

CHAPTER 7

Classical liberal internationalism

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As none of the three terms in the title of this chapter is self-explanatory or uncontroversial, each warrants some clarification. “Internationalism” has been described succinctly as “the ideology of international bonding” or “the idea that we both are and should be part of a broader community than that of the nation or the state.” As such, it has a range of overlapping meanings, all revolving around attempts to regulate political life at the global level in the pursuit of peace. Internationalism can be seen as the opposite of nationalism, which emphasizes national interests and values in opposition to internationalist ideas and programs that are perceived to threaten national independence. Both ideologies have rational as well as emotional qualities.

Internationalism should also be distinguished from cosmopolitanism. Whereas cosmopolitanism envisages a universalistic community, internationalism takes the existing division into particularistic communities as its point of departure. Internationalists, in other words, do not share the cosmopolitan vision of transcending the state but take the division into states as a given and look for ways of aligning conflicting interests.^{[1](#)}

The label “liberal” indicates one distinct variety of internationalist thought that may be

distinguished from conservative and socialist internationalism. In contrast to its conservative counterpart, which views the balance of power as the principal way of restraining states, liberal internationalism is more optimistic about the prospects for interstate cooperation. And against the socialist vision of the withering away of states and ensuing classless world society, liberal internationalism posits a zone of peace and cooperation among liberal states. Another, partly overlapping typology contrasts liberal internationalism with hegemonic internationalism—the belief that the only possible and desirable way of integrating the world is on asymmetrical, unequal terms—and with radical or revolutionary internationalism.² In short, the liberal character of internationalism was historically an open question, and there were links and mutual dependence between liberal and illiberal internationalisms.³

This chapter deals with *classical* liberal internationalism. It is a tradition of thought with roots in the Enlightenment. Where the classical era ends and neoliberalism takes over is debatable. For the purpose of this chapter, the border was arbitrarily drawn during World War II. The war entailed a crisis for liberal internationalism. Criticized as

idealistic, naïve, and utopian, it was overtaken by realism as the prevailing paradigm. The post-war re-establishment of liberal internationalism in the form of neoliberal institutionalism is dealt with elsewhere in this volume. It should be noted that whereas the classical tradition was primarily a prescriptive and prospective ideology with minimal empirical claims, neoliberalism offers an analytical framework for the study of historical processes rather than a remote ideal.⁴

A caveat seems called for at the outset: When we attach the label “liberal internationalism,” especially with the epithet “classical,” to a number of early thinkers from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, we apply a terminology of later origin. “Many thinkers are retrospectively categorized as liberal internationalists despite the fact that they would neither recognize nor identify with the term.”⁵

This chapter first outlines some of the basic values and tenets associated with liberal internationalism. It then gives a brief account of the evolution of the tradition, pointing to some of its most prominent exponents. The section thereafter identifies and discusses recurrent tensions and controversies within liberalism related to interna-

tional relations. The concluding remarks dwell on the legacy of classical liberal internationalism and its relevance to contemporary realities.

Basic tenets of liberal internationalism

In Michael Doyle's oft-quoted words, "there is no canonical description of liberalism," only something resembling "a family portrait of principles and institutions" associated with liberal states.⁶ If liberalism in general defies precise definition, liberal internationalism appears even more ambiguous. "Few political notions are at once so normative and so equivocal as liberal internationalism."⁷ Yet there is a fair degree of agreement on identifying a cluster of values characterizing liberalism as a political ideology and their application to international affairs.

The most fundamental value shared by all liberals concerns individual *freedom*. Commitment to this principle entails challenging vested interests and arbitrary authority while defending human rights and promoting popularly based institutions.

Power is considered legitimate only if it is based on popular consent and respects basic freedoms. Liberalism rests on confidence in the rational and moral qualities of human beings. The emphasis on the liberty and welfare of individuals over and above social structures sets liberalism apart from socialism. Another core element of liberalism is a belief in progress. Classical liberalism is thus an ideology of reform, reflecting confidence in the corrigibility and improvability of all political arrangements. Malfunctioning behavior is viewed as a product of counterproductive institutions and practices that can be remedied by reforming the system that produces it. This emphasis on progressive change sets liberalism apart from conservatism.⁸

