

CHAPTER 8

Liberal institutionalism

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Liberal institutionalism presumes that domestic and international institutions play central roles in facilitating cooperation and peace. But recently, this influential approach has been in jeopardy. For example, the United Kingdom, after 47 years as a participant in European integration, became the first state to exit the European Union (EU). The United States, having withdrawn from or renegotiated several international arrangements under President Donald Trump, could not position itself as an automatic backer of multilateralism even under President Joseph Biden. China hinted that it would be happy to take on greater global leadership if the United States retreated from this traditional role, and Russia used military and cyber capabilities to reassert its transborder influence. During the COVID-19 pandemic, major international institutions were paralyzed as states closed their borders, hoarded supplies, and engaged in vaccine nationalism.^{[1](#)}

It is hardly unprecedented to see states renegotiating or rejecting international cooperation. However, what is surprising is the rhetoric. Liberal institutionalism presented itself as a corrective to conventional realist international relations theory, which held that powerful states dominate world

politics while international institutions are inconsequential. And yet today, liberal democracies—which are some of the world's most powerful states—contain vocal segments that are desperate to escape the clutches of formidable international institutions that supposedly demand too much. Meanwhile, non-liberal regimes are willing not only to stay in these institutions, but to take more central roles.

To fathom the irony, it is necessary to understand liberal institutionalism in tandem with historical events and competing theoretical views. This chapter begins by explaining how this theoretical approach has developed in response to both the conceptual, and the real, worlds. It tracks major critiques of liberal institutionalism by realists, Marxists, constructivists, critical theorists, developing countries, non-liberal governments, and the general public. This chapter concludes with open questions about the survival of the contemporary international order—and the liberal institutionalism that has animated it.

Conceptual roots of liberal institutionalism

Liberal institutionalism selectively embraces and repudiates tenets of other theories of international relations, and therefore it cannot be understood without grasping the broader conceptual milieu of realism, classical liberalism, and Marxism. Modern international relations theory is often traced to Niccolo Machiavelli, the Florentine diplomat whose 1513 treatise *The Prince* advised rulers about using ethically questionable means to achieve their goals.² Rooted in pragmatism rather than ideology, this approach to governance has become entwined with the paradigm of realism. Realism eventually developed a particular set of assumptions, including:

1. states are the primary actors
2. states interact in an anarchic system lacking any higher authority or enforcement
3. states are rational actors, selecting actions they expect will achieve their goals

4. to survive and thrive, states must accumulate power
5. accumulating power is a zero-sum game in which gains for one state necessitate losses for another.

Under these assumptions, realists consider any inter-state cooperation to be only a temporary reprieve from states' general circumstances of competition, conflict, and war.

Classical liberalism, the intellectual antecedent of liberal institutionalism, is a paradigm that strongly challenges the realist premise that states are on an inevitable collision course in their quest for power. Instead, liberalism perceives high prospects for sustained cooperation. States can surmount competition, conflict, and war by forming like-minded groups and binding themselves through domestic and international institutions.

This rationale permeates Immanuel Kant's 1795 essay *Perpetual Peace*, which offers three linked prescriptions.³ Internally, each state should embrace a republican form of government that separates legislative and executive power. Such domestic institutions make war more difficult because the citizenry, who bear much of the cost, would need

to approve it. Externally, these republican states should band together in a pacific federation whose members renounce the right to wage war with one another. Such international institutions facilitate trade and other linkages that would make war even more damaging for its perpetrators. Universally, individual “citizens of the world” who conduct themselves peacefully should be free to travel and do business in states other than their own. Once states are restrained at the domestic and international levels, their citizens are more likely to respect the rights of other states’ citizens, further reducing the impetus for inter-state conflict.

In theory, the Kantian system widens over time, as more states become republican and therefore eligible to enter the pacific federation and reciprocal rights of “hospitality.” And as more states subscribe to universalist values, which guide how all members of the in-group must be treated, the in-group itself grows. Thus, political institutions lie at the core of Kantian perpetual peace, for they are crucial components of an expanding system that discourages war.

