

## Chapter 7

# Liberalism

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### Reader's Guide

The practice of international relations has not been accommodating to liberalism. Whereas the domestic political realm in many states has witnessed an impressive degree of progress, with institutions providing for both order and justice, the international realm in the era of the modern states system has been characterized by a precarious order and the absence of justice. The introductory section of the

chapter will address this dilemma before providing a definition of liberalism and its component parts. The second section considers the core concepts of liberalism, beginning with the visionary internationalism of the Enlightenment, through to the idealism of the inter-war period, and the institutionalism that became dominant in the second half of the twentieth century. The third and final section considers the grave challenges that confront liberalism in an era of globalization.

## Introduction

Although **realism** is regarded as the dominant theory of international relations, **liberalism** has a strong claim to being the historic alternative. In the twentieth century, liberal thinking influenced policy-making elites and public opinion in a number of Western states after the First World War, an era often referred to in academic International Relations as **idealism**. There was a brief resurgence of liberal sentiment at the end of the Second World War with the birth of the United Nations, although this beacon of hope was soon extinguished by the return of **cold war** power politics. In the 1990s, liberalism appeared to be resurgent again as Western state leaders proclaimed a new world order and intellectuals provided theoretical justifications for the inherent supremacy of their liberal ideas over all other competing ideologies. Since 9/11, the pendulum has once again swung towards the realist pole as the USA and its allies have engaged in costly wars against states and networks who were believed to be a threat; during this period, the power and legitimacy of the Western-dominated order has been called into question.

How do we explain the divergent fortunes of liberalism in the domestic and international domains? While liberal values and institutions have become deeply embedded in Europe and North America, the same values and institutions lack legitimacy worldwide. To invoke the famous phrase of Stanley Hoffmann's, 'international affairs have been the nemesis of Liberalism'. 'The essence of Liberalism', Hoffmann continues, 'is self-restraint, moderation, compromise and peace' whereas 'the essence of international politics is exactly the opposite: troubled peace, at best, or the **state of war**' (Hoffmann 1987: 396). This explanation comes as no surprise to realists, who argue that there can be no progress, no law, and no justice where there is no common power. Despite the weight of this realist argument, those who believe in the liberal project have not conceded defeat. Liberals argue that power politics itself is the product of ideas, and—crucially—ideas can change. Therefore, even if the world has been inhospitable to liberalism, this does not mean that it cannot be re-made in its own image.

While the belief in the possibility of progress is one identifier of a liberal approach to politics (Clark 1989: 49–66), there are other general propositions that define the broad tradition of liberalism. Perhaps the appropriate way to begin this discussion is with a four-dimensional definition (Doyle 1997: 207). First, all citizens

are juridically equal and possess certain basic rights to education, access to a free press, and religious toleration. Second, the legislative assembly of the state possesses only the authority invested in it by the people, whose basic rights it is not permitted to abuse. Third, a key dimension of the liberty of the individual is the right to own property, including productive forces. Fourth, liberalism contends that the most effective system of economic exchange is one that is largely market-driven and not one that is subordinate to bureaucratic regulation and control, either domestically or internationally. When these propositions are taken together, we see a stark contrast between, on the one hand, liberal values of **individualism**, tolerance, freedom, and constitutionalism, and, on the other, conservatism, which places a higher value on order and authority and is willing to sacrifice the liberty of the individual for the stability of the **community**.

Although many writers have tended to view liberalism as a theory of government, what is becoming increasingly apparent is the explicit connection between liberalism as a political and economic theory and liberalism as an international theory. Properly conceived, liberal thought on a global scale rests on the application of an analogy from the character of a political actor to its international conduct. Like individuals, states have different characteristics—some are bellicose and war-prone, others are tolerant and peaceful: in short, the **identity** of the state determines its outward orientation. Liberals see a further parallel between individuals and sovereign states. Although the character of states may differ, all states are accorded certain 'natural' rights, such as the generalized right to non-interference in their domestic affairs. At the same time, liberals believe that for certain purposes the liberty of the state must be compromised by the need for collective action, hence the priority attached to the coordinating role of international organizations.

Liberals concede that we have far to go before cooperative patterns of behaviour are sustained across a variety of issues and challenges. Historically, liberals have agreed with realists that war is a recurring feature of the **anarchic system**. But, unlike realists, they do not identify **anarchy** as the cause of war. How, then, do liberals explain war? As **Box 7.1** demonstrates, certain strands of liberalism see the causes of war located in **imperialism**, others in the failure of the **balance of power**, and still others in the problem of undemocratic **regimes**. And ought this to be remedied through **collective security**,

### Box 7.1 Liberalism and the causes of war, determinants of peace

One of the most useful analytical tools for thinking about differences between individual thinkers or particular variations on a broad theme such as liberalism is to differentiate between levels of analysis. For example, Kenneth Waltz's *Man, the State and War* (1959) examined the causes of conflict operating at the level of

the individual, the state, and the international system itself. The following table turns Waltz on his head, as it were, to show how different liberal thinkers have provided competing explanations (across the three levels of analysis) for the causes of war and the determinants of peace.

