soliciting opinions on Wilson to a variety of different public intellectuals and leaders around the world. More than three hundred responded, including replies from Sigmund Freud, and Wilson's contemporary and Italian counterpart at the Paris peace conference, Vittorio Orlando. Few answered at such length however as W. E. B. Du Bois. The scholar and activist related his personal experiences with Wilson. Over eight pages Du Bois traced a narrative that started from his advocacy for Wilson during the 1912 presidential election. Drawn to Wilson's pragmatic brand of progressivism, Du Bois thought that he represented the best chance for Black Americans who were repelled by the conservative Taft administration and frustrated by Theodore Roosevelt's refusal to adopt Du Bois' proposed plank on racial issues for the progressive Bull Moose Party's platform. Du Bois actively campaigned for Wilson, alongside other Black American leaders in a closely fought election.² Wilson's gratitude however did not extend very far for Du Bois and his compatriots, as the first Democratic president in a generation over the course of his tenure largely acquiesced to racist policies pushed by his party's conservative Southern flank. These policies included segregating federal employees and turning a blind-- and some even argue sympathetic-- eye to rising violence against Black Americans.

The arch from enchantment to frustrated disillusionment that Du Bois expresses in his response to Paul Hill captures the seeming dissonance of Wilson's legacy. On the one hand,

¹ Quoted in Kenneth M. Glazier, "W. E. B. Du Bois' Impressions of Woodrow Wilson," *The Journal of Negro History* 58, no. 4 (1973): 452, accessed June 3, 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2716750>.

² W. E. B. Du Bois, "My Impressions of Woodrow Wilson," *The Journal of Negro History* 58, no. 4 (1973): 453–55, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2716751>.

Wilson was a noted progressive and represents a pivotal figure in the history of liberal internationalism. Ikenberry refers to Wilson as "the great prophet of liberal internationalism who brought forth new ideas for the rebuilding of a war-ravaged world."³ On the other hand, Wilson's presidency represents one of the darkest periods in twentieth century American history for Black Americans and many other groups that did not fit the Anglo-Saxon ideal America to which Wilson and his contemporaries subscribed. Du Bois' view of Wilson is fundamentally more sympathetic than modern popular interpretations, which tend to treat Wilson as a committed Neo-Confederate and explicitly racist in that same sense.⁴ Even if we accept Du Bois' more sympathetic perspective though, it is now clear that Wilson's perspective on race permeated both his scholarship and his politics. This seeming contradiction has troubling implications for the wider progressive and liberal projects with which Wilson is still associated. Recent turns towards re-examining the role of racism in American politics and history, alongside the continuing emergence of global recognition of how the legacy of imperialism continues to affect politics, have reopened questions about the significance of Wilson's views on race both as those views regard his legacy⁵ and the larger history of liberal internationalism during this period.⁶ How do Wilson's liberalism and progressivism hang together with his views on race?

³ G. John Ikenberry, *A World Safe for Democracy: Liberal Internationalism and the Crises of Global Order*, electronic resource, Politics and culture (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 108, accessed June 3, 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/j.ctv15pjxns>.

⁴ Lloyd E. Ambrosius, "Woodrow Wilson and The Birth of a Nation: American Democracy and International Relations," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 18, no. 4 (December 13, 2007): 689–718, accessed June 3, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592290701807168>; Dylan Matthews, "Woodrow Wilson Was Extremely Racist — Even by the Standards of His Time," *Vox*, last modified November 20, 2015, accessed June 3, 2021, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2015/11/20/9766896/woodrow-wilson-racist>.

⁵ Philip Conway, "The Case against Woodrow Wilson, after 100 Years," *The Disorder Of Things*, May 28, 2019, accessed June 3, 2021, <https://thedisorderofthings.com/2019/05/28/the-case-against-woodrow-wilson/>.

⁶ Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Larry Wolff, *Woodrow Wilson and the Reimagining of Eastern Europe* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2020), 10–11.

Chapter One: Woodrow Wilson, race, and the work of progressive liberalism

1.1 Argument

In this thesis, I make the case that Wilson's progressivism and views on race hang together because they are entangled and together constitute Wilson's vision of American identity. By assuming that progressivism and racial politics are incapable of hanging together, we overlook much about the context within which Wilson wrote, campaigned, and governed. Modern liberal perspectives like Ikenberry's have difficulty accounting for how Wilson's progressivism and racism hang together because they are narrowly concerned with modern liberalism's antecedents and thus miss a larger context within which liberalism serves as identity.⁷ Wilson's liberalism is in-extractable from his specific project of making sense of the United States as a racially English nation and securing its place in the world. He understood liberalism as emerging from a particular history of the Anglo-Saxon people, prompted by drive towards self-government, individualism, and democracy. This dependence on English history however accentuated the identity problems that the United States faced as one of the earliest settler states. Wilson believed that the United States was too young as a nation to have an identity grounded in its own history separate from England. He also struggled to differentiate the United States from Europe and its project of empire. This dilemma left the United States vulnerable to the anxiety inherent in an international system that had centered European empires for at least a century. Wilson depended on a notion of historical progress to solve this dilemma, emphasizing the progressive trajectory of English America as being an exemplary representative

⁷ Beate Jahn, "The Sorcerer's Apprentice: Liberalism, Ideology, and Religion in World Politics," *International Relations* 33, no. 2 (June 1, 2019): 322–337, accessed June 3, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117819834647>.

of its civilization. When understood through the terms of historical progress, the United States was both grounded in an English past and uniquely situated to advance English civilization and liberalism through its distance from the Old World.

The story of historical progress and liberalism for Wilson then was fundamentally an identity narrative, as becomes clear when put in the context of ontological security. In this thesis, I rely on a recent turn in ontological security scholarship towards anxiety as a formative factor in the international system to develop a thicker account of Wilson that links his scholarship and his politics. Anxiety is a fundamental background condition of the international system that prods actors to craft theories and identities to make sense of international politics in a constant process of reinvention.⁸ This background anxiety is compounded by conflicts and inequalities between the states.⁹ Settler states lacked historical resources to generate a national identity that was independent of their originating empire's history and thus struggled to assert their agency in the present. Wilson's early scholarship on the state in 1893 can be understood as an act of "autocoscography"¹⁰ that provides crucial context for his later attempts to reorder the world after the First World War. Wilson drew on his narrative of historical progress to recraft international order in a liberal image that reflected the English heritage of the United States. His success in influencing the structure of the League of Nations placed the nation-state at the center

⁸ Bahar Rumelili, "Integrating Anxiety into International Relations Theory: Hobbes, Existentialism, and Ontological Security," *International Theory* 12, no. 2 (July 2020): 257–272, accessed June 3, 2021, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-theory/article/integrating-anxiety-into-international-relations-theory-hobbes-existentialism-and-ontological-security/606253984F2E80E48E9C24D5E66CFFE6>.

⁹ Ayşe Zarakol, "Ontological (In)Security and State Denial of Historical Crimes: Turkey and Japan," *International Relations* 24, no. 1 (March 1, 2010): 3–23, accessed June 3, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117809359040>.

¹⁰ Andrew R. Hom and Brent J. Steele, "Anxiety, Time, and Ontological Security's Third-Image Potential," *International Theory* 12, no. 2 (July 2020): 328, accessed June 3, 2021, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-theory/article/anxiety-time-and-ontological-securitys-thirdimage-potential/782E1AEDB5BAC9AF3D7D923E2AC5F900>.

of international society rather than empires, managing American anxiety by leveling the relationship between the United States and the European empires.