This sunny perspective is at odds not only with realism but also with Marxism. Far from seeing capitalist institutions and economic relations as

the underpinnings of peace, Marxists see them as the sites of contestation between social classes and as vehicles for exploitation.⁴ Marxism clashes with the Kantian premise that liberal institutions can bind people together and promote peace.

This foreshadows one of liberalism's thorniest issues: until all states reciprocate an identical set of universalist values, there will be an in-group and an out-group. Enhancements for one can be threats to the other. Hence until the system is all-encompassing, peace will be fragile, partial, and intermittent. It is difficult to know, then, how to interpret the outbreak of wars. Are these predictable bumps on the road to perpetual peace, or are they evidence that liberalism is not a viable approach to international politics?

Real-world roots of liberal institutionalism

Proponents of liberalism continually wrestled with this, especially as real-world conflicts underscored the dilemma. For instance, in his 1911 publication *The Great Illusion*, Norman Angell reacted to saber-

rattling in continental Europe.⁵ Although this work is often misinterpreted as a positive argument for why war in Europe *could* not happen, in fact, it is a normative argument for why war *should* not happen. The “great illusion” was governments’ continuing faith in military power. Angell asserted that war among interdependent industrialized countries would be costly and self-immolating because most of the material and human resources sought through conquest could be obtained much more effectively through other means.

Although World War I nevertheless ensnared states in Europe and elsewhere, liberalism would have another chance to guide international politics: US president Woodrow Wilson incorporated liberal notions in his “Fourteen Points.”⁶ He called for an intergovernmental League of Nations, a remarkable manifestation of Kant’s “pacific federation” in which states with shared values and linked economies could coexist. The League was created, but the United States itself never formally joined.

The League’s many weaknesses—along with evidence of Japan’s imperial aspirations and the renewed tensions in Europe—highlighted the ongoing conceptual tussle between the liberal and realist paradigms. In the 1939 book *The Twenty*

Years' Crisis, E.H. Carr lambasted “utopians” who had trusted transnational ties or institutions to overcome states’ innate attraction to power, competition, and armed conflict.⁷ Carr acknowledged liberalism’s normative appeal. However, he ultimately argued that in the existing milieu of jostling nation-states, the realist paradigm was a superior guide and predictor of political behavior. Indeed, later that year Hitler invaded Poland, launching World War II.

After the war, the conceptual tussle persisted. Realism’s tenets seemed to explain the failure to prevent a second large-scale war among industrialized countries, and its assumptions appeared to fit the burgeoning Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, liberalism also thrived. In his 1941 State of the Union address, US President Franklin D. Roosevelt asserted freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from want, and freedom from fear as core values that could and should spread throughout the United States and the world.⁸ Traces of these “four freedoms” pervade the United Nations (UN), the intergovernmental organization that replaced the League of Nations in 1945. Similar values also gird a host of other international institutions—including the Food and Agri-

culture Organization (FAO), the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank—that the US government and others helped to design and fund at the end of World War II. These values and institutions are the foundations of today's liberal international order.

In the middle of the twentieth century, unable to ignore the flurry of postwar institution-building, realists sought to bring these institutions in conformity with their own paradigm. Some work, such as Hans Morgenthau's *Politics among Nations*, marginalized international institutions as epiphenomenal: if institutions merely reflect the balance of power among states, then it is still expedient for theories to ignore institutions and look directly at states.⁹ Other work, such as Charles Kindleberger's *The World in Depression*, took a more nuanced approach.¹⁰ As an early proponent of “hegemonic stability theory,” he argued that the belligerence and economic woes of the 1930s stemmed from that period's lack of a single hegemonic state that was powerful enough to keep the international system running smoothly. After World War II, however, the United States saw that its own capabilities and aims fit the role. Hence, this powerful state backed

a network of international institutions to help it provide economic stability and other public goods for the international system. A confluence of liberal values was unnecessary because peace could be achieved by a hegemon who would self-servingly enforce cooperation.