Images of liberalism	Public figure/period	Causes of conflict	Determinants of peace
First image (Human nature)	Richard Cobden (mid-19th century)	Interventions by governments domestically and internationally disturbing the natural order	Individual liberty, free trade, prosperity, interdependence
Second image (The state)	Woodrow Wilson (early 20th century)	Undemocratic nature of international politics, especially foreign policy and the balance of power	National self-determination; open governments responsive to public opinion; collective security
Third image (The structure of the system)	J. A. Hobson (early 20th century)	The balance of power system	A world government, with powers to mediate and enforce decisions

commerce, or world government? While it can be productive to think about the various strands of liberal thought and their differing prescriptions (Doyle 1997: 205–300), given the limited space permitted to deal with a broad and complex tradition, the emphasis below will be on the core concepts of international liberalism and the way in which these relate to the goals of order and justice on a global scale.

At the end of the chapter, the discussion will consider the challenges facing the liberal institutions and values that have shaped the post-1945 order. Here we consider the claim made by a leading thinker from Princeton University, G. John Ikenberry, that liberal internationalism is at a crossroads. The liberal states that have had their hands on the tiller of world order are no longer in command of the vessel. Why is this? Several reasons are offered. From within the heartland of liberalism, the issue is about the decline in relative power of the USA and the EU. From outside the transatlantic sphere, fewer states are prepared to fall into line: in other words, as we move through the second decade of the twenty-first century, there is a crisis of both leadership and followership in world politics. This raises the question whether other states and institutions are in a position to take up the mantle of leadership. Despite the increased visibility and coordination among the so-called rising powers, there is no evidence that they believe themselves to have a special responsibility for managing world order—in a manner that parallels the role played by the USA after

1945. The other possibility, mooted by Ikenberry, is that liberal institutions could strengthen to the point where individual state power and capacity becomes a much less significant determinant of stability. This possible future for liberal internationalism remains a distant hope today.

#### Key Points

- Liberalism is a theory of both government within states and good governance between states and peoples worldwide. Unlike realism, which regards the 'international' as an anarchic realm, liberalism seeks to project values of order, liberty, justice, and toleration into international relations.
- The high-water mark of liberal thinking in international relations was reached in the inter-war period in the work of idealists, who believed that warfare was an unnecessary and outmoded way of settling disputes between states.
- Domestic and international institutions are required to protect and nurture these values.
- Liberals disagree on fundamental issues such as the causes of war and what kind of institutions are required to deliver liberal values in a decentralized, multicultural international system.
- An important cleavage within liberalism, which has become more pronounced in our globalized world, is between those operating with an activist conception of liberalism, who advocate interventionist foreign policies and stronger international institutions, and those who incline towards a pragmatic conception, which places a priority on toleration and non-intervention.

## Core ideas in liberal thinking on international relations

Immanuel Kant and Jeremy Bentham were two of the leading liberals of the **Enlightenment**. Both were reacting to the barbarity of international relations, or what Kant graphically described as ‘the lawless state of savagery’, at a time when domestic politics was at the cusp of a new age of rights, **citizenship**, and constitutionalism. Their abhorrence of the lawless state of savagery led them individually to elaborate plans for ‘perpetual peace’. Although written over two centuries ago, these manifestos contain the seeds of core liberal ideas, in particular the belief that reason could deliver freedom and justice in international relations. For Kant, the imperative to achieve perpetual peace required the transformation of individual consciousness, republican constitutionalism, and a federal contract between states to abolish war (rather than to regulate it, as earlier international lawyers had argued). This federation can be likened to a permanent peace treaty, rather than a ‘super-state’ actor or world government. The three components of Kant’s hypothetical treaty for a permanent peace are outlined in **Box 7.2**.

Kant’s claim that liberal states are pacific in their international relations with other liberal states was revived in the 1980s. In a much-cited article, Michael Doyle argued that liberal states have created a ‘separate peace’ (1986: 1151). According to Doyle, there are two elements to the Kantian legacy: restraint among liberal states and ‘international imprudence’ in relations with non-liberal states. Although the empirical evidence seems to support the **democratic peace** thesis, it is important to bear in mind the limitations of the argument. In the first instance, for the theory to be compelling, believers in the thesis need to provide an explanation as to why war has become unthinkable between liberal states. Kant had argued that if the decision to use force were taken by the people, rather than by the prince, then the frequency of conflicts would be drastically reduced. But, logically, this argument also implies a lower frequency of conflicts between liberal and non-liberal states, and this has proven to be contrary to the historical evidence. An alternative explanation for the democratic peace thesis might be that liberal states tend to be wealthy, and therefore have less to gain (and more to lose) by engaging in conflicts than poorer authoritarian states. Perhaps the most convincing explanation of all is the simple fact that liberal states tend to be in relations of amity with other liberal states. War between Canada

and the United States is unthinkable, perhaps not because of their liberal democratic constitutions, but because they are friends (Wendt 1999: 298–9), with a high degree of convergence in economic and political matters. Indeed, war between states with contrasting political and economic systems may also be unthinkable because they have a history of friendly relations. An example here is Mexico and Cuba, which maintain close bilateral relations despite their history of divergent economic ideologies.

Irrespective of the scholarly search for an answer to the reasons why liberal democratic states are more peaceful, it is important to note the political consequences of

### Box 7.2 Immanuel Kant’s ‘Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch’

#### **First Definitive Article: *The Civil Constitution of Every State shall be Republican***

‘If, as is inevitably the case under this constitution, the consent of the citizens is required to decide whether or not war is to be declared, it is very natural that they will have great hesitation in embarking on so dangerous an enterprise ...’