Centering Wilson's project to evoke a particular American identity contextualizes his liberalism and highlights the problems inherent in any project that considers the problems of identity and liberalism separately. It also illuminates the more fundamental ways in which Wilson aimed to reshape the international system. The establishment of the League of Nations at the Paris Peace Conference reformed and narrowed the lines along which sovereignty was recognized. Empires continued after 1919, but they did so in an international system that normatively privileged the nation-state as the constitutive unit of international politics. By centering the nation-state, Wilson used a narrow understanding of anti-imperialism to place settler states on an equal footing with Europe in international society. My interpretation here is admittedly at odds with conventional understandings of sovereignty in International Relations,¹¹ which often treat the concept as a closed-off ideal type. Conversely, I follow Bartelson's conclusion from his genealogy of sovereignty as axiomatic: "the relationship between the very term sovereignty, the concept of sovereignty and the reality of sovereignty is historically open, contingent and unstable."¹² The concept of the nation-state is similarly contingent and historically specific, as Ayşe Zarakol notes, "the notion of bounded community as represented by the nation-state is a modern invention (or at the very least its ubiquity is)."¹³ It is at this point that the nation-state, which up until 1919 had largely been a political community historically specific

¹¹ Stephen D. Krasner, "Abiding Sovereignty," *International Political Science Review* 22, no. 3 (July 1, 2001): 20, accessed June 3, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512101223002>.

¹² Jens Bartelson, *A Genealogy of Sovereignty*, Cambridge studies in international relations 39 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 2.

¹³ Ayşe Zarakol, "Why Hierarchy?," in *Hierarchies in World Politics*, ed. Ayşe Zarakol, Cambridge Studies in International Relations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 269, accessed June 3, 2021, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/hierarchies-in-world-politics/why-hierarchy/D34A9A48880359040EA25BDE841F945F>.

to Europe and European colonies, became normatively "ubiquitous" within the larger world. If we follow along with E. H. Carr's critique that the value system that Paris Peace Conference stood up was not self-evident¹⁴-- as Wilson would have understood it-- then how the participants at the Paris Peace Conference attempted to stabilize a concept of sovereignty as embedded in the nation-state is a problem that entails deeper examination of how the participants understood these concepts.

1.2 (Re)interpreting early twentieth-century liberalism

My work in this thesis is set in the larger context of a shift in conversation about the Liberal International Order at the turn of the twentieth century and the transition in hegemony from Great Britain to the United States. Wilson's presidency is important in part because it occurred during this hegemonic transition, but also crucially because he was the first champion of the American variant of liberal internationalism. By focusing on how Wilson aimed to stabilize sovereignty on to the nation-state during the 1919 peace negotiations, I contribute to this conversation by developing a thicker understanding of liberal American identity during this period, anchored in the concept of ontological security. My perspective diverges significantly from conventional liberal perspectives. Mainstream liberal perspectives like Ikenberry's have shifted over the course of the last several decades, especially as Wilson's complicated legacy has received more attention. They still go too far in narrowing their focus on liberalism to those antecedents of modern liberalism that remain consistent.

¹⁴ E. H. Carr and Michael Cox, "The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939: Reissued with a New Preface from Michael Cox," electronic resource, *Springer eBooks* (2016), accessed June 3, 2021, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/978-1-349-95076-8>.

Wilson looms large in Ikenberry's early work on hegemony and Liberal International Order. In *After Victory*, he argues that the post-World War I order was defined by Wilson's commitment to democracy and liberalism and the United States' willingness to forego the normal spoils of victory in favor of controlling institutional arrangements.¹⁵ Wilson and the United States in this treatment are depicted through the narrow lens of being antecedents of future liberal order builders to come. In his more recent work on Liberal International Order, Ikenberry has retrenched his argument.¹⁶ Wilson still looms large: its title-- *A World Safe for Democracy*-- is drawn from Woodrow Wilson's 1918 Fourteen Points speech to Congress.¹⁷ Ikenberry attempts to modify his framing of Wilson however from a bold progressive proponent of liberalism to a conservative:

Wilson-era liberal internationalism was conservative in the sense that it did not frontally challenge European empire, racial or cultural hierarchies, or ultimately, the prevailing terms of state sovereignty. Wilson sought to initiate a political and moral project that would not transcend the Westphalian international order but bring independent, self-governing states and peoples together through the evolution of intergovernmental norms and political relations.¹⁸ (Ikenberry 2020, 102)

Ikenberry makes two significant moves here in his attempted reframing. First, he frames Wilson as a conservative, noting "at a deeper level, Wilson saw global political change as a slow evolution... this made it easier for internationalists in his generation to reconcile their liberalism with Western imperialism."¹⁹ Second, Ikenberry attempts to isolate Wilson's views on race and civilization as simply being of-his-era, rather than being inextricably linked to his views of

¹⁵ G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars*, Princeton studies in international history and politics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

¹⁶ Ikenberry, *A World Safe for Democracy*.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 102.

¹⁹ Ibid., 138.

liberalism, describing these ideas instead as "moral blindness"²⁰ resulting in part from Wilson's connections with the American South.²¹ These moves are buttressed by Ikenberry's assumption that modernization, and thus history, is a more or less a linear progressive path. He contends that elements of Wilson's thought that would be understood as regressive by modern standards are contradictions resulting from his environment, rather an actual element and function of Wilson's progressivism.

Ikenberry's retrenchment is an important acknowledgement of the darker side of Wilson's legacy. In trying to separate Wilson-as-liberal from Wilson-as-racist however, Ikenberry draws Wilson's progressivism too narrowly. He crucially misses the work that Wilson's assumption of historical progress does in incorporating race and civilization in Wilson's concept of the nation-state. Nor can Wilson's progressivism be separated from his project of evoking an American national identity. I illustrate both of these problems in Chapter Three of this thesis. These issues of historical interpretation highlight larger problems with Ikenberry's historicization of liberalism. While liberalism might now be associated with pluralism and universalism, its history is fundamentally entangled with specific European identities and hegemony.²² Racial politics played a much greater role in American foreign policy than Ikenberry concedes. Vucetic finds that the transition between British and American hegemony remained peace "because American and British elites succeeded in framing their community as a single Anglo-Saxon brotherhood, the vanguard of a racially defined humankind."²³ Schake similarly acknowledges the role of

²⁰ Ibid., 139.

²¹ Ibid., 133.

²² Jahn, "The Sorcerer's Apprentice."

²³ Srdjan Vucetic, "A Racialized Peace? How Britain and the US Made Their Relationship Special," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 7, no. 4 (October 1, 2011): 403–404, accessed June 3, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1743-8594.2011.00147.x>.

shared culture in the peaceful transition from British to American hegemony.²⁴ Bell more broadly illustrates how English language liberal discourse in the late nineteenth century was inextricably entangled with arguments about race, civilization, and empire.²⁵ This problematizes Ikenberry's contention that Wilson's views on race were simply "moral blindness"²⁶ or were linked to Wilson's identification with the American South.

In *After Defeat*, Zarakol illustrates how progressive narratives can further entrench the same imperial structures which they purportedly deconstruct by conflating specific cultural arches of development with universal development.²⁷ Where Ikenberry sees modernization as being a linear progressive path, Zarakol sees modernization as contingent and culturally specific. This conflation both implies and obscures a hierarchy in which the specific culture of European (and settler) states, or as Zarakol puts it, a "modernist ontology,"²⁸ constitutes the standard of progress. While more inclusive than the preceding Standard of Civilization, Zarakol emphasizes that it also stigmatizes any states that fall short of progressive standards, as it is "abstracted entirely from the Western experience."²⁹ The inverse of this dynamic is that the same narratives of historical progress that stigmatize states outside the European core secures the identities of states within the European core. Narratives of historical progress then like Wilsonian liberalism also served larger identity functions by enabling Western states to justify hierarchies that benefitted them. Ikenberry's narrow focus on the antecedents of liberalism that make us comfortable excludes this dynamic from view.

