

Introduction:

Ordering the world? Liberal internationalism in theory and practice

G. JOHN IKENBERRY, INDERJEET PARMAR AND DOUG STOKES

The Trump presidency appears to personify, along with Britain's vote to withdraw from the European Union, a sense of deep crisis in the United States-led liberal international order (LIO). The two states that conceived and constructed a whole array of international institutions after 1945 now seem to be rejecting that order, or at the very least, demanding that its institutions either be reformed or recalibrated to better suit their purposes. However, both developments may signal a new phase in the evolution of the international system—more nationalistic, state-centric and transactional, in which costs and responsibilities are more widely shared and where the electorate questions the costs versus benefits of the postwar liberal consensus. This crisis has long been evident: rising non-western states; global shifts in economic power; illiberal non-state actors; deep-seated problems with the legitimacy of political elites; as well as social and racial problems at home all signal enduring problems for US global leadership. 'Liberal internationalism' has long been one of the most influential approaches to the challenge of international order-making in the post-1945 system. The question today is: in an unstable and rapidly changing world and given the changing character of societies, how relevant is liberal internationalism as an ideological construct, a scholarly theory or a practical roadmap, in navigating a new and potentially non-western world order? This special issue draws together leading scholars to discuss the broad range of positions in the burgeoning debate on the continued viability of the liberal world order, while moving beyond the conventional liberal–realist spectrum with its focus on Great Powers and Great Power politics.

The promise of this special issue lies, first of all, in its framing. The special issue is construed, at least initially, as a debate around the notion of liberal internationalism as a theory and practice in crisis, because its core tenets, some argue, do not explain the current sources of western and US 'decline' or power shifts to the East. The seeds of crisis will be located, in part at least, by identifying the historical development of liberalism in general and of liberal internationalism in particular—as well as through more conventional, realist critiques. What is even more unconventional, the debate encompasses deep critiques of the very foundational principles of the international order—seen as heavily racialized, elitist and imperial in character and, hence, probably incapable of deep enough reform to address problems of power and inequality that lie at the heart of the crises of

order. The challenge for critics, however, is to go beyond familiar and frequently heard discussions of the crisis of liberal internationalism, to also explore what they see as the great ‘alternatives’ to liberal internationalism defined as an open and at least loosely rules-based system. For all its faults, the key problem for critics to address is what alternative form of international order would be preferable? The menu options are thin.

The above places the onus on liberal internationalists not merely to restate old positions, but to discuss fundamental assumptions and to clarify, ‘defend’ and develop their arguments to meet these challenges. Conversely, criticism of the current order is easy, but if we presume that critics wish to maintain the progressive norms, democratic forms of representation and commitment to a rules-based international order, who or what will carry this project forward if not the ‘West’, based on US leadership? Few theorists of liberal internationalism see it as a static theory or singular historical moment, so their task is to illuminate the long-term logic and trajectories of the LIO. Yet, and here is the fourth claim to distinctiveness, such intellectual exchanges are rarely, if ever, afforded a forum, as most ‘debates’ are very narrow and conventionally take place between established, mainstream realists and liberals—their points and assumptions too frequently do not include voices on the more critical margins of world politics or academia.

To that end, we asked a range of contributors to address questions they deemed most relevant—from their own varied theoretical, historical, contemporary or philosophical perspectives. How viable is the LIO in the absence of western and US leadership and intervention? Is its liberalism the very key to the international order? How will the international order change as more nationalistic or authoritarian states emerge onto the global stage, as sovereignty is potentially experiencing a resurgence against the globalizing trend of the last 30 years and, even more interestingly, as supposedly solid liberal states tend towards what some term right wing populism? Is hard, economic power likely to be useful or to become the US’s preferred form of global engagement in maintaining the LIO—especially in the context of deepening economic multipolarity and increasing elite and popular frustration with allegedly unfair trade practices and their impacts on levels, types and remuneration of employment in the US, Britain and elsewhere? Are there alternatives to, or recalibrations or (re)forms of western order and, if so, how desirable are they and how might they relate to non-western states and other formations? What are possible, alternative—non-western and western—‘grand strategies’ to apply to structural changes taking place in the post-9/11 era, including, but not limited to, how the ‘West’ addresses illiberal state and non-state actors?

Responding to these questions, G. John Ikenberry considers whether the LIO, led by the US for the last 70 years, is ending. He argues that liberal internationalism is in a crisis of authority but that this is not a crisis of the underlying logic and character of the LIO. Indeed, the constituencies for at least a loosely rules-based international order are expanding, not declining. Liberal internationalism is a product of centuries of struggle over the terms of modern, global order. Non-western states—including China—are seeking greater voice and authority

within a renegotiated and expanded system of rules and institutions, but they are not offering fundamentally new ideas about how global order should be organized or run. However, will the liberal order, at home as much as internationally, survive an ‘America First’ Trump presidency?