(Kant 1991: 99–102)

#### **Second Definitive Article: *The Right of Nations shall be based on a Federation of Free States***

‘Each nation, for the sake of its own security, can and ought to demand of the others that they should enter along with it into a constitution, similar to a civil one, within which the rights of each could be secured ... But peace can neither be inaugurated nor secured without a general agreement between the nations; thus a particular kind of league, which we will call a pacific federation, is required. It would be different from a peace treaty in that the latter terminates one war, whereas the former would seek to end all wars for good ... It can be shown that this idea of federalism, extending gradually to encompass all states and thus leading to perpetual peace, is practicable and has objective reality.’

(Kant 1991: 102–5)

#### **Third Definitive Article: *Cosmopolitan Right shall be limited to Conditions of Universal Hospitality***

‘The peoples of the earth have thus entered in varying degrees into a universal community, and it has developed to the point where a violation of rights in one part of the world is felt everywhere. The idea of a cosmopolitan right is therefore not fantastic and overstrained; it is a necessary complement to the unwritten code of political and international right, transforming it into a universal right of humanity.’

(Kant 1991: 105–8)

this hypothesis. In 1989 Francis Fukuyama wrote an article entitled ‘**The End of History**’, which celebrated the triumph of liberalism over all other ideologies, contending that liberal states were more stable internally and more peaceful in their international relations (1989: 3–18). Other defenders of the democratic peace thesis were more circumspect. As Doyle recognized, liberal democracies are as aggressive as any other type of state in their relations with authoritarian regimes and stateless peoples (1995a: 100). How, then, should states inside the liberal zone of peace conduct their relations with non-liberal regimes? How can the positive Kantian legacy of restraint triumph over the historical legacy of international imprudence on the part of liberal states? These are fascinating and timely questions that will be taken up in the final section of the chapter.

Two centuries after Kant first called for a ‘pacific federation’, the validity of the idea that democracies are more peaceful continues to attract a great deal of scholarly interest. The claim has also found its way into the public discourse of Western states’ foreign policy, appearing in speeches made by American presidents as diverse as Ronald Reagan, William Jefferson Clinton, and George W. Bush. Less crusading voices in the liberal tradition believe that a legal and institutional framework must be established that includes states with different cultures and traditions. Such a belief in the power of law to solve the problem of war was advocated by Jeremy Bentham at the end of the eighteenth century. Like many liberal thinkers after him, Bentham believed that federal states such as the German Diet, the American Confederation, and the Swiss League were able to transform their identity from one based on conflicting interests to a more peaceful federation. As Bentham famously argued, ‘between the interests of nations there is nowhere any real conflict’.

Cobden’s belief that free trade would create a more peaceful world order is a core idea of nineteenth-century liberalism. Trade brings mutual gains to all the players, irrespective of their size or the nature of their economies. It is perhaps not surprising that it was in Britain that this argument found its most vocal supporters. The supposed universal value of free trade brought disproportionate gains to the hegemonic power. There was never an admission that free trade among countries at different stages of **development** would lead to relations of dominance and subservience. Neither was it questioned by nineteenth-century British liberals that internationalism ought to be the enemy of imperialism and not its servant, a point which is developed in **Case Study 1**.

The idea of a natural **harmony of interests** in international political and economic relations came under challenge in the early part of the twentieth century. The fact that Britain and Germany had highly interdependent economies before the Great War (1914–18) seemed to confirm the fatal flaw in the association of economic interdependence with peace. From the turn of the century, the contradictions within European civilization, of progress and exemplarism on the one hand and the harnessing of industrial power for military purposes on the other, could no longer be contained. Europe stumbled into a horrific war, killing 15 million people. The war not only brought an end to three **empires**, but also was a contributing factor to the Russian Revolution of 1917.

The First World War shifted liberal thinking towards a recognition that peace is not a natural condition but is one that must be constructed. In a powerful critique of the idea that peace and prosperity were part of a latent natural order, the publicist and author Leonard Woolf argued that peace and prosperity required ‘consciously devised machinery’ (Luard 1992: 465). But perhaps the most famous advocate of an international authority for the management of international relations was Woodrow Wilson. According to this US president, peace could only be secured with the creation of an **international organization** to regulate international anarchy. Security could not be left to secret bilateral diplomatic deals and a blind faith in the balance of power. Just as peace had to be enforced in domestic society, the international domain had to have a system of regulation for coping with disputes and an international force that could be mobilized if non-violent conflict resolution failed. In this sense, more than any other strand of liberalism, idealism rests on the domestic analogy (Suganami 1989: 94–113).

In his famous ‘**Fourteen Points**’ speech, addressed to Congress in January 1918, Wilson argued that ‘a general association of nations must be formed’ to preserve the coming peace—the League of Nations was to be that general association. For the League to be effective, it had to have the military power to deter aggression and, when necessary, to use a preponderance of power to enforce its will. This was the idea behind the ‘**collective security**’ system that was central to the League of Nations. Collective security refers to an arrangement where ‘each state in the system accepts that the security of one is the concern of all, and agrees to join in a collective response to aggression’ (Roberts and Kingsbury 1993: 30). It can be contrasted with an alliance system of security, where a number of states join together, usually as a response to a specific external threat (sometimes known as ‘collective

## Case Study 1 Imperialism and internationalism in nineteenth-century Britain



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The life of J. S. Mill illustrates the ambivalent character of nineteenth-century liberal thinking in Britain. He was born in London in 1806, and became the intellectual protégé of Jeremy Bentham, the utilitarian philosopher who coined the term 'international'. By mid-century, Mill was a dominant figure in Victorian intellectual life. He was no stranger to international issues and concerns; in fact, he was an employee of the East India Company for thirty-five years and later became a Member of Parliament at a time when Britain was at the apogee of its preponderance. In common with many other Victorian intellectuals, Mill regarded liberal government as the highest stage of civilization.