²⁴ Kori N. Schake, *Safe Passage: The Transition from British to American Hegemony* (Cambridge, Massachusetts ; London, England: Harvard University Press, 2017), 271.

²⁵ Duncan Bell, "Introduction:: Reordering the World," in *Reordering the World, Essays on Liberalism and Empire* (Princeton University Press, 2016), 1–16, accessed June 3, 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1q1xqvt.4>.

²⁶ Ikenberry, *A World Safe for Democracy*, 139.

²⁷ Ayse Zarakol, *After Defeat: How the East Learned to Live with the West*, Cambridge studies in international relations 118 (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 41.

²⁸ Ibid., 82.

²⁹ Ibid., 90.

In this paper, I make an additional cut within Zarakol's core and distinguish between European nation-states with empires and settler states that emerged over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth century.³⁰ This distinction may be sufficient for Zarakol's broader project of tracing the structures through which the West continues to dominate what she loosely terms the East. It is necessary, however, for understanding Wilson's sense of anxiety and insecurity over the identity of the United States in both his scholarship and-- crucially-- during the First World War and the lead up to the Paris Peace Conference. This explains the contradiction between Wilson's formal and public commitment to anti-imperialism, even as he encouraged the re-entrenchment of many of the racial hierarchies that characterized politics leading up to the war. The productive power of the new nation-state system and the League of Nations both managed the anxiety of settler states by making their status less ambiguous, while also preserving the racial and civilizational hierarchies that gave Wilson's sense of Anglo-Saxon identity meaning and purpose.

1.3 Contributions and road map

In this thesis, I contribute to two conversations in International Relations. The first conversation to which I contribute is the fast growing "research agenda"³¹ of ontological security, as I detail in Chapter Two. Emerging in response to the need to consider security of identity in International Relations, ontological security enables me to place Wilson's concept of state within the larger context of anxiety over American identity. States are particularly sensitive

³⁰ Duncan Bell, "The Dream Machine: On Liberalism and Empire," in *Reordering the World*, Essays on Liberalism and Empire (Princeton University Press, 2016), 19–61, accessed June 3, 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1q1xqvt.5>.

³¹ Catarina Kinnvall and Jennifer Mitzen, "An Introduction to the Special Issue: Ontological Securities in World Politics," *Cooperation and Conflict* 52, no. 1 (March 1, 2017): 5, accessed June 3, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836716653162>.

to how their history-- or lack of history-- affects their ability to project anxiety managing identities. I argue that the ambiguity of settler states during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries highlights specific anxieties around their national identities and how they are both grounded in and simultaneously differentiated from the national identities of their mother countries. I contribute to this conversation by developing a framework of settler state identity. This framework enables me to illustrate that ontological anxiety is a motivating force behind both Wilson's understanding of the state and his attempt to stabilize sovereignty on nation-states at the Paris Peace negotiations.

This framework contextualizes the problems around the historicization of liberalism that sketched out in the previous section. Liberalism should not be dismissed as being only an instrumental justification for empire. Nor should modern notions of liberalism blind us to the work that similar narratives of historical progress have done in the past to entrench and justify hierarchies in international relations. Understanding liberalism as identity is not a new idea;³² my contribution here is to show how Wilson's liberalism functioned as part of a larger identity project to manage anxiety. The thicker understanding of Wilson's concept of the state that I develop in Chapter Three contributes to this conversation by revealing how Wilson's assumptions about race and civilization not only hang together with his progressivism but are effectively co-constitutive. I emphasize that specific identities are embedded in universalist narratives like liberalism.

In chapter three, I apply this theoretical framework to both Wilson's scholarship, or autocosmography, on the historical development of the state and what I interpret as his pursuit of ontological security through both his domestic and foreign policy. I follow Hom and Steele's

³² Jahn, "The Sorcerer's Apprentice."

adaptation of Waltz's levels of analysis.³³ Wilson's textbook *The State: Elements of Historical and Practical Politics*³⁴ conceptualizes the state from the perspective of the first image. His nation-building and progressive economic reform is best understood as national autobiography occurring within the second image. His thought and politics in both the first and second images were consistent with his statecraft, through which he attempted to shape the third image of international politics to sustain his vision of American identity. I find that Wilson's notions of historical progress result in his concepts of liberalism, race, and civilization consistently hanging together across all three images.

³³ Hom and Steele, "Anxiety, Time, and Ontological Security's Third-Image Potential."

³⁴ Woodrow Wilson, *The State: Elements of Historical and Practical Politics* (D.C. Heath & Company, 1893).

Chapter Two: Ontological Security Literature and Settler State Anxieties

In this chapter, I develop a theoretical framework of the settler state in ontological security. I first provide a brief sketch and definition of ontological security in International Relations research. I focus on Zarakol's historicization and critique of early state-centered approaches to ontological security. This historicization is crucial to my project of developing a theoretical framework for applying ontological security to settler states in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as settler states have limited unique historical resources to draw on to create identities and fundamentally awkward relationships with the European empires from which they emerged through colonization. I conclude my discussion of ontological security by drawing on more recent ontological security scholarship that theorizes anxiety as a constant background in politics that emanates from a fundamentally unsettled international system.³⁵ I then announce my theoretical framework of the ontological security of and in settler states. From this framework, I draw a methodological approach relying on discourse analysis and narrative contextualization with which I conclude this chapter.

2.1 What is ontological security?

Predicated on what sociologist Anthony Giddens termed "security as being,"³⁶ ontological security has produced a wide variety of literature since its original adaptation to international relations in the mid-2000s. Most ontological security literature refers back to the work of Giddens or psychoanalyst R. D. Laing, from whom Giddens adapted the concept. Mitzen

³⁵ Karl Gustafsson and Nina C. Krickel-Choi, "Returning to the Roots of Ontological Security: Insights from the Existentialist Anxiety Literature," *European Journal of International Relations* 26, no. 3 (September 1, 2020): 875–895, accessed June 3, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066120927073>; Hom and Steele, "Anxiety, Time, and Ontological Security's Third-Image Potential"; Rumelili, "Integrating Anxiety into International Relations Theory."

³⁶ Kinnvall and Mitzen, "An Introduction to the Special Issue," 4.

provides the following definition: "ontological security refers to the need to experience oneself as a whole, continuous person in time-- as being rather than constantly changing-- in order to realize a sense of agency."³⁷ Ontological security then consists of establishing continuous identity, or narrative, that is grounded in the past provides agency in the present and presents a sense of security and direction when projected into the future. This continuous identity enables individuals to manage the anxiety and fundamental uncertainty modernity and establish themselves as competent agents.

Early scholarship on ontological security in International Relations centered the state in research, treating the state *as if* it experienced ontological security in the same manner as individuals.³⁸ While this assumption grounded the nascent research agenda in existing conversations with conventional International Relations accounts that focused on physical security, it also limited the potential of ontological security to a parallel explanation for state behavior. Both Jennifer Mitzen and Brent Steele start by problematizing the realist assumption that states are only concerned with physical security.³⁹ As a result, both Steele and Mitzen also center the state in their analyses, if in seemingly opposed ways. Mitzen argues that state identities function as roles and are thus constituted through social interaction (354).⁴⁰ Identity formation is an exogenous process where interactions with other states and the international system at large are routinized and internalized into the state's identity. Steele alternatively posited that state identity was autobiographical and narrative based.⁴¹ State identity formation in

³⁷ Jennifer Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma," *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 3 (September 1, 2006): 342, accessed June 3, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066106067346>.