How, then, do these core values translate into the international arena? First, it should be noted that the international dimension is not an afterthought or a later derivative but has always been an integral part of liberal thinking. It can be argued that “liberalism is by definition international.”⁹ The growth of international interaction and cooperation is seen as a central element in the realization of greater human freedom. The belief in progress applies to the international arena as well. Liberal internationalism envisages a gradual

transformation of international relations, which helps promote human freedom by establishing conditions of peace, prosperity, and justice.¹⁰ Thus, “liberal accounts of international politics were characteristically those of a process, not what we have today, but what we may have later if we keep to a certain course.”¹¹ Like all liberals, internationalists celebrate the possibility of deliberate reforms, but their expectations go beyond the domestic sphere to include international relations. While not teleological, liberal internationalism offers a broad vision of an open, rule-based system where states have overcome constraints and are prepared to cooperate and pursue collective action.¹²

Other themes characteristic of classical liberal internationalism include free trade, national self-determination, nonintervention in the internal affairs of other states, and strengthened international law. Free trade is seen to generate peace and prosperity by binding people together in material interdependencies that would raise the costs of war and create an international division of labor. The belief that national self-determination promotes peace is a variant of democratic liberalism. It draws on an assumed similarity of relationships between states and international order, on the one hand,

and individuals and domestic order, on the other, as does the principle of nonintervention. In the same way that morally autonomous citizens hold rights to liberty, states that represent them democratically have the right to be free from foreign intervention. Similarly, the progress of international law is measured by its increasing similarity to domestic law.

As pointed out by several observers, the classical liberal vision of international reform is built to a considerable degree on a domestic analogy: the same general principles that had led to the transformation of political life domestically were seen to apply externally as well. Stanley Hoffmann argues that “the international dimension of liberalism was little more than the projection of domestic liberalism on a world scale.”¹³ Critics claim that early liberals overlooked the differences between domestic and international politics. However, more nuanced accounts posit that the liberal vision did not rest on a naïve analogy but reflected “the view that the anarchic system of sovereign states can and ought to be *domesticated* in a way that resembles, however imperfectly, the liberal vision of political society within the state.”¹⁴

Classical liberal internationalism is best characterized as an ideology, that is, a system of political thought arising out of, and reflecting, the economic, political, and cultural experience of particular social groups. As such, it is geared toward political action in a political realm where it has to struggle with the world views of other social groups. Historically bound, ideologies are constantly changing. To account for liberal internationalism as an ideology therefore requires “an engagement with its conditions of emergence and an historical account of its struggle with internal and external competitors.”¹⁵

The origins and evolution of liberal internationalism

Liberalism originated in Europe around the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a tumultuous period in that continent's history. The feudal system had fallen; the political control of papal Christendom was broken; the Renaissance had renewed interest in the republican and cultural traditions of antiquity; a system ordered on

sovereign states was emerging; and the Enlightenment introduced ideas about reforming society, using reason rather than tradition, and advancing knowledge through science. It was during this era of change that liberalism emerged to become the dominant theory of modernity. Domestically, the feudal legacy of ruling aristocracies and autocratic rule became targets of liberal criticism; internationally, the prevalence of violence and hypocrisy in a system dominated by balance-of-power thinking came under attack.

The earliest liberal intellectuals sought to use an empiricist methodology developed in the natural sciences to determine a political theory that would organize and defend the aspirations of the emergent middle class for a defense of private property, a rationalized system of laws, and a voice in law-making while still providing a basis for moral and ethical life consistent with deep-seated Christian values and beliefs.^{[16](#)}

Although liberalism has no unequivocal founder who played the role Marx did for Marxism, John Locke is generally recognized as a pioneer in terms of drawing disparate liberal ideas together.^{[17](#)} His seventeenth-century philosophy laid the foundation of modern liberal individualism. Locke be-

lieved in human rationality, which was ultimately to be embodied in government by consent and the protection of private property. Arguing that the duty of the state was to uphold the “life, liberty and property” of its citizens, Locke drew a moral parallel between external aggression and domestic oppression. Aggressive war was seen to violate the *raison d'être* of society, thus being inconceivable as a delegated power of legitimate government.^{[18](#)}

Early liberal internationalists tended to believe, with Adam Smith, in the unhampered pursuit of economic interests. Government intervention needed to be minimized in order to allow the private sector to flourish. If trade and manufacturing were to be conducted freely throughout the world, a pattern of cooperation and peaceful competition would ensue. In his *Plan for an Universal and Perpetual Peace* written in 1786–1789 as part of his *Principles of International Law*, the British utilitarian Jeremy Bentham argued that free trade would bring the greatest economic benefits to the greatest number of people at the same time as trade relations would discourage war. Similar ideas of “commercial pacifism” based on *laissez-faire* principles were developed by later British liberal thinkers,

such as James Mill, John Stuart Mill, and Richard Cobden.