A social reformer domestically, Mill was an imperialist internationally. He contrasted European liberal modes of governance with barbarism and savagery beyond Europe's edge. These two

coexisting but opposite states of development required the existence of different moral codes. Among civilized countries, the only matter to be resolved was 'the question of interference' (Jahn 2006: 195). Between civilized and barbarian peoples, it was both necessary and proper to permit imperial—even despotic—systems of authority.

It became commonplace for intellectuals to divide international order into these three domains of 'civilized', 'semi-civilized' and 'barbaric'. As such distinctions entered the language of international law, the effect was to produce a highly stratified view of international society—one where membership was based on race and religion. The consequences of this application of the standard of civilization to nineteenth-century diplomacy was 'horrible', to borrow Mark Mazower's description (2012: 72). By the century's end, Africa was re-ordered in ways that reflected the interests of the great colonial powers; such naked exploitation was justified by a mission to 'civilize' the 'savages'. Small wonder that one of the countries that was given to King Leopold of Belgium, the Congo Free State, has been in such turmoil for the last two decades. With millions of civilians murdered, displaced, beaten, and raped, Congo is at the epicentre of what has been described as Africa's first world war. From the time of the Berlin Conference (1884–5) to today, imperialists and internationalists have conspired to colonize the territory, then decolonize it, and finally condemn it through neglect and moral indifference.

#### Theory applied



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defence'). In the case of the League of Nations, Article 16 of the League's Charter noted the obligation that, in the event of war, all member states must cease normal relations with the offending state, impose sanctions, and, if necessary, commit their armed forces to the disposal of the League Council should the use of force be required to restore the status quo.

The League's constitution also called for the **self-determination** of all nations—another founding characteristic of liberal idealist thinking on international relations. Going back to the mid-nineteenth century, self-determination movements in Greece, Hungary, and Italy received support among liberal powers and public opinion. Yet the default support for self-determination masked a host of practical and moral problems that were laid bare after Woodrow Wilson issued his proclamation. What would happen to newly created minorities who felt no allegiance to the self-determining state? Could a democratic process adequately deal with questions of identity—who was to decide what constituency was to participate in a ballot? And what

if a newly self-determined state rejected liberal democratic norms?

The experience of the League of Nations was a disaster. While the moral rhetoric at the creation of the League was decidedly idealist, in practice states remained imprisoned by self-interest. There is no better example of this than the USA's decision not to join the institution it had created. With the Soviet Union outside the system for ideological reasons, the League of Nations quickly became a talking shop for the 'satisfied' powers. Hitler's decision in March 1936 to reoccupy the Rhineland, a designated demilitarized zone according to the terms of the **Treaty of Versailles**, effectively pulled the plug on the League's life-support system (it had already been put on the 'critical' list following the Manchurian crisis in 1931 and the Ethiopian crisis in 1935).

According to the history of International Relations, the collapse of the League of Nations dealt a fatal blow to idealism. There is no doubt that the language of liberalism after 1945 was more pragmatic; how could anyone living in the shadow of the Holocaust be optimistic? Yet

familiar core ideas of liberalism remained. Even in the early 1940s there was recognition of the need to replace the League with another international institution with responsibility for international peace and security. Only this time, in the case of the United Nations, there was an awareness among the framers of its Charter of the need for a consensus between the great powers in order for enforcement action to be taken—hence the veto system (Article 27 of the UN Charter), which allowed any of the five permanent members of the Security Council the power of veto. This revision constituted an important modification to the classical model of collective security (Roberts 1996: 315). With the ideological polarity of the cold war, the UN procedures for collective security were stillborn (as either of the **superpowers** and their allies would veto any action proposed by the other). It was not until the end of the cold war that cooperation among the great powers was sufficiently well developed for collective security to be enacted, such as was evident in response to the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq on 2 August 1990 (see Case Study 2).

An important argument advanced by liberals in the early post-war period concerned the state's inability to cope with modernization. David Mitrany (1943), a pioneer **integration** theorist, argued that transnational **cooperation** was required in order to resolve common problems. His core concept was 'ramification', meaning

the likelihood that cooperation in one sector would lead governments to extend the range of **collaboration** across other sectors. As states become more embedded in an integration process, the 'cost' of withdrawing from cooperative ventures increases.

This argument about the positive benefits from transnational cooperation is one that informed a new generation of scholars (particularly in the USA) in the 1960s and 1970s. Their argument was not simply about the mutual gains from trade, but that other **transnational actors** were beginning to challenge the dominance of sovereign states. World politics, according to pluralists (as they are often referred to), was no longer an exclusive arena for states, as it had been for the first 300 years of the Westphalian states-system. In one of the central texts of this genre, Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye (1972) argued that the centrality of other actors, such as interest groups, **transnational corporations**, and **international non-governmental organizations** (INGOs), had to be taken into consideration. Here the overriding image of international relations is one of a cobweb of diverse actors linked through multiple channels of interaction.