Constance Duncombe and Tim Dunne second Ikenberry’s motion. Realists and critical theorists can point to the failure of liberal regimes—designed to manage order and promote justice—in vital areas demanding cooperation, such as nuclear arms control, climate change and financial stability. Yet proposals for resolving these world order problems are seldom framed in ways that reject liberal arguments and principles, which would suggest that their causes lie elsewhere. This article uses the case of the human protection regime as a test of liberal internationalism’s capacity to deliver order and justice, arguing that the regime will be enhanced by allowing an older form of liberal pluralism—more resilient than strong universalism—to inform the (re)design and implementation of human protection practices.

Beate Jahn, moreover, argues that liberal internationalism will survive, but the postwar liberal order created by the United States may not. Liberal internationalism is a centuries-old political project, aimed at promoting individual freedom through private property and government by consent which, since the eighteenth century, entailed political emancipation and oppression, appropriation and expropriation. These contradictory policies constitute liberal and illiberal actors, and the resulting struggles and shifting power relations lead to the dynamic development of liberalism itself: from anti-democracy to democracy, from imperialism to anti-imperialism, from *laissez-faire* and Keynesian, to neo-liberal economics. Current struggles and power shifts therefore express the internal dynamics of liberal internationalism, not an existential crisis. But what is new is the fact that these contradictions today play themselves out within a liberal world order—raising the question of how far liberalism can adjust or whether the liberal world order will fall apart.

Carla Norrlof presents a vigorous defence of the international order as beneficial to the United States, even though its negative domestic distributional impact has been mobilized by President Trump under the banner of ‘making America great again’ and putting ‘white America first’. This is the first real mention of the racialized and class character of the liberal order’s leading power and the inequalities it has—in part—generated and which have been effectuated by successive administrations under the banner of liberal internationalism. By bringing felt anxieties to the fore—racial and economic—President Trump’s approach is likely to do more harm than good. Norrlof argues that the domestic foundations of the international order need to be secured not only by redistributionist economic and labour market policies, but also by opening up college and university education to a wider range of Americans, especially working-class whites. In short, “‘America first’ will make America second rate’ (p. 88).

Christopher Layne, however, argues that despite the optimism of liberal internationalists—and their theory of achieving ‘painless decline’ through locking the

Pax Americana's essential features into the system—China is working to recast the international order to serve its own interests. Given its perception that the US is declining, Beijing has an incentive to reshape the international system in a way that advances China's interests. US foreign policy elites do not grasp this, claiming that rules and institutions are politically neutral and beneficial for all. However, in international politics, who rules makes the rules and no international order lasts forever. Over time, the relative power of states change and a rising Great Power will want to shape the rules that the existing international order embodies—rules made, of course, by the once dominant, but now declining, Great Power.

Naná de Graaff and Bastiaan van Apeldoorn look at Sino-US economic networks as a way to discuss the same question as Layne, but come to a different conclusion. They outline three scenarios: a) China poses a challenge to the existing liberal order, its mode of governance and dominant power structures; b) China is gradually integrating into the liberal order; or c) China retains an autonomous trajectory of transnationalization, leading to a more hybrid global politico-economic order. How does China's transnationalization trajectory impact Sino-US relations? The roots of the so-called China threat must be situated in the distinctive nature of the state-capital nexus in the US and China respectively, and the configuration of elite networks underpinning this nexus in both countries. The authors trace the formation of the Obama administration's grand strategic Asia pivot by analysing the American nexus between corporate elites, think-tanks and the state. They also explore the extent to which Chinese 'statist' elites are integrating into the power structures of the liberal order as opposed to developing alternative networks of their own, and argue that this provides important reminders of the resilience of the liberal order.

Doug Stokes suggests that the US remains structurally advantaged by the international order, even though it faces both internal and external challenges. Drawing on different models of hegemonic stability theory, Stokes maintains that, from the point of view of US elites, the LIO is the 'best of a bad bunch' of global alternatives (p. 150). But the LIO's model of globalization has deepened structural inequality both within the US and in the 'West' more broadly, which has not only weakened the social contract at the heart of US identity but also the capacity of foreign policy elites to build consent for a grand strategy of primacy. The US continues to enjoy huge positional advantages from its postwar model, but it will prove very hard to move back to the status quo after President Trump without addressing the domestic inequalities and political fallout of near-unfettered globalization.

Inderjeet Parmar argues that the biggest challenge facing the post-1945 LIO is the need to embrace ethno-racial diversity and strategies to reduce class-based inequalities. This is problematic because the LIO's core foundational principles, and the 'theory' of liberal internationalism underpinning them, are Eurocentric, elitist and resistant to change. As illustration, this article considers wartime elite planning for global leadership, the role of the United Nations in Korea from 1945 to 1953, as well as the role of several US state-linked initiatives in China over the

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past several decades, especially the Ford Foundation. The article uses the contemporary and historical evidence to evaluate liberal internationalist claims, as well as claims implied by work on 'ultra-imperialism', based on Karl Kautsky's and Antonio Gramsci's ideas of hegemony. The article concludes that elite incorporation is the principal goal of the US-led order, as opposed to embracing diversity and moving towards genuine change felt at a mass level. Hence, we should expect domestic and international political crises to deepen.