The role of republican governments based on liberal principles in developing peaceful international relations was highlighted by Immanuel Kant in his influential book *Perpetual Peace (Zum ewigen Frieden)*, written in 1795. In this, he envisioned the widening acceptance of three “definitive articles” of peace. The first requires that state constitutions be republican. In contrast to the aggressive interests of absolutist monarchies, republics are not inclined to go to war because this requires the consent of the citizens, who are reluctant to accept the costs in lives and financial resources. According to Kant’s second definitive article, liberal republics will progressively establish peace among themselves by means of a pacific federation (*foedus pacificum*). As more and more republics join, an expanding “zone of peace” is created. Even if Kant does not elaborate on the organizational embodiment of this pacific union, it is clearly more than a single peace treaty but less than a world state. It is not seen to acquire any power or authority over and above each autonomous state. The third definitive article outlines the idea of a cosmopolitan law “limited to conditions of universal hospitality” as a

complement to the pacific union. Cosmopolitan law would guarantee access to foreigners and the flow of goods and ideas across national borders.^{[19](#)}

Even if Kant himself would hardly have recognized the concept of “liberalism,” his philosophy has inspired subsequent generations of liberal internationalists to the present era. For instance, contemporary theories of “democratic peace” and “cosmopolitan democracy” draw on Kant’s idea of a republican zone of peace.^{[20](#)} The popularity of his writings, in combination with their complexity and ambiguity, has entailed differing interpretations. By some, he has been interpreted as an idealist, but by others as a revolutionary.

These readings hover between two distinct forms of expectation: either they emphasize the moral aspect of the Kantian idea of peace, and end up interpreting it as a promise; or they emphasize the natural necessity of this idea and the inevitability of its realization, and end up interpreting it as a prognosis.^{[21](#)}

The nineteenth century is generally considered the golden age of liberalism, especially in the United Kingdom. While beginning as an expression

of middle-class industrial interests, English liberalism developed into a national political movement. It was now that a number of thinkers, such as John Stuart Mill, Richard Cobden, and Herbert Spencer, combined different liberal internationalist strands into a credo that free trade would produce international prosperity, peace, and cooperation; a vital private sector constituted the engine of progress; and this vitality depended on the freedom provided by democratic or republican government.²²

Nineteenth-century industrialism produced a new setting “in which the implementation of ideas of equal rights and opportunities became more feasible, but only if the state were accorded a more positive role than in classical liberal theory.”²³ Although much of the liberal agenda had been achieved in the advanced capitalist states, the envisaged domestic and international effects had disappointingly not appeared. In addition, liberalism now had to take up the struggle with another radical ideology, socialism. A downturn in the world economy in combination with *fin de siècle* fatalism and pessimism precipitated a crisis of liberalism around the turn of the century. The outbreak of World War I delivered a severe blow to liberal internationalism and is sometimes conceived

as the end of the liberal century that had begun in 1815.^{[24](#)}

The “new liberalism” that gradually emerged promoted a greater role for the state. Earlier versions paid more attention to what states should refrain from doing than what they could positively do. Among new liberals, the emphasis moved from “negative” to “positive” liberty, from “freedom from” government interference to “freedom to” enjoy work and social improvements. This entailed calls for appropriate institutional responses domestically as well as internationally, not only to problems of law and order but also to those of economic and social welfare. Increasingly suspicious of private exchanges domestically, the new liberals came to doubt their efficacy in the management of international relations. The emerging “welfare internationalism” demanded government engagement in regulating international intercourse.^{[25](#)} The liberal state, in short, was expected to uphold private property rights and free markets, while simultaneously providing politically necessary regulation to mitigate the detrimental consequences of the market.^{[26](#)}

Two prominent exponents of the new liberal internationalism were Norman Angell and J. A.