More recent work, such as G. John Ikenberry's *After Victory*, bridged realist and liberal interpretations of postwar institution-building.^{[11](#)} For him, state power was important, but international institutions and liberal values were too. Institutions are difficult to change or dismantle once they begin operating. Therefore, a hegemonic state can use institutional rules to restrain itself when it is at the height of its power but also to extend its influence into the future, when its power differential has declined. If the hegemon injects liberal values into these institutions, then the institutions themselves will perpetuate the rule of law and the sorts of universalist principles that Kant envisioned. The hegemon's initial self-restraint convinces other states to join—and as a greater number of states become invested in an institution, the institution is even more likely to persist and propagate. That helps to explain why the liberal international order, initiated following World War II, has expanded.

Rehabilitation and redemption: the emergence of liberal institutionalism

Liberalism had struggled to make sense of the two world wars, but it prospered afterward. From a real-world standpoint, it aligned with the institution-building and relative peace of the latter half of the twentieth century. From a conceptual standpoint, it rehabilitated and redeemed itself with the emergence of several offshoots, culminating in the refinement of liberal institutionalism from the 1970s onward. Repeatedly, the influence of liberalism soared after its proponents were forced to wrestle with competing theoretical views or unexpected historical events.

In the decades after World War II, the construction of global and regional institutions continued, rejuvenating “functionalist” notions that had begun challenging core realist tenets in the 1930s. Promulgated through writings such as David Mitrany’s 1933 book *The Progress of International Government*,^{[12](#)} functionalism argued that authority

is not necessarily monopolized by nation-states within sovereign territories. Instead, governance is a set of functions that can—and perhaps should—be carried out across national borders by a mix of state and non-state actors specializing in particular tasks. This becomes self-perpetuating: as entities in a variety of functional areas develop deep expertise and cooperate effectively to wield authority, nation-states cede even more authority to international institutions. And in line with liberalism, such connectedness disincentivizes war.

Europe's incremental development of supranational governance made these abstract ideas concrete. The path began in 1951 with the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), which would manage coal and steel production in France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg. In the mid-1960s, the ECSC merged with two sister bodies to form the European Communities (which would eventually morph into the European Union). In 1973, the original six-state membership expanded to include Denmark, Ireland, and the United Kingdom. Throughout this process, numerous European policymakers expressed an Angell-like insistence on making their

states so interdependent that war among them would never again be a compelling option.

The European undertaking gave credence to liberal and functionalist notions, and it also inspired a new line of “neo-functionalist” thinking about regional integration. Building upon Mitrany’s insights, works such as Leon Lindberg’s *The Political Dynamics of European Economic Integration*¹³ and Ernst B. Haas’ *Beyond the Nation-State*¹⁴ argued that the architects of European integration were strategically sequencing the delegated functions. By initially cooperating in economic matters, states were building institutions and trust that eventually could spill over into more politically sensitive areas.

Among the shortcomings of functionalism and neo-functionalism, one of the most serious was the supposition of a steady march toward supranationalism. By the 1970s, the United States was thinking about rolling back its support for international institutions—and certainly not making them broader and deeper. US officials questioned whether they could, or should, continue to bear the largest costs for international public goods such as freer trade, collective defense, and the UN system. Nevertheless, interdependence across the world proved difficult to reverse. Not only states, but also

firms, subnational governments, and civil society groups were intensifying their transnational activities.

In their 1977 book *Power and Interdependence*, Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye explored this complexity, arguing that international affairs are not dictated by monolithic states. Instead, bureaucrats, legislators, judges, international institutions, firms, civil society groups, and others interacted with each other domestically and internationally. Consequently, states' fortunes were tied not only through conventional economic linkages but also through novel political and societal ones.¹⁵ Keohane and Nye flirted with liberal views, without explicitly endorsing them—and they concluded that the US government could not easily extricate itself from the institutions and networks it had helped to create.