Although the phenomenon of transnationalism was an important addition to the International Relations theorists' vocabulary, it remained underdeveloped as a theoretical concept. Perhaps the most important contribution of **pluralism** was its elaboration of **interdependence**.

### Case Study 2 The 1990–1 Gulf War and collective security



Source: US Air Force

Iraq had always argued that the sovereign state of Kuwait was an artificial creation of the imperial powers. When this political motive was allied to an economic imperative, caused primarily by accumulated war debts following the eight-year war with Iran, the annexation of Kuwait seemed to be a solution to Iraq's problems. The Iraqi President, Saddam Hussein, also assumed that the West would not use force to defend Kuwait, a miscalculation fuelled by the memory of the support the West had given Iraq during the Iran–Iraq War (the so-called 'fundamentalism' of Iran

was considered to be a graver threat to international order than the extreme nationalism of the Iraqi regime).

The invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990 led to a series of UN resolutions calling for Iraq to withdraw unconditionally. Economic sanctions were applied while the US-led coalition of international forces gathered in Saudi Arabia. Operation 'Desert Storm' crushed the Iraqi resistance in a matter of six weeks (16 January to 28 February 1991). The 1990–1 Gulf War had certainly revived the UN doctrine of collective security, although a number of doubts remained about the underlying motivations for the war and the way in which it was fought (for instance, the coalition of national armies was controlled by the USA rather than by a UN military command as envisaged in the Charter). President George H. Bush declared that the war was about more than one small country, it was about a 'big idea; a new world order'. The content of this new world order was 'peaceful settlement of disputes, solidarity against aggression, reduced and controlled arsenals, and just treatment of all peoples'.

#### Theory applied



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Due to the expansion of **capitalism** and the emergence of a global culture, pluralists recognized a growing interconnectedness in which ‘changes in one part of the system have direct and indirect consequences for the rest of the system’ (Little 1996: 77). Absolute **state autonomy**, so keenly entrenched in the minds of state leaders, was being circumscribed by interdependence. Such a development brought with it enhanced potential for cooperation as well as increased levels of vulnerability.

In his 1979 work, *Theory of International Politics*, the neo-realist Kenneth Waltz attacked the pluralist argument about the decline of the state. He argued that the degree of interdependence internationally was far lower than between the constituent parts in a national political system. Moreover, the level of economic interdependence—especially between great powers—was less than that which existed in the early part of the twentieth century. Waltz concludes: ‘if one is thinking of the international–political world, it is odd in the extreme that “interdependence” has become the word commonly used to describe it’ (1979: 144). In the course of their engagement with Waltz and other neo-realists, early pluralists modified their position. Neo-liberals, as they came to be known, conceded that the core assumptions of **neo-realism** were indeed correct: the anarchic international structure, the centrality of states, and a rationalist approach to social scientific enquiry. Where they differed was apparent primarily in the argument that anarchy does not mean that durable patterns of cooperation are impossible: the creation of international regimes matters here as they facilitate cooperation by sharing information, reinforcing **reciprocity**, and making defection from norms easier to punish (see Ch. 19). Moreover, in what was to become the most important difference between neo-realists and neo-liberals (developed further in Ch. 8), the latter argued that actors would enter into cooperative agreements if the gains were evenly shared. Neo-realists dispute this hypothesis: what matters is a question not so much of mutual gains as of **relative gains**. In other words, a neo-realist state has to be sure that it has more to gain than its rivals from a particular bargain or regime.

There are two important arguments that set neo-liberalism apart from democratic peace liberalism and the liberal idealists of the inter-war period. First, academic enquiry should be guided by a commitment to a scientific approach to theory-building. Whatever deeply held personal values scholars maintain, their task must be to observe regularities, formulate hypotheses as to why that relationship holds, and subject these to critical scrutiny. This separation of fact and value puts neo-liberals on the positivist side of the methodological divide. Second, writers such as Keohane are critical of the naive assumption of nineteenth-century liberals that commerce breeds peace. A free trade system, according to neo-liberals, provides incentives for cooperation but does not guarantee it. Here he is making an important distinction between cooperation and harmony. ‘Co-operation is not automatic’, Keohane argues, ‘but requires planning and negotiation’ (1986: 11). In the following section we see how contemporary liberal thinking maintains that the institutions of world politics after 1945 successfully embedded all states into a cooperative order.

### Key Points

- Early liberal thought on international relations took the view that the natural order had been corrupted by undemocratic state leaders and outdated policies such as the balance of power. Enlightenment liberals believed that a latent cosmopolitan morality could be achieved through the exercise of reason and through the creation of constitutional states. In addition, the unfettered movement of people and goods could further facilitate more peaceful international relations.
- Although there are important continuities between Enlightenment liberal thought and twentieth-century ideas, such as the belief in the power of world public opinion to tame the interests of states, liberal idealism was more programmatic. For idealists, persuasion was more important than abstract moral reasoning.
- Liberal thought at the end of the twentieth century became grounded in social scientific theories of state behaviour. Cooperation among rational egoists was possible to achieve if properly coordinated by regimes and institutions.

## The challenges confronting liberalism

The ascendancy of liberal ideas and institutions has been one of the most striking trends in world politics for the last two centuries. Furthermore, with the

demise of the cold war system it seemed like liberalism had seen off all other contending political ideologies. At the start of the 1990s, leading Western politicians



hailed a 'new world order' as international institutions such as the United Nations Security Council began to operate as envisaged by the drafters of the Charter back in 1945. These new and welcome patterns of cooperation prompted the then British Prime Minister Tony Blair to declare, at the end of the 1990s, that 'we are all internationalists now' (1999a).