Hobson. Angell is best known for his argument concerning the futility of war. In *The Great Illusion*, published in 1912, he argued that modern production, transportation, and communication technologies had made national economies so interdependent that war would be disruptive to all. In his treatment, not only free trade but also the international networks of financial elites contributed to these interdependencies. Angell also believed that extensive education was necessary to overcome public ignorance and “the crowd mind,” which tended to encourage war. Angell was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1933.

While Hobson is usually associated with his work on imperialism, his prolific writings dealt with a number of issues that modified early liberal internationalism. Proceeding from an analogy of society to an organism, Hobson criticized the individualism of nineteenth-century liberalism. Applying the organic analogy to international relations, he envisaged expanding cooperation within an emerging world society made up not only of interacting states but also of networks of individuals and groups. Hobson suggested that the international realm was an integral part of social life, with people living in “concentric circles of as-

sociation.” In the same way that he argued for more interventionist government domestically, he saw the need for international control and organization—both intergovernmental and nongovernmental—to regulate and mitigate the excesses of the world market. His ideal was a loose international federation with associated functional organizations. Along with L. T. Hobhouse, who argued that transnational vocational and civic associations might facilitate cooperation and build up a world community,²⁷ Hobson can be seen as a precursor of David Mitrany’s functional approach to international integration. Hobson, in short, played an important role in the transformation from nineteenth-century to twentieth-century liberal internationalism.²⁸

Early twentieth-century internationalism reflected the transition domestically from old liberalism to the doctrine of the welfare state. This entailed a drift toward institutional arguments. Plans for, and the eventual performance of, the League of Nations provided foci of attention and contention. Whereas nineteenth-century liberals saw the internal reform of states inexorably leading to external reform, most twentieth-century liberals argued that external reform was integral to, or a precon-

dition for, domestic reform. They also imagined reform, not in terms of limitations on government, but as positive engagement in international policies encouraging wealth creation and social stability. Mitrany's functionalism, for example, focused on economic and social welfare issues that were increasingly becoming issues for government policy, arguing that the national basis was inadequate. His criticism of the limits of the League is telling: "It is no use putting a policeman at the street corner to keep the traffic in order and to watch for burglars if at the same time the water and food supply for that street is being cut off."²⁹

At the end of World War I, Woodrow Wilson's vision of a liberal world order became a controversial component of world politics. This was a "one-world" vision of an orderly international community of states interacting in a system of laws and international organization. The son of a Presbyterian minister, Wilson grounded his liberalism, not in natural law and sovereignty like Kant's perpetual peace, but in the Christian origins of democracy.³⁰ Yet following Kant, Wilson believed that peace could be established only by a compact among inherently peaceful democracies. "Wilson had fought his war to make the world safe

for democracy; he created his League to make the world safe *by* democracy.” National self-determination, in Wilson’s view, was an essential corollary of democracy. “Just as the people had a right to govern themselves within the national system, so the nations had the right to govern themselves within the global system.”³¹

Taken together, the Wilsonian vision of liberal internationalism was both breathtakingly ambitious and surprisingly limited. It sought to transform the old global system based on the balance of power, spheres of influence, military rivalry, and alliances into a unified liberal international order based on nation-states and the rule of law. Power and security competition would be decomposed and replaced by a community of nations. But Wilsonian liberal internationalism did not involve the construction of deeply transformative legally binding political institutions. Liberal international order was to be constructed around the “soft law” of public opinion and moral suasion.³²

In the United Kingdom during the interwar years, an active liberal internationalist movement launched campaigns for open diplomacy, arbitration, and disarmament. With the League of Nations Union (LNU) as a key organizational basis, liberal

internationalism spread through “mainstream” UK opinion and transgressed party boundaries. Momentous changes in the international environment in the 1930s led to internal controversies. While gradually changing their conception of peace through collective security, liberal internationalists maintained a deep commitment to conflict prevention.³³

During the interwar era liberal internationalism also became the target of much criticism, most famously in E. H. Carr’s *The Twenty Years’ Crisis*. Characterizing liberal internationalism as based on idealist or even “utopian” myths of a “harmony of interests” among states, Carr laid the foundation of realism as an alternative perspective on international relations. The pejorative labels of “idealists” or “utopians” have had a lasting impact. Carr’s critique is echoed, for instance, by Stanley Hoffman, who speaks of liberal internationalism’s “fallacy of believing that all good things can come together.” Yet recent scholarship has demonstrated that Carr painted too simplistic a picture and created a straw man out of the diverse views held by liberal internationalists. And Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points, which came to be seen as “something approaching an idealist Magna Carta” in the interwar

period, have provided the foundation of efforts to resuscitate “neo-idealism” after the end of the Cold War.^{[34](#)}

In sum, it was only in the twentieth century that international organization entered the liberal internationalist agenda in earnest. Before then, either free trade or an expanding network of liberal republics was seen as producing future prosperity and peace. As the nineteenth century drew to an end, the “domestic analogy” took on another meaning, as the proactive welfare state came to serve as a model for intensified collaboration internationally.