³⁸ Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi, "Returning to the Roots of Ontological Security," 882.

³⁹ Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State*, The new international relations series (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2007), 1.

⁴⁰ Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics," 354.

⁴¹ Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, 10.

Steele is endogenous, emerging from within the state and driven by internal dynamics and contestation between competing internal actors. While Mitzen and Steele's approaches to the subject were quite different, they weren't necessarily contradictory. Ayşe Zarakol theorized that both endogenous and exogenous ontological security could occur simultaneously but must be historically contextualized. She writes, "both approaches are partly right, but they are also incomplete because neither takes into account the uneven expansion of international society or the effect this expansion had on the identity of outside states who were incorporated into the system at a later date."⁴²

In subsequent scholarship, Zarakol built on the idea that ontological security is processed by different societies in different manners in a broader historical exploration of the maintenance of ontological security in human society. In her 2017 paper, Zarakol directly problematizes the notion that the state is naturally or has always been associated with the provision of ontological security. Zarakol poses the question of when the state became responsible for providing ontological security. She suggests that this arrangement may be historically contingent and unstable. The concept of sovereignty is key to Zarakol's historicization (2017) of ontological security: "it is possible that institutions of political authority that do not offer the people a secure ontological framework may not be thought of as truly sovereign, even if they have exclusive territorial control."⁴³ This current arrangement divides ontological security provision between political and religious authority but privileges the former over the latter. Historically, the "sovereign" model of ontological security encompasses Mitzen⁴⁴ and Steele's⁴⁵ concept of the

⁴² Zarakol, "Ontological (In)Security and State Denial of Historical Crimes," 19.

⁴³ Ayşe Zarakol, "States and Ontological Security: A Historical Rethinking," *Cooperation and Conflict* 52, no. 1 (March 1, 2017): 49, accessed June 3, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836716653158>.

⁴⁴ Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics."

⁴⁵ Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*.

state as a primary ontological security provider and seeker. Zarakol emphasizes the sovereign model is only dominant in the international system as currently constituted: "there are good reasons to think that the nation-state may no longer be (or never really has been) meeting the ontological security needs of citizens."⁴⁶ If the state is not necessarily the natural proper subject of ontological security research throughout history, then what is?

2.2 The Anxiety of the International

A recent turn towards theorizing and understanding anxiety as an essential background condition of the international system addresses Zarakol's challenge most fully. In their introduction to *Political Theory's* 2020 symposium on the controversy, Kinnvall and Mitzen contend that ontological security research has unnecessarily tended towards empirical focus on fear and conflict. They emphasize that where fear leads to the predetermined responses of flight or fight, "anxiety is characterized by multi-finality, admitting to a range of emotions, including excitement and anticipation, and a variety of behaviors, from compulsive repetition, to acting out, paralysis, to entrepreneurship."⁴⁷ Kinnvall and Mitzen call for ontological security to thicken accounts of anxiety. Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi pick up on Kinnvall and Mitzen's call by returning to the existentialist literature from which Laing drew his initial formulation and revitalizing a distinction between normal anxiety, and neurotic anxiety or ontological insecurity.⁴⁸ Normal anxiety in particular-- they argue-- has the potential to be productive, as it is "a cultural and societal phenomenon, to the extent that collectives, societies, or particular periods

⁴⁶ Zarakol, "States and Ontological Security," 62.

⁴⁷ Catarina Kinnvall and Jennifer Mitzen, "Anxiety, Fear, and Ontological Security in World Politics: Thinking with and beyond Giddens," *International Theory* 12, no. 2 (July 2020): 241, accessed June 3, 2021, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-theory/article/anxiety-fear-and-ontological-security-in-world-politics-thinking-with-and-beyond-giddens/BC21CD903850B452EBDB663A011C082C>.

⁴⁸ Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi, "Returning to the Roots of Ontological Security."

in history can come to be characterized by grave anxiety."⁴⁹ Normal anxiety then, according to Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi, can be experienced by political communities like states.

Existentialist philosophy's treatment of anxiety is also an invaluable productive source for Rumelili.⁵⁰ She argues that the existential state of humanity is "meaninglessness,"⁵¹ which results in an anxiety to create meaning becoming a constitution condition of politics. Rumelili links this to Hobbes' contention that the existential state of humanity is uncertainty leading to humans feeling a compulsion to seek certainty over the future. This is the background condition against which the states-- or Hobbes' leviathan-- becomes necessary. Adopting this framework of anxiety enables ontological security scholarship to study the state as both as a political community that derives its authority from managing anxiety, but at the same time an entity that is anxious itself.⁵² Hom and Steele (2020) deepen Rumelili's theorization of anxiety as a background condition of the international system. Adapting Waltz's framework of politics in three images, Hom and Steele draw on Rumelili⁵³ and pull Steele's early account of ontological security into a theorization of anxiety as fundamentally characterizing Waltz's Third Image, or-- as Hom and Steele put it-- the International. They write "self-identity narratives... must grapple with two important issues: (1) the coherence of 'inner Selves,' which are an environment of their own'; and (2) the coherence of those Selve's external environments, the constellation of stimuli of which they must 'make sense' in order to persist."⁵⁴ There is constant tension between the collective project of international society in structuring international relations with intranational identities, many of which implicate specific views of international society. It is against this

⁴⁹ Ibid., 888.

⁵⁰ Rumelili, "Integrating Anxiety into International Relations Theory," 257.

⁵¹ Ibid., 260.

⁵² Ibid., 266.

⁵³ Hom and Steele, "Anxiety, Time, and Ontological Security's Third-Image Potential," 325.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 324.

background that society must not only provide nation-building narratives-- as in Steele's earlier work--but also "world-building narratives,"⁵⁵ within which intranational narratives must fit to remain consistent. These narratives must strive to maintain a continuous narrative across the three images that ground societies in the past and provide them with agency in the present to manage the fundamental uncertainty of both the future and the International.

The elevation of anxiety to the third image also crucially makes the lines between the third, second, and first images "fuzzy rather than distinct."⁵⁶ Anxiety turns ontological security into a continuum, where agents within states also experience anxiety but may respond to that anxiety differently.⁵⁷ Anxiety from the International thus fundamentally conditions politics both between and within states. Based on this continuum, Hom and Steele deepen Steele's first-generation understanding of autobiography. In addition to state autobiographies that make sense of both the state's Self and its international context and "world building" efforts to reform the international, Hom and Steele also identify "international autocosmographies" as a crucial form of narrative creation. These are narratives about the International that are not told by a state agent but instead are the efforts of individuals who live within these structures to make sense of the international environment and why it "hangs together."⁵⁸

2.3 Ontological Security and the Anxieties of Settler States

Assuming a background condition of anxiety as constituting the international system enables me to build a framework for the ontological security of and in settler states. First, we can assume that ontological security processes work to manage anxiety in different ways across

⁵⁵ Ibid., 325.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 330.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 335.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 328.

international society, as they are affected by factors like hierarchy and history. This makes the very provision of ontological security-- both its content and processes-- fundamentally contested. This is especially true at the end of the long nineteenth century, as the empire system peaked and entered a long decline that coincided with the eventual full emergence of that nation-state system, as discussed in chapter one. It is within this history that settler states emerged as a particular concern. Born as the colonies of (mostly) European empires, the colonies that would become settler states derived their ontological security from the empires that established them, or-- as Bell puts it-- their mother countries.⁵⁹ They shared a common culture with their mother countries and imagined themselves as being descended from the same peoples or race. This last factor was particularly crucial:

Colonists were figured as always already civilized, and as carrying with them a bundle of rights and obligations that marked them indelibly as both facsimiles (or not-quite-facsimiles) of those inhabiting the mother country and radically different from (and superior to) other peoples they encounter and especially those they invaded and dispossessed. This set of assumptions underwrote the argument for self-government.⁶⁰

There is then a fundamental tension between the commonality from which the settler state emerges and its eventual independence. This tension was formative for the United States, which established its identity in rejection of the British rule of its mother country. Settler states that attained sovereignty would have to navigate this tension over perceptions of the past to provide ontological security and maintain sovereignty⁶¹ in a way that European empires, which had clearer senses of continuous and constitutive history, did not.