From the vantage point of the second decade of the twenty-first century, confidence in the liberal international order has ebbed and liberalism is now in question in international theory and in practice. Recurring crises and disagreements in the multilateral institutions designed to provide governance over security, trade, and finance, have demonstrated that cooperation is harder to achieve and to sustain than liberals assumed. The on-going violence in the Middle East and North Africa, the uneven record of post-cold war liberal foreign policies in delivering a more secure and just world order, and unrest triggered by the global financial crisis have turned the triumphalism of the 'liberal decade' into despondency. It is now more common to read about liberalism's demise than it is to hear about its ascendancy.

G. John Ikenberry is the most prominent analyst of the influence liberal ideas have exerted over world order in the last hundred years or so. In a highly cited article, Ikenberry maps liberalism's influence through three phases, conveniently labelled 'liberal internationalism 1.0', '2.0', and '3.0' (1999). Liberal internationalism 1.0 corresponds with the inter-war period and the failed attempt to replace the old balance of power order with the rule of law. After 1945, America set about constructing liberal internationalism 2.0. It did this by embedding certain fundamental liberal principles into the regulatory rules and institutions of international society. Contrary to realist claims about state behaviour, the world's pre-eminent power chose to forsake the pursuit of short-term gains in return for a durable settlement that benefited its European allies and those in Asia too. While America had more power than other states in the system, it also accepted a greater share of the burden when it came to setting and upholding the rules of economic and security governance (see Box 7.3).

This model of an American-led international order—liberal internationalism 2.0—is experiencing a crisis today. Why is this? First and foremost, American hegemony 'no longer appears to be an adequate framework to support liberal international order' (Ikenberry 2009: 99). Even if the USA had sufficient power, there

### Box 7.3 Crisis and division in liberalism?

The theme of liberal world order in crisis is one that has received a great deal of scholarly attention in recent years. In a book of the same title, Georg Sørensen compares the optimistic sentiments of the 1990s with the post-9/11 world in which terror and great power rivalry darkened the horizon of international relations. Sørensen defines world order as 'a governing arrangement among states' (2011: 12), and believes that sovereign states remain the primary building blocks of these governance arrangements. The main contribution of the book is the way in which tensions arise when liberty is pursued in the world. One example of this tension is the practice of democracy-promotion that has been pursued by most liberal states, to varying degrees, in the last two decades. Outsiders promoting democracy risk becoming overly paternalistic and thereby lapsing into a form of imperialism that has no legitimacy in international politics today. Another example of this tension concerns the criteria for membership of international institutions: should they be open to states with illiberal constitutions, or should they be restricted to liberal, democratic countries only? Such voices are frequently heard in Western capitals when the will of liberal great powers has been stymied by others, as was the case in 2003 when the UN Security Council refused to give its consent to the war against Iraq. Sørensen describes this tension, and the protagonists putting one or other liberal position, as a choice 'between Imposition and Restraint' (2011, 64). The values and practices associated with 'Imposition' include intervention, foreign policy activism, scrutiny of other states, and the pursuit of universal principles. The values and practices associated with 'Restraint' include non-intervention, toleration, empathy, and pragmatism.

are signs that the rest of the world no longer wants an order in which a single state is preponderant. Related to this point is the sense that the liberal principle of sovereign equality is under threat. The security policies being driven by America and its allies in NATO rest on a conception of sovereignty that has become conditional on good behaviour, understood either as being on-side with the war on terror or ensuring basic human rights are protected.

The controversy generated by the 2011 NATO-led war against Gaddafi's Libya is an example of the deep divisions that Western leadership is generating. Shortly after the no-fly zone began to be enforced militarily, Russia and China argued that the other three permanent members of the Security Council (France, the UK, and the USA) had shifted the mandate from one of protecting civilians to regime change. Whether this is a correct understanding of the NATO-led enforcement action is less important than understanding the magnitude of the struggle that is under way between

influential Western states and the re-emerging powers such as India, China, and Russia. In the realigned world order, the question of where authority lies to decide questions of intervention is one that will need to be answered. The responsibility to protect doctrine (or R2P) could become a key test for whether liberalism can endure despite systemic changes to the distribution of material and normative power.

At the start of the second decade of the twenty-first century, it is apparent to Ikenberry that the US lacks the capacity, and Western institutions the legitimacy, to maintain a version 2.0 into the future. Alternative configurations of liberal internationalism remain a distant possibility. Liberal internationalism 3.0 requires a movement away from a sovereignty-based order towards one where global institutions become the new rulers of the world. While less tied to American power, the governance institutions of the future will nevertheless be driven by liberal values. The dilemma for Ikenberry is that liberal internationalism 2.0 is in crisis, yet 3.0 remains hopelessly unrealistic.

Given that liberalism has produced such unequal gains for the West and the rest, it is perhaps unsurprising that contemporary US-based liberal scholars have become preoccupied with the question of preserving the current order rather than reconstituting it according to more just distributive principles. Rather than seeing reform as a task that wealthy Western countries have a responsibility to undertake, the use of Western power is more often equated with extending control of

institutions, and protecting markets and security access to precious resources. When a hegemonic liberal order comes under challenge, as it did on 9/11, the response was uncompromising. It is noticeable in this respect that former President George W. Bush mobilized the language of liberalism against Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and also Iraq. He referred to the 2003 war against Iraq as 'freedom's war'.