Tensions and controversies in liberal internationalism

We need to be reminded that

liberalism did not just enter this world as a benevolent rational force which gradually conquered ground by the authority of example, but rather as a sectarian political position which had to fight its way to the top and adjusted its goals and means to the given circumstances.^{[35](#)}

As the brief account of the evolution of liberal internationalism indicates, this struggle was not only with contending ideologies but included internal disagreements. One may speak of “contending liberalisms.”³⁶ Moreover, liberalism itself contains unresolved internal tensions and contradictions.³⁷ In the following, some of the most prominent tensions and controversies within liberal internationalism will be identified.

At a general level, liberalism encompasses two different perspectives on human nature: one proceeding from human selfishness, defining interests in material terms, and believing that human greed may produce general benefits; the other promoting the moral aptitude, self-fulfillment, and civic virtues of human beings and emphasizing rights and duties.³⁸ Another recurrent general tension is between experience and expectation. Liberal internationalism is a container of past experience as well as expectations for the future.³⁹ A more tangible division concerns the importance accorded to economic and political factors. The question of whether economic or political driving forces will produce international improvement and reforms has divided liberals throughout history. Moreover,

within each faction, there have been contentious issues.

Economic issues

One of the first liberal debates concerned the relationship between freedom and property. Whereas individual liberty and the right to private property were fundamentals in early liberal thinking, the question was whether all citizens should have a voice in government or whether the popular rule should be restricted to the propertied. The defense of property rights was central in the early *laissez-faire* formulations of liberal internationalism. The role of the state was to be constrained to enforcing a limited set of laws, adjudicating disputes, and defending property and individual rights. State intervention in the domestic economy as well as in international economic transactions was seen as detrimental. Unconstrained activity by the private sector would contribute to a steady improvement of the material and moral condition of all people. This “liberalism of privilege” demoted or shunned the doctrine of equal rights.[40](#)

Although *laissez-faire* liberalism continued to hold sway throughout the nineteenth century, a number of later liberal thinkers questioned the classical idea of the independence of the economy from political pressure or social concern. They had less confidence in the progressive potential of the private sector, arguing that previous liberal thought had neglected the powerful political interests of industrial and financial elites. Capitalism was not necessarily a force for peace, but could be an incitement to war because of the influence of sectional interests.^{[41](#)} The re-evaluation of economic actors entailed a more favorable view of the state as a vehicle for the redistribution of wealth and power and guarantor of liberal values, not only at home but abroad as well. Several liberals advocated foreign intervention for liberal ends. As early as 1849 John Stuart Mill declared that every liberal government “has a right to assist struggling liberalism, by mediation, by money, or by arms, wherever it can prudently do so; as every despotic government, when its aid is needed or asked for, never scruples to aid despotic governments.”^{[42](#)}

Political issues

If classical liberal internationalism harbors certain economic divergences against the backdrop of a general belief in the beneficial effects of a free private sector, there is a greater amount of contentious political issues. The common denominator is the conviction that liberal states constitute the foundation of a peaceful and prosperous world. This, however, does not exclude significant disagreements.

Related to the *laissez-faire* problematic is the contrast between “negative” and “positive” freedom. Whereas the early English tradition equated liberalism with freedom from control by the state, the “new liberals” in the 1880s advanced a positive ideal of freedom as “the liberation of the powers of all men equally for contributions to a common good” and “the maximum of power for all members of human society to make the best of themselves.”⁴³ This debate recurs as differing views of the international role of the state. Early liberals were critical of the traditional practices of power politics, mistrusted foreign policy elites, diplomats, and the military, and wanted to minimize government intervention not only within but also beyond national borders. The more “positive” conceptions of self-actualization and social welfare entailed a more active role for the state in the inter-

national arena as well. Some analysts contend that liberalism is “inherently expansionist”: the belief in inalienable rights entails a duty to intervene in order to ensure that these rights are protected everywhere.⁴⁴ Others argue that the divisive issue of intervention for “positive” freedom meant that liberal internationalism might encompass a wide span from what we today label isolationism to moral crusades.⁴⁵