⁵⁹ Bell, "The Dream Machine."

⁶⁰ Ibid., 71.

⁶¹ Zarakol, "States and Ontological Security."

During the period of 1890 to 1920, the period on which I focus in this thesis, the United States was emerging from a fraught century of growth, conflict, and transformation. The United States fought two wars with Great Britain and constantly expanded Westward across North America, conquering or pushing back Native American political communities as it went. Both immigration and lingering conflict over the end of Civil War made both ontological security narratives and processes by which they were created contested. We see here clear examples of Steele's autobiographical, or endogenous ontological security processes, as leaders within the United States furiously wrote and rewrote national narratives to suit their vision of the United States. As the United States gained prominence internationally, we also see Mitzen's exogenous, or relational, conception of ontological security come into play. Most Americans who held political authority in the United States thought of their country as European, but the United States neither had extensive overseas possessions, nor was it ethnically homogenous in the same sense as Western European powers like Great Britain and France. Through the Monroe doctrine, the United States attempted to assert a type of hegemony in the Western Hemisphere to keep European powers out, but it also sought status in the European order. We then have two fundamental tensions in American ontological security during this period: ambiguity over the United States' relationship with Europe, Great Britain in particular, and anxiety over how the United States could maintain its ties to its imagined English past.

Woodrow Wilson emerges as a unique figure and subject of settler state anxiety against this background, a prominent author of both American autobiographical narrative, through his career as a politician, and international autocosmography about the International that formed the environment of the United States, through his career as scholar. He was also a liminal figure within regional politics in the United States, as he grew up in the South during and after the Civil

War but made his home in the Northeast at Princeton.⁶² Wilson's writing is a rich source for ontological security narrative, and it is in his writings and speeches that we see how the issues of identity and liberalism are fundamentally entangled for him. Wilson's liberalism emerged from the history and culture of first England and then the United States as a form of historical progress at the vanguard of which Wilson placed his vision of a progressive and nationalist United States. Conversely, liberalism and progressivism were also integral to Wilson's conception of American identity. This entanglement of American identity and Wilson's understanding of liberalism as historical progress resulted in Wilson using a universalist register of language that appears almost cosmopolitan to the modern eye, even as he was satisfied with reordering the world in a manner that favored his conception of the United States. Wilsonian liberalism then not only comprised a variant of then-progressive politics, but also as a response to the anxieties emerging from the United States position as a settler state in a fundamentally uncertain and unsettled international society. As I show in the next chapter, it is Wilson's concern with curating a specific form of American identity to manage anxiety that allows both his progressivism and his views on race to hang together through his narrative of historical progress.

2.4 Methodological approach

My theoretical framework dictates both certain methodological commitments and limitations. Like Steele, I look for Wilson's ontological security seeking and autocosmography as instances of discursive consciousness, or what Giddens terms "well ordered speech."⁶³ This

⁶² Patricia O'Toole, *The Moralist: Woodrow Wilson and the World He Made* (New York ; London ; Toronto: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 10.

⁶³ As quoted in Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, 11.

necessitates discourse analysis. I adopt a conceptual approach to Wilson, examining how he links sovereignty, identity, and the state together. I focus on Wilson's attempt to concretize a certain vision of the United States and an international order sympathetic to that vision. I also attempt to gain an understanding of Wilson's practical consciousness of American identity, or the actual policies and politics of his administration. While Wilson treated the concepts of race, civilization, and historical processes explicitly in his scholarship, he rarely mentioned these subjects in his political speeches. We see this for instance in how Du Bois must interpret the ambiguity of Wilson's political stances on race issues in his letter to Paul Hill (see introduction). I therefore look for continuity in both Wilson's speeches as president and in the context of his actions.

An appropriately exhaustive approach to understand both Wilsonian liberalism and the ontological security seeking functions that it fulfilled would take a genealogical approach. As I don't have the time or space for that here, I focus instead on offering a thick account of how Wilson's concept of historical progress animated both his liberalism and racial views in the hopes of providing a foundation for future work. Wilson's dual identity as both a scholar and president is a unique opportunity for this project, as his scholarship can stand as explications of the premises that drove his later statecraft. Being able to draw such a connection is rare and also highlights the potential of anxiety focused ontological security research by focusing on an individual agent over a longer period of time, rather than an agent who embodies the state over a shorter period. I draw on Duncan Bell's approach of treating liberalism as a diffusive but real subject and on expanding conceptual analysis of politics beyond the normal confines of the liberal canon.⁶⁴ This second approach is especially helpful, as Bell emphasizes both scholars and

⁶⁴ Duncan Bell, "What Is Liberalism?" in *Reordering the World*, Essays on Liberalism and Empire (Princeton University Press, 2016), 62–90, accessed June 3, 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1q1xqvt.6>.

politicians in his work. As Wilson is both, a looser approach to who qualifies as being worthy of conceptual analysis is useful.

I focus on analyzing two sets of primary sources. I start with Wilson's textbook *The State: Elements of Historical and Practical Politics*. Intended as a comprehensive treatment of the evolution and purposes of the state from prehistory to modern days, Wilson targeted the *The State* towards students as a survey of where he viewed the field. In the book, he takes an evolutionary perspective, conditioned by his assumption that the only traditions of the state worth studying were those that arose from what he termed the Teutonic peoples. Wilson conceived of the United States as a civilizational descendent of Anglo-Saxon traditions. This formed the substance of the American nationalism that Wilson promoted. I then analyze Wilson's speeches and policies in office, illustrating how Wilson enunciated this concept of American nationality. Finally, I analyze Wilson's statecraft preceding the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. I focus in particular on his Fourteen Points speech and how the structure of the League of Nations fulfilled Wilson's aim to better manage the anxieties that the United States faced as a settler state. These contributions illuminate important continuities in his scholarship on the themes of which peoples actually constituted nations and which peoples were allowed to have states.

Chapter Three: Wilson as narrator and American anxiety

In this chapter, I draw a thick understanding of Wilson's thought and politics through my framework of ontological security and settler state anxiety. Both Wilson's scholarship and his politics were shaped by deep engagement with historicist approaches to understanding politics. This belief held that history and politics were both shaped by the progressive evolution of dominant races and peoples. Ambrosius (2018) links Wilson's historicism with a German approach to political history: "this Hegelian theory of history affirmed that modern nations grew like biological organisms from primordial racial roots."⁶⁵ In *Dreamworlds of Race and Utopia*, Bell identifies Wilson as one amongst a number of American and British leaders who were "true believers in racial kinship."⁶⁶ Wilson's early study of politics focused on the history of English and American institutions in particular, and this pursuit would also define how he practiced politics. While in office as president, Wilson rarely read newspapers. When asked by his wife's social secretary Edith Benham how he made decisions, Wilson noted that "he had saturated himself in American political history."⁶⁷ Wilson also kept tight control over his administration and wrote most of his own speeches. His scholarship on politics then is not only a gateway into his understanding of the world, but it also reveals the precepts on which he formed his politics and statecraft.