Kenneth Waltz's 1979 realist treatise *Theory of International Politics* took a different tack.¹⁶ According to him, the world's ostensible complexity had a simple cause: the number of powerful states in the international system. Such structural realism contended that the existing bipolar system, in which two great powers tried but failed to dominate one another, would naturally look different

from a unipolar system with a global hegemon or a multipolar system with several evenly matched states. Thus the real action was not among businesses, or international institutions, or civil society groups, or even among most states—instead, all could be traced simply to the rivalry between Washington and Moscow. Realism reasserted itself, this time with a qualifier: “neo-realism.”

Liberal notions soon rematerialized, taking on the parallel name of “neo-liberalism” and building on Keohane and Nye’s ideas of interdependence. In the 1980s, scholars amassed evidence about the importance of domestic institutions, a “black box” rarely opened by realists. Summarizing historical data, Michael Doyle noted that mature liberal democratic states did not go to war against each other, but they did go to war against illiberal, non-democratic states. He posited that this “democratic peace” was not maintained via a hegemonic overseer. Rather, it resulted from liberal values, norms, and institutions within individual states aligning with those of fellow democracies, thus producing a modern stepping-stone to Kantian perpetual peace.¹⁷ The findings again underscored the interim existence of in-groups and out-groups: renouncing war as a solution to problems was a

“universal” principle that worked primarily within the group of states whose domestic democratic institutions made reciprocation of that principle more credible.

Other scholars complemented these findings on domestic institutions by showing that international institutions matter, too. Since the early 1970s, the United States had decried free-riders in global affairs and had tried retreating from its hegemonic support of international institutions and public goods. Yet institutions such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the GATT, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the UN, and the World Bank continued to facilitate aid, trade, financial stability, peace, and development. How could this be, if realists were correct that institutions merely reflected the will of the most powerful states?

John Ruggie and Robert Keohane offered somewhat different answers for why an international institution can survive even if a hegemon retreats, declines, or disappears. In *After Hegemony*, Keohane adopted the core realist assumptions of state-centrism, anarchy, and rationality, but he rejected the premise that international politics is a zero-sum quest for power. He offered a corrective to

realism by harkening back to functionalism and neofunctionalism: institutions can persist when they provide information, coordination, enforcement, or other benefits that states could not provide on their own.¹⁸ By selectively tweaking realist tenets, Keohane demonstrated much greater prospects for cooperation, even without a hegemonic patron. In contrast, Ruggie did not work from realist tenets, and in his work on “embedded liberalism” he diverged markedly from realism by emphasizing social purpose: institutions can endure when a larger community of states continues to share the values embodied in those institutions.¹⁹ In a foreshadowing of future divisions in international relations theory, Ruggie presaged the emergence of constructivism, while Keohane linked the new “liberal institutionalism” with realism.

Realist or constructivist critiques of liberal institutionalism

Clearly, liberal institutionalism was not universally embraced. Instead, new strains of realism and liberalism would engage in a so-called “neo-neo”

debate that lasted over a decade. Joseph Grieco, for instance, argued that international cooperation could not be as easy to achieve as Keohane and others asserted. Attempting to reinstate the rejected realist premise, Grieco argued that international politics was indeed a zero-sum game, and therefore each state would inevitably fixate on relative gains rather than being satisfied with absolute outcomes. Presented with any arrangement from which it derived some benefits but another state derived even more, a state would refuse to participate. Grieco concluded that this dynamic would unravel international cooperation and institutions.^{[20](#)}

However, various formal models countered this view. Duncan Snidal and Robert Powell argued that a fixation on relative gains occurred only under particular conditions. The fixation could dissipate in non-security issues^{[21](#)} or with increases in the number of participating states,^{[22](#)} thus explaining why inter-state cooperation is often prevalent and lasting. Robert Axelrod acknowledged that in numerous situations international politics shared characteristics with a Prisoners' Dilemma game, in which each player's dominant strategy is to defect rather than cooperate. However, in the real world, many of these situations are repeated, and this

iteration makes prolonged cooperation possible through reputation-building and other means.^{[23](#)} The result was that formal models shored up elements of, but also delivered a further departure from, classical liberalism. Aiming for world government was unnecessary because cooperation could be sustained through uncoordinated, self-interested reciprocity.