The potential for liberalism to embrace imperialism is a tendency that has a long history (Doyle 1986: 1151–69). We find in Machiavelli a number of arguments for the necessity for republics to expand. Liberty increases wealth and the concomitant drive for new markets; soldiers who are at the same time citizens are better fighters than slaves or mercenaries; and expansion is often the best means to promote a state's security. In this sense, contemporary US foreign policy is no different from the great expansionist republican states of the pre-modern period such as Athens and Rome. Few liberals today would openly advocate territorial expansion along the lines of nineteenth-century European colonial powers; at the same time, many have been drawn to consider the virtues of empire as a way of delivering liberty in an insecure world. Even when empire is rejected by liberals such as Michael Doyle, their defence of interventionism in the affairs of non-liberal states suggests that the line between internationalism and imperialism is a very fine one. Doyle's defence of democracy promotion by a policy mix of forcible and non-forcible instruments is featured in **Box 7.4**.

#### Box 7.4 Defending and extending the liberal zone of peace

As we have seen, advocates of the democratic peace thesis believe that liberal states act peacefully towards one another. Yet this empirical law does not tell liberal states how to behave towards non-liberal states. Should they try to convert them, bringing them into the zone of peace, or should they pursue a more defensive strategy? The former has not been successful in the past, and in a world of many nuclear weapons states crusading could be suicidal. For this reason, Michael Doyle suggests a dual-track approach.

- The first track preserves the liberal community, which means forging strong alliances with other like-minded states and defending themselves against illiberal regimes. This may require liberal states to include in their foreign policy strategies such as the balance of power in order to contain authoritarian states.
- The second track is more expansionist, and aims to extend the liberal zone by a variety of economic and diplomatic

instruments. Doyle categorizes these in terms of 'inspiration' (hoping that peoples living in non-democratic regimes will struggle for their liberty), 'instigation' (peace-building and economic restructuring), and 'intervention' (legitimate if the majority of a polity is demonstrating widespread disaffection with their government and/or their basic rights are being systematically violated).

Doyle concludes with the warning that the march of liberalism will not necessarily continue unabated. It is in our hands, he argues, whether the international system becomes more pacific and stable, or whether antagonisms deepen. We must be willing to pay the price—in institutional costs and development aid—to increase the prospects for a peaceful future. This might be cheap when compared with the alternative of dealing with hostile and unstable authoritarian states.

(Doyle 1999)

The goal of preserving and extending liberal institutions is open to a number of criticisms. The liberal character of those institutions is assumed rather than subjected to critical scrutiny. As a result, the incoherence of the purposes underpinning these institutions is often overlooked. Issues of international peace and security are determined by the fifteen states on the UN Security Council, of whom only five have a right to veto a resolution. If we take the area of political economy, the power exerted by the West and its international financial

institutions perpetuates structural inequality and generates new patterns of dominance and dependence. Also, critics argue that the kind of crisis narrative evident in the work of Ikenberry and Sørensen can be viewed as an implicit pretext for more liberal ordering. It also risks misrepresenting liberalism in terms of great powers in the driving seat of global public policy, when governance is multilevel and the actors driving policies are often private enterprises or the new breed of global diplomats and regulators.

### Key Points

- Liberal internationalism 2.0, which is associated with the post-1945 period, is in crisis. The ability of the USA to steer world order is diminishing, rising powers are wanting a greater share of the spoils, and new security challenges are opening up significant divisions among the major powers.
- If Ikenberry is right and 2.0 is in decline, it is not clear what is going to replace it. If 2.0 collapses then the world is back to the inter-war period when the League of Nations could not live up to its promise. If 2.0 is reinvigorated, then global institutions will adapt to the challenge of new emerging powers without losing their distinctively liberal character.
- The assumption that liberalism has indeed triumphed during the post-1945 period is vulnerable to the critique that the practices of trade, security, and development have never delivered on their promise. As a result, liberal international orders remain conveniently favourable to the most powerful states in the system.
- Is the future of liberalism likely to be a return to internationalism 1.0—in other words, a period in which there is an institutional architecture that is hopelessly out of step with what is happening in world politics? Or is internationalism 3.0 a realistic alternative to the rules and institutions of the post-1945 period, which seem unable to deliver order and justice for most peoples in the world?

### Conclusion

The euphoria with which liberals greeted the end of the cold war in 1989 has dissipated. The pattern of conflict and insecurity that we have seen at the beginning of the twenty-first century suggests that liberal democracy remains at best an incomplete project. Images and narratives from countries in every continent—Afghanistan, Liberia, Chechnya, Colombia, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Myanmar, Zimbabwe, and so on—remind us that in many parts of the world, anti-liberal values of warlordism, torture, intolerance, and injustice are expressed daily. Moreover, the reasons why these states have failed can to some extent be laid at the door of liberalism, particularly in terms of its promotion of often irreconcilable norms of sovereignty, democracy, national self-determination, and human rights (Hoffmann 1995–6: 169).