⁶⁵ Lloyd E. Ambrosius, "Wilsonianism and Transatlantic Relations," *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 16, no. 4 (October 2, 2018): 7, accessed June 3, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14794012.2018.1521836>.

⁶⁶ Duncan Bell, *Dreamworlds of Race: Empire and the Utopian Destiny of Anglo-America* (Princeton University Press, 2020), 14.

⁶⁷ O'Toole, *The Moralists*, 358.

3.1 First image: Wilson's scholarship as autocosmography

The State: Elements of Historical and Practical Politics was Wilson's second book and his broadest engagement with political history beyond the subject of the United States and England. The concept of the state that Wilson develops in his textbook relies on a narrative of historical progress. Like many of his contemporaries, strong and explicit themes of Herbert Spencer's social Darwinism run through Wilson's work and the question of "how did it come about that some men became progressive, while most did not?"⁶⁸ is central to his argument. 'Progressive men' for Wilson encompassed peoples who could trace their cultural descent from early Aryan tribes that migrated Westward. Wilson identifies the Greeks and the Romans as the first such peoples to reach Europe and establish both wide-ranging empires and elaborate state institutions.⁶⁹ Historical progress however was not pre-ordained, and Wilson wrote both the Romans and the Greeks would stagnate and calcify as peoples.⁷⁰ The Teutonic tribes who invaded the Roman empire westwards from the Eurasian steppe in the fifth century, however, maintained close kinship ties that would enable them to progress further than the Romans. Even as the Teutons learned the state from the Roman Empire as they conquered it, they also retained the Aryan roots which, Wilson believed, made individualism and organic democracy possible. Progress for Wilson then is understood both literally and metaphorically as movement: to progress is to move forwards-- or westwards, while lack of progress and movement results in rigid conservative attachment to institutions, alienation from a people's Aryan roots, and ultimately decline. Sovereignty could reside in many forms according to Wilson. For the most

⁶⁸ Wilson, *The State*, 22.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 127.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 150.

progressive peoples though, sovereignty resided in the close organic relationship between a people and a state.

3.2 England and America

Of the inheritors of the Teutons, Wilson pointed to England and the colonies that sprung forth from it as the most progressive examples. While other Teutonic communities lost the form of their tight kinship groups during the feudal era, Wilson argued that England remained more connected with its cultural roots, enabling the slow growth of "the free self-governing nation."⁷¹ This progress however was not without wrong turns. Wilson differentiated between "good" empire and "bad" empire. By the absence of any serious treatment of people outside Europe and its colonies and diaspora in *The State*, we can assume that Wilson found empire practiced over non-Aryan peoples to be at least unobjectionable in the terms of historical progress. Exercising that same dominance over colonies, or what Wilson viewed as co-nationals, however, is considered a form of "bad empire," comparable in effect to the dynamics that resulted in the social wars in the late Roman republic. "Good," or right ordered, empires however consisted of the seeding, support, and recognition of the colonists as if they had "full rights as Englishmen."⁷² It is the denial of this recognition that precipitates American independence and makes the eighteenth-century empire "bad," and England's embrace of the later colonies like Canada and Australia as more or less racial equals that makes the latter nineteenth century empire "good" in Wilson's eyes. The development of self-government in the United States and the later colonies for Wilson was a natural outgrowth of the same migratory instinct that drove the Teutonic

⁷¹ Ibid., 577.

⁷² Ibid., 440.

antecedents of the English west and therefore ought to be respected as progressive. It was within this context Wilson grounded his account of the advent of the American state and later nation.

As with the development of England, Wilson argued that English civilization in America evolved from "small isolated settlements"⁷³ into states, and finally a union, in a long, gradual process. This gradual process was necessary, as Wilson argued that the same Teutonic 'racial' qualities that gave the American colonists a propensity towards liberty, self-government, and democracy also made them resistant to centralization.⁷⁴ Wilson viewed centralization of the American project as historical progress, but only when it was driven forward by the necessity of adaptation.⁷⁵ This historical progress was enabled by what Wilson asserted as the pragmatic character of the "English race" towards institutions: laws were to be treated as precedents rather than binding and immutable principles. Dependence on precedent and custom granted the flexibility necessary to continue to progress through history towards "a more perfect union,"⁷⁶ rather than stagnation. This progress was not without conflict, however. Once again focusing almost exclusively on Americans who he recognized as 'racially English,' as if the presence of other Americans was immaterial to historical progress, Wilson highlighted the Civil War as a type of growing pain. For Wilson, the main significance of slavery was not moral or a consideration of those Americans who were enslaved, but instead that slavery divided the national concept of the United States between north and south. In 1893, Wilson did not see that project as complete: "it of course by no means follows that because we have become in the fullest organic sense a national [sic], ours has become a unitary government, its federal features

⁷³ Ibid., 450.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 462.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 470.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 475–476.

merged in a new national government." ⁷⁷ The United States was not, in Wilson's eyes, a nation-state; the trajectory of the historical progress of its national project was clear to him but ultimately incomplete and insecure in its youth. In the language of ontological security, Wilson illustrated a portrait of the United States that had only recently within his lifetime begun to announce a narrative of itself that could be seen by inhabitants like himself-- secure in their English racial identity-- as capable of managing the anxieties of the wider world.

3.3 Sovereignty in the wider world

When considered as a form of autocosmography, *The State* is complex, primarily focusing on a description of how Wilson believes the state as an institution has evolved, but also clearly implying normative conclusions based on Wilson's narrative of historical progress. As Wilson noted in his chapter on the nature and development of law: "sovereignty resides in the community; but its organs, whether those organs be supreme magistrates, busy legislatures, or subtle privileged classes, are as various as the conditions of historical growth have commanded."⁷⁸ The world that Wilson evokes then is diverse, which might suggest a type of pluralism. Such a sense of pluralism however is in tension with the core of Wilson's project of historical progress, as he believed that the trajectory of historical progress is already known. The implications about the International that we draw out of Wilson's work on the state are thus fundamentally normative: if historical progress is to continue, and humanity to avoid stagnation, then the vanguard of humanity's progress must be secured through privilege. An international order that tolerates true pluralism between societies unequal in historical progress for Wilson would be to invite stagnation. This assumption that the greater purpose of politics is to advance

⁷⁷ Ibid., 480–481.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 625.

the progressing vanguard of humanity fuses together Wilson's notions of progressivism and American identity: to secure the one is to secure the other. It is this belief-- expressed here as autocosmography-- that would animate both Wilson's domestic and foreign policies.

3.4 Second image: Wilson's politics as national autobiography

Wilson's politics of progressive nationalism is most clearly visible in his inaugural speeches. In his first inaugural speech in 1913, he framed this progressive agenda in explicitly national terms, referring to "national" identity three times, which he framed against "private interests." He contrasted national, or public minded policy, with policy that benefits private interests, framing this call for economic reform as a justice issue-- justice not in the universal sense, but instead because it is what is due to the people of the American nation, a "restoration."⁷⁹ (Wilson 1913). Wilson's advocacy for an expanded role for the state evokes the same sense of pragmatism towards the nature of governing institutions that he praised in *The State*. States and peoples must adapt institutions to their current needs in order to progress, or else become stagnant. The economic progress for which Wilson called was about universal justice, but it was also inherently entangled with who he believed the American people must be in order to progress in history. Remember too that Wilson wrote in *The State* that the concept of America as a nation was much newer than the union itself. Wilson's call for reform then was also an annunciation and an argument for looking at the identity of the United States in a particular way.