Despite these conceptual victories, the real-world endurance of domestic and international institutions would be tested in the late 1980s and early 1990s, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union's disintegration officially ended the Cold War. Would international institutions crumble in a unipolar world where the United States did not need their assistance in its competition with the Eastern bloc and might be disinclined to restrain newfound American dominance? Would inter-state war become widespread again, since there were no longer two superpowers reigning in the smaller states in their respective blocs? Would the camaraderie of liberal democracies collapse, now that their primary external antagonist had disbanded?

Europe reacted by not only deepening but also widening the region's supranational institutions.

In 1993, the signing of the Maastricht Treaty triggered an evolution of what had already become the European Community (EC) into the EU, an even bolder form of economic and political integration. The EU expanded its membership eastward and eventually developed a common currency for states opting into its Eurozone. Various works, such as Andrew Moravcsik's 1998 *The Choice for Europe*, strove to determine whether realism, liberalism, or something else best accounted for this institutional phenomenon.^{[24](#)} Meanwhile, policy practitioners toyed with the idea of recreating the European experiment in other parts of the world—thus far, the African Union is the most overt replication attempt.

Although realists continued to question the importance of institutions,^{[25](#)} liberal institutionalists now believed the evidentiary trail was compelling enough to stop playing defense.^{[26](#)} The interesting question was not whether institutions mattered—it was when, or how. Jon Pevehouse, Edward Mansfield, and Bruce Russett argued that international institutions spread both peace and democracy.^{[27](#)} Meanwhile, Helen Milner reasoned that democratic domestic institutions aided the diffusion of technology.^{[28](#)}

Despite these insights, beginning in the 1990s liberal institutionalism faced a new conceptual difficulty: the rise of social constructivism. According to constructivists, actors in international affairs are socialized and influenced by their surroundings, and therefore their proclivities toward conflict or cooperation are collectively constructed.²⁹ Those who interact with others negatively will generate a hostile realist system; those who interact with others more positively can create a Kantian system in which self-interests meld with community interests. But as social constructions, neither realism's zero-sum game nor liberalism's value-aligned in-group was assured. Both could be made and unmade.

Beyond this, constructivism directly disputed the realist assumptions of state-centrism, rationality, and anarchy.³⁰ Since liberal institutionalism also adopted these premises, it too was challenged by constructivism. In fact, some observers conjoined realism and liberal institutionalism as "rationalist" views that greatly differed from constructivism. Ironically—although many liberals shared constructivists' appreciation for ideas, non-state actors, and goals other than power—liberals

could be painted with the same brush as the realists they had spent centuries contesting.[31](#)

More recently, many researchers (including the authors of this chapter) have eschewed strict allegiance to a single paradigm and instead have drawn from multiple conceptual insights to investigate pressing real-world developments. For instance, Tana Johnson's 2014 book *Organizational Progeny* used rationalist principal-agent models—but also constructivist notions about policy-related values, the pursuit for institutional legitimacy, and alliances with civil society—to examine the staff members working within the UN and other inter-governmental organizations.[32](#) Similarly, Andrew Heiss' research on “amicable contempt” considered the role of both material and ideational considerations in authoritarian governments' interactions with nongovernmental organizations.[33](#)

The spreading critiques of liberal institutionalism

As liberal institutionalism grew more prominent, its critics grew more vocal. In fact, critiques had

been swirling for years among critical theorists, developing countries, non-liberal governments, and marginalized segments within liberal societies. The problems being highlighted come in two broad flavors.