One response to the argument that liberalism is incomplete or under threat is to call for more liberalism. This is certainly the approach taken by G. John

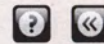
Ikenberry and his co-author Daniel Deudney (2009). They believe that there is only one path to modernization, and that illiberal voices will be drowned out by the imperatives to open markets and hold governments accountable. A deeper reason for the crisis in liberalism is that it is bound up with an increasingly discredited Enlightenment view of the world. Contrary to the hopes of Bentham, Hume, Kant, Mill, and Paine, the application of reason and science to politics has not brought communities together. Indeed, it has arguably shown the fragmented nature of the **political community**, which is regularly expressed in terms of ethnic, linguistic, or religious differences. Critics of liberalism argue that the universalizing mission of liberal values such as democracy, capitalism, and secularism undermines the traditions and practices of non-Western cultures (Gray 1995: 146). When it comes to doing intercultural politics, somehow liberals just don't seem to take 'no' for an answer. The Marxist writer Immanuel Wallerstein has a nice way of expressing

the dilemma over universalism. Liberals view it as ‘a “gift” of the powerful to the weak’ that places them in a double bind: ‘to refuse the gift is to lose; to accept the gift is to lose’ (in Brown 1999).

The challenges that lay ahead for liberalism are immense. Whether the challenge is the environment, or poverty reduction, or nuclear non-proliferation, or humanitarian atrocities, liberal institutions and policies have not mitigated or eradicated these issues—in some cases they have made them worse. One response is to say that liberalism itself is part of the reason why such pathologies exist in the world; free trade, as we know, generates hierarchies of wealth and power which international institutions seem better at reflecting rather than dismantling; in the area of international security,

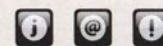
almost every organization or treaty is built on structural inequalities that might be defensible if those institutions were effective but often they are not. Another response is to say that the problem with the institutions of governance in global politics today is not too much liberalism, but not enough liberalism. In other words, like the great nineteenth-century reformers, today’s advocates of a liberal world order should return to the core values and beliefs of the tradition. In so doing, they will insist that international institutions must be reformed, that decisions are better when they are made democratically, that good governance requires public services for all, that rights are irrelevant unless responsibilities are taken seriously, and that economic and social justice is critical to peaceful change on a regional and global scale.

### Questions



- 1 Do you agree with Stanley Hoffmann that international affairs are ‘inhospitable’ to liberalism?
- 2 What arguments might one draw on to support or refute this proposition?
- 3 Was the language of international morality, used by liberal idealists in the inter-war period, a way of masking the interests of Britain and France in maintaining their dominance of the international system after the First World War?
- 4 Should liberal states promote their values abroad? Is force a legitimate instrument in securing this goal?
- 5 How much progress (if any) has there been in liberal thinking on international relations since Kant?
- 6 Is the ascendancy of democratic regimes explained by the superiority of liberal institutions and values?
- 7 Is liberalism too wedded to a state-centric view of international relations?
- 8 Is there a fundamental tension at the heart of liberalism between liberty and democracy? If so, how is this tension played out in the international domain?
- 9 Are liberal values and institutions in the contemporary international system as deeply embedded as neo-liberals claim?
- 10 Is the liberal order in crisis today, as G. John Ikenberry and G. Sørensen argue? Are emerging global powers a threat to the liberal order?

### Further Reading



**Brown, C., Nartin, T., and Rengger, N.** (eds) (2002), *International Relations in Political Thought: Texts from the Ancient Greeks to the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). See especially the readings from classical liberal thought in sections 7, 8, and 9.

- Doyle, M.** (1997), *Ways of War and Peace* (New York: W. W. Norton). Doyle classifies liberalism into the following strands: liberal pacifism, liberal imperialism, and liberal internationalism.
- (2012), *Liberal Peace: Selected Essays* (Abingdon: Routledge). An excellent collection of Doyle's writings on liberalism, including the two part essays 'Kant, liberal legacies, and foreign affairs'.
- Dunne, T., and Flockhart, T.** (eds) (2013), *Liberal World Orders* (Oxford: Oxford University Press/ British Academy). Critical reflections on liberal world orders by leading IR scholars, including Emanuel Adler, Richard Devetak, Stefano Guzzini, John Hobson, Kim Hutchings, and Chris Reus-Smit.
- Hoffmann, S.** (1987), *Janus and Minerva: Essays in the theory and Practice of International Politics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press): An excellent account of liberalism and its troubled relationship to international relations.
- Ikenberry, G. J.** (2009), 'Liberal Internationalism 3.0: America and the Dilemmas of Liberal World Order', *Perspectives in Politics*, 71(1): 71–87. A pivotal case for the reform of the post-1945 order, by an influential liberal thinker.
- Jahn, B.** (ed.) (2006), *Classical Theory in International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). Includes a number of critical essays on liberal thinkers such as Kant, Mill, and Smith.
- Mazower, M.** (2012), *Governing the World: The History of an Idea* (New York: Penguin Press). This book is a brilliant study of liberal internationalist policies and programmes. It traces governance back to the early nineteenth century and shows how many of the flaws in the current global order have causes that reach far back into history.
- Sørensen, G.** (2011), *A Liberal World Order in Crisis: Choosing Between Imposition and Restraint* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press). A good account of the division within liberalism between advocates of 'imposition' and advocates of 'restraint'.
- Walt, S.** (1998), 'International Relations: One World, Many Theories', *Foreign Policy*, 110: 29–46. Not only does this contain a useful short overview of liberalism, it highlights the imperfect application of liberal theory in practice.

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