Wilson used an emerging sense of nationalism to propel a progressive domestic political agenda, seeking the progress which he believed defined the United States' place in international

⁷⁹ Woodrow Wilson. 1913. First inaugural address. (Washington DC, March 4). Retrieved from: https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/wilson1.asp

society. However, his focus on a specifically American form of identity did darker work. As noted in chapter one, Wilson's administration coincided with a movement in the American South to further entrench racial segregation and an increase in racial violence. Wilson's actual views on Black Americans remain ambiguous and cloaked by his political pragmatism. As Du Bois' letter attests, he was fully willing to work with Black American leaders to achieve electoral success and counted on their support. His willingness to further racial integration however did not extend so far as to recognize Black Americans as expressing a legitimate identity or as having grievances that he ought to address. Immediately after Wilson's inauguration, Southern members of his cabinet began to segregate the portions of his administration which were under their purview. He would meet with a delegation of Black American leaders from the National Equal Rights League-- which had endorsed Wilson in 1912-- in late 1914 on the subject. He haughtily informed the delegation that race was a human and not a political issue and that their threats to abandon him amounted to "political blackmail."⁸⁰ Wilson's cooperation with Black Americans only occurred when his political agenda aligned with their own. When a series of race riots broke out at the end of his administration, he paid little attention, and racial violence against Black Americans significantly increased throughout his time in office.⁸¹

Wilson's Anglo-centric nationalism would also put him into conflict with both German and Irish Americans, who had little sympathy for the British cause in World War I.⁸² As long as Wilson's conception of American nationalism was put in universalist civic terms, there was no issue, but as Wilson found it harder and harder to maintain neutrality in World War I, tensions began to rise. Biographer Patricia O'Toole writes:

⁸⁰ O'Toole, *The Moralists*, 134.

⁸¹ Kenneth O'Reilly, "The Jim Crow Policies of Woodrow Wilson," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 17 (1997): 119, accessed June 3, 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2963252>.

⁸² O'Toole, *The Moralists*, 129.

After lunch at the White House, the Wilsons went to the Washington Monument, where the president gave a speech that began as a hymn to the flag and Americanism but evolved into an attack on an unnamed ethnic group. He was talking about German Americans, accusing them of "political blackmail" for saying that they would withhold their votes from a presidential candidate who ignored their interests. Although careful to point out that he was talking about a tiny minority of the unnamed group, he insisted that it was "a very active and subtle minority" but "must absolutely be crushed" because it was undermining the government's influence in international affairs. Wilson challenged the American people to "teach these gentlemen once and for all that loyalty to this flag is the first test of tolerance in the United States."⁸³

Wilson's demonization of German Americans who did not fall into line with his conception of American identity would have tragic consequences, as thousands of German immigrants would be harassed during the war. German and Gaelic language newspapers would be coerced into bankruptcy by harassment from the U.S. Postal Service.⁸⁴ Wilson would eventually condemn the worst of the violence after a mob lynched a German immigrant named Robert Prager in Illinois. However, Wilson's denunciation was too late for Prager and too little for thousands of German and Black Americans who were demonized, harassed, and killed by extrajudicial groups that had been organized in response to the Wilson administration's propaganda. Any identity which fell outside the English cultural lines that Wilson drew around his progressive nationalism was understood as a "private interest" and the self-advocacy of his political allies who fell outside those lines as "blackmail."

3.5 The Third Image: Wilson's world building as anxiety management

As Wilson came to his decision to finally enter the First World War, he drew on his understanding of historical progress and America's larger civilizational identity to make sense of

⁸³ Ibid., 210.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 293.

the anxiety that emerged from an increasingly violent and intimidating International for the United States. While the first third of his War Message to Congress, delivered on April 2, 1917, focused on the individual transgressions of German submarines against American shipping, the second third framed the conflict in terms of historical progress. Wilson preached the necessity reordering the world to reflect the institutions of progressive nations, so that war would not occur again: "We are at the beginning of an age in which it will be insisted that the same standards of conduct and of responsibility for wrong done shall be observed among nations and their governments that are observed among the individual *citizens of civilized states* [emphasis added]."⁸⁵ Wilson casts Germany's behavior as belonging to the "old unhappy days"⁸⁶ or as being essentially regressive. Germany and the world must be remade as progressive so that the historically progressive nations would be safe, saying "the world must be made safe for democracy."⁸⁷ Here we see the fusion between Wilson's conceptions of universal historical progress and American identity most clearly. Wilson makes an appeal here to Congress based on his conviction that the United States is fundamentally a historically progressive country. As he exclaims that the United States seeks to reorder the world in the favor of all mankind by virtue of America's own identity, he also implies that the United States' identity should be privileged in the new world order by virtue of its historical progress.

If Wilson's War Message hinted at the world building that he desired, the Fourteen Points that he announced in a speech to Congress were much more specific. Wilson's Fourteen Points are remembered for being one of the first instantiations of the right to national self-

⁸⁵ Wilson, Woodrow. War message to Congress. (Washington DC, April 2, 1917). Accessed June 3, 2021. https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Wilson%27s_War_Message_to_Congress

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

determination, but in text they are much less broad and align with his understanding of political diversity in the world being organized largely by race and historical progress. It is worth noting that Wilson's understanding of the regions of which he spoke in the Fourteen Points speech was limited. Historian Larry Wolff points out Wilson's radicalized and simple understanding of Eastern Europe as being an illustrative example. Having little personal experience with the region, Wilson largely understood political problems in Eastern Europe as being defined by the struggle for freedom of "Christian Slavs" against the Ottomans, and later the Austro-Hungarian empire, drawing on his admiration William Gladstone's activism in the region in the 1870s when Wilson was young student.⁸⁸ (15-16). As problematic as Wilson's Fourteen Points are from a historical perspective, they also show the outlines of how he wanted to circumscribe and stabilize sovereignty following the First World War. In his concluding remarks, Wilson stakes out what might initially be termed an anti-imperial position: "in regard to these essential rectifications of wrong and assertions of right we feel ourselves to be intimate partners of all the governments and peoples associated together against the Imperialists."⁸⁹ This position is best understood through the prism of Wilson's distinction between "good empire" and "bad empire," as his commitment to national self-determination is less than complete through the rest of his fourteen points.

Wilson calls for what might broadly be categorized as national self-determination, and thus more-or-less absolute sovereignty, for Belgium (point VII), "the peoples of Austria-Hungary" (point X), "the [T]urkish portion of the present Ottoman Empire" (point XII), and Poland (point XIII).⁹⁰ Wilson identifies German and Ottoman domination in these areas as being of a past age once again drawing on the dichotomy inherent in his 'history as progress' narrative,

⁸⁸ Wolff, *Woodrow Wilson and the Reimagining of Eastern Europe*, 15–16.

⁸⁹ As quoted in Margaret Olwen Macmillan, *Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World*, 1st U.S. ed. (New York: Random House, 2002), 495.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 495–496.

identifying the allies with progress and their opponents as selfish and reactionary. This is not the annunciation of a universal principle of national self-determination for which this speech is remembered, however. The sovereignty that Wilson reserves for peoples that he doesn't specifically mention in the Fourteen Points is less than full. The assumedly "non-Turkish" parts of the Ottoman Empire for instance "should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development" (point XII), as compared to the "secure sovereignty" (point XII) that Wilson advocates for the Turkish portion. This alludes to what Wilson had already made explicit in his scholarship: not all forms of pre-war sovereignty were considered "developed" in Wilson's eyes. Wilson is even less generous in his proposed mechanism for adjudicating "colonial claims" (point V), calling for adjustments to be made on the principle that "such questions of sovereignty the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the government whose title is to be determined" (point V).⁹¹ The approach that Wilson prescribes is anti-imperial only in the narrow sense that he rejects the imperial control of what he would term fully developed peoples, in terms of his understanding of historical progress. This position secured the position of settler states like the United States, while still leaving the hierarchy that undergirded Wilson's understanding of the United States as being historically progressive (or dominant) in place. In short, Wilson's position is only anti-imperial in the narrow sense of calling for national equality between peoples who he believed to be peers.