The first points out problems with liberal institutionalism's conceptual roots. From multiple angles, critical theorists have highlighted biases and blind spots. For example, feminist thinkers have denounced the reliance on masculine perspectives. They have noted that by absorbing some of realism's fascination with power, nation-states, and the international system, liberal institutionalism risked creating a body of knowledge and practice based largely on the lives of power-seeking men—while neglecting other goals, actors, or communities.^{[34](#)} Similarly, race scholars have decried the predominance of white thinkers and experiences in liberal institutionalism. Such predominance risked creating an international order that, rather than embodying ideals of human equality, would reinforce long-standing racial hierarchies.^{[35](#)}

Commentators from developing countries have made related objections to liberal institutionalism's conceptual roots. Debates between realists and liberals—and later, between neo-realists and neo-lib-

erals—often were dominated by Western thinkers, arguing about Western states and institutions.³⁶ This overlooked non-Western experiences and risked excluding states in the Global South from full participation in international affairs.³⁷ Many of today's domestic governance standards and major intergovernmental organizations reflect the experiences and expectations of the West—a handful of North American and Western European states that were among the first liberal democracies.³⁸ Even where the conceptual roots of liberal institutionalism were actually much broader, a very small set of states have been given most of the credit.³⁹ To the many other states that adopted liberal standards and organizations, the West still seems to have an edge, enjoying greater benefits from international institutions and greater influence over international norms.⁴⁰ Reminiscent of Marxism, subaltern critiques argue that the structures of global governance privilege a small set of transnational elites.

Besides problems with conceptual roots, a second flavor of criticism highlights problems with liberal institutionalism's implementation. Non-liberal governments have been particularly aware of how Kantian philosophy and real-world practices may diverge. While Kant's great hope

for liberal institutions was rooted in universality, the democratic peace and the liberal international order are non-universal—and may even be non-Kantian. According to Kant, peace would emerge naturally when states and their citizens chose to embrace similar values and institutions, domestically and internationally. Peace would spread as more people adopted these vehicles for reciprocal hospitality. However, contemporary critics note a paradox: incomplete universalism may deter liberal states from interfering or warring with each other, but it can allow (or even embolden) liberal states to meddle or fight with non-liberal ones. This, in turn, prompts non-liberal states to fight back.^{[41](#)}

There have been strong temptations to *impose* liberal values, democratic institutions, and internationalism—not only on non-liberal places, but even on skeptical members of the populace within liberal states.^{[42](#)} Such interventions have jeopardized liberal institutionalism itself. After all, spreading it through coercive means is “the propagation of particularist law under a universal guise,” with liberals disqualifying others from participating in self-determination.^{[43](#)} If real Kantian peace and order come from spontaneous alignment of universal political principles, then forced adherence

(whether internationally or domestically) cannot bring genuine peace and order. Instead, liberalism operates illiberally. To the extent that international institutions have portrayed elite interests as a “liberal consensus,” they are perceived as oppressing “ordinary” people worldwide.[44](#)

The future of liberal institutionalism—and liberal institutions

Liberal institutionalism’s future cannot be known without examining its past, and its past cannot be understood without appreciating liberals’ interactions with rival theoretical views and knotty historical events. As the discussion shows, liberals occupy a tough position. By adopting many of realism’s tenets, they became vulnerable to its shortcomings. But they also tried to distinguish themselves: realists simply anticipate war, while liberals anticipate war but strive for peace. Kantian perpetual peace is a goal more than a prediction; indeed, the path to such peace will be punctuated by war, because tensions arise between in-groups and

out-groups as long as universalism is incomplete. Moreover, to generate long-standing peace, values probably should not be applied selectively, and institutions probably should not be foisted on unwilling populations.^{[45](#)}

Grievances, now trumpeted in the West and other parts of the world, are not so different from those of the 1970s, 1930s, and other periods. At times grievances were surmounted; other times they were not. Therefore, several questions arise for international relations scholars and policy practitioners. Is liberal institutionalism on the cusp of collapse, or merely experiencing growing pains on the path to perpetual peace? Can civil society groups, firms, or other non-state actors bring more stability to global affairs? To what extent does the survival of international institutions depend on the preservation of democratic domestic institutions? Could the liberal international order, which was championed by democratic Western states, be maintained by a powerful non-liberal state such as China?

When placed within the historical context, these questions point to a core truth. The future is fraught with danger. But for liberal institutional-

ism and liberal institutions, that has always been the case.

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