3.6 Reordering the international

⁹¹ Ibid., 496.

The perception that Wilson's mission to the Paris Peace negotiations was a failure is largely rooted in a universalist understanding of his progressivism. This is the standard to which Du Bois held Wilson, writing that "... at Versailles he did not seem to understand Europe, nor European politics, nor the world-wide problems of race."⁹² Du Bois is likely right Wilson's comprehension of European politics, but his interpretation of Wilson's goals is overly generous. Wilson's actual aims were more limited. Wilson certainly did believe that the League of Nations would secure a progressive peace, and he campaigned hard for the United States to join the organization. His larger goal of reordering the International to better secure his version of American identity however was largely accomplished through the League of Nation's constitution. Regardless of American participation, the covenant of the League of Nations stabilized sovereignty in a manner that reflected Wilson's desire to set the American approach to government at the center of international order and put settler states on an equal footing with the older European empires. After the Paris Peace Conference drafted the covenant of the League of Nations, there was no longer any ambiguity over the role of settler states in the International. The principle of national equality guaranteed their independence from their home countries, substantiating a unique American identity politically apart from what Wilson saw as its shared English heritage. The covenant of the League of Nations also re-entrenched the pre-war racial hierarchies, and the conference, under Wilson's chairmanship, even specifically rejected a proposal from the Japanese that would have recognized racial equality in addition to national equality.⁹³ Wilson privately lobbied against the initiative, warning his British counterparts that anti-Japanese sentiment in the American West would make the proposition impossible to pass

⁹² Du Bois, "My Impressions of Woodrow Wilson," 459.

⁹³ Glenda Sluga, "Remembering 1919: International Organizations and the Future of International Order," *International Affairs* 95 (January 1, 2019): 29–30.

through the American Senate. The British and Australians would also vote against the initiative, which otherwise passed in the committee by a vote of eleven to six. Wilson, using his position as chair, declared that the proposition had not passed because it had failed to achieve unanimous support.⁹⁴ Wilson's role in crafting the covenant shouldn't be overemphasized.⁹⁵ For the purposes of understanding the work that the structure of the League of Nations did in changing the trajectory of the ambiguous relationship between "mother countries" and settler states, Wilson's emphasis on the importance of the nascent institution and his urging that its creation be the first work of the Paris Peace conference is significant.

For most of the world, the order that emerged from the Paris Peace Conference was not substantially different in form than the explicitly imperial form that preceded it. While some treaties that emerged from the Paris Peace Conference affirmed the right to self-determination, they did so only in specific circumstances and in ways that re-entrenched the same largely racial hierarchies which characterized international politics before the First World War. Even in circumstances where sovereignty was conferred on European peoples emerging from broken empires, as in Central and Eastern Europe, this sovereignty was more limited than the privileges enjoyed by Western European nation-states.⁹⁶ The Mandate System, constructed within the League of Nations, much more explicitly limited the sovereignty of non-European peoples emerging from the defeated empires by grouping them into proto states governed by the French and the British until those peoples had "developed" into having the capacity to rule their own nation-states.⁹⁷ Large swathes of the rest of the globe left within the victorious empires of France

⁹⁴ O'Toole, *The Moralists*, 368–369.

⁹⁵ Sluga, "Remembering 1919," 28.

⁹⁶ Mark Mazower, "Minorities and the League of Nations in Interwar Europe," *Daedalus* 126, no. 2 (1997): 50, accessed June 3, 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20027428>.

⁹⁷ Macmillan, *Paris 1919*, 98.

and Great Britain remained de facto imperial possessions, under the assumption that the peoples who inhabited those regions were too far from exercising sovereignty to even be able to have a mandate.

Settler states and colonies however were granted fuller expressions of sovereignty, propelling those colonies not already independent on a path towards independence, as well as establishing their equal status with Europe. Understanding Wilson's concept of the state and sovereignty as being the response of an agent and subject to the anxiety that emanates from the International illustrates that it was this last change that concerned him the most. The structure and hierarchy that the League of Nations established reordered the world so that status-- what was a fundamentally European world order before the First World War-- was no longer as much of a concern for the United States after the war, regardless of how invested they were in its actual institutions. The identity of the United States as not only a member of, but a model for, international society managed the anxieties that arose from its "youth." An international society that promised national, but not racial, equality also calmed the anxieties of Wilson and his Anglo-American peers over the changing demography of the United States.

CONCLUSION:

Given the understanding of sovereignty that Wilson expresses in *The State*, it is unlikely that he wanted to reform the International much further. He believed that racial inequalities were effectively entrenched in the historical development of institutions, arguing by hypothetical example that, even if the Tsar of Russia adopted the institutions of the United States, Russians would still be habituated to following his command, "schooled by centuries of obedience to bureaucracy."⁹⁸ Wilson believed that these inequalities would only be eased over long periods of time. There is a certain amount of irony then that the peoples subjected to this re-entrenched hierarchy were able to use Wilsonian language and the precedents that the Paris Peace Conference set to force the issue of their own independence.⁹⁹ Zarakol notes that a "trend toward inclusivity," propelled by the universalist register in which Wilson and his contemporaries at the Paris Peace Conference, would continue over the course of the twentieth century.¹⁰⁰ The roots of the end of the imperial age lie in the universalist register that Wilson used to set the United States on equal footing with Europe. Wilson's narrative of progress is inextricably linked to his vision of the United States as emerging from an English nation, but the universal terms in which he cast that vision could do other work beyond Wilson's intentions and likely beyond his understanding. This perhaps explains in part why Du Bois remained sympathetic to Wilson so many years later and chose to portray him charitably. The work to which activists like Du Bois put Wilsonian rhetoric and the hope that Wilson engendered around the world in 1918 and 1919, however, should not be confused with Wilson himself. Wilson's liberalism and progressivism were

⁹⁸ Wilson, *The State*, 624.

⁹⁹ Sluga, "Remembering 1919," 31.

¹⁰⁰ Zarakol, *After Defeat*, 83–84.

wrapped up in his specific project of making sense of the United States and its place in the world.

One hundred years after Wilson left office, the political problems resulting from the entangled politics of identity and ideology have become more prominent. Zarakol's trends toward inclusivity have resulted in a world where many more peoples than just the inhabitants of Europe and the settler states demand and are able to announce political identities of their own, as they should. If liberalism is to survive as a global institution, then its proponents must learn to embrace a pluralism that historical progressives like Wilson rejected. This will require a greater degree of reflexivity from self-defined progressives and liberals alike. Wilson's commitment to his idea of universal historical progress blinded him to the subjectivities of other peoples, who he dismissed as regressive, reactionary, or stagnant. The explicit language that Wilson used to develop his views may shock us today, but a sense of progressivism is what gave Wilson's thought and politics its animating force, persuasiveness, and its purported sense of objectivity. Entirely disentangling specific political identities from aspirationally universal creeds like liberalism will never be entirely possible. This isn't a problem that can be solved, but perhaps, by focusing on making the implicit explicit, we can do a better job of managing it. Understanding that the stakes of creeds like liberalism and progressivism are fundamentally entangled with a basic drive towards defining ourselves in specific terms—as ontological security highlights—should at least make us more sympathetic towards peoples with different identities and histories.

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