Retrospective analyses have raised the question of whether classical liberal internationalism was genuinely inclusive and *international*. Post-colonial scholars, in particular, have portrayed liberalism as Eurocentric, paternalist, and imperialist, insofar as it regarded Western values as universally applicable and served as a justification for Western superiority. They point out that the nineteenth century witnessed the triumph of Western liberalism at the very time that British imperialism expanded. Among liberal internationalists, there were, in fact, different views concerning the “civilizing mission” of liberal states. For instance, Locke supported British colonialism and Mill believed in hierarchical relations between civilized and barbarian peoples, arguing for colonial government intervention. By contrast, Kant’s principle of nonintervention, his

expectation that republican constitutions would emerge through internal political processes rather than outside interference, and his emphasis on consent as the basis of republican constitutions precluded imperialist policies. Hobson, for his part, argued that a “civilizing mission” was necessary but only under the tutelage of an independent international organization.⁴⁶

Classical liberal internationalism also exhibits a tension between *moral* and *institutional* arguments.⁴⁷ Moral arguments point to a new international consciousness as the agent of a positive transformation of international relations. The conscience of civilized humankind was to safeguard the internationalist goals of order and progress. In the words of L. T. Hobhouse: “Moral rights and duties are founded on relations between man and man, and therefore applicable to all humanity. To deny this applicability is merely to throw back civilized ethics to the savage state.”⁴⁸ According to institutional arguments, international progress cannot be left to ethics alone, but requires institutional mechanisms. The aim is then to devise political institutions that can induce people to act in morally defensible ways. World War II tipped the balance in favor of institutional arguments.

Humanitarian ethics had proved inadequate to avert warfare, and an international organization to promote peace and prevent the recurrence of war became a cornerstone of liberal internationalism.

Another unresolved question concerns whether the sovereign state facilitates or impedes the overarching goal of individual freedom. On the one hand, the political and legal framework of sovereignty permits freedom from the coercion of others; on the other hand, it allows the state to impose arbitrary and oppressive ends on individual citizens. Kant, for instance, was ambiguous on this issue, at times considering state sovereignty as a *sine qua non* condition of freedom, on other occasions viewing sovereignty as a threat to freedom.⁴⁹ The classical liberal internationalist solution, or vision, is that “the *external* sovereignty of states will be exercised with more restraint—and anarchy will thereby be mitigated—when *internal* sovereignty is located in the people.”⁵⁰

Nineteenth-century nationalism confronted liberals with a new quandary. Eighteenth-century liberals viewed the relationship between state and society in rational terms—as a set of mutual obligations or a social contract. Nationalism drew on emotional bonds of allegiance, loyalty, and

passion. The predominant liberal position was to embrace the principle of national self-determination, which was seen as an external extension of the principle of consent, a corollary of liberal self-government. Yet this entailed an incongruity, insofar as liberalism had originally been an appeal to reason. Nationalism had more to do with emotion and a common national will. By overrunning the restraints on power and creating new sources of intense conflict between states, nationalism threatened both the liberal program at home and the vision of international order and peace.⁵¹

Another question concerns the interstate/transnational dimension: would national reforms establishing liberal states in and by themselves establish the desired world order, or is the formation of a transnational society, linking people across borders beyond government control, an additional precondition? Free commerce, cultural interaction, and the formation of a world public opinion were part of the classical liberal internationalist vision. Most liberals would include both national and transnational processes in their perspectives, but with varying emphasis. Some, such as Kant and Woodrow Wilson, believed in a world order created mainly by self-determining states, whereas

Mitrany's functionalism saw the world of states as a constraint and envisaged transnational associations of legitimacy transforming human attachment to particular states.⁵²

The location of rules and authority—how the envisaged liberal order is to be governed—is another unresolved and contested question. At issue is essentially to what extent the liberal order entails legal-political restrictions on state sovereignty. As we have seen, there have been different ideas about the need for an international organization, and those who have advocated one have not concurred on its scope and mandate. By the same token, the “rule of law” has been a significant part of the liberal vision of a peaceful world, but there has been no consensus as to the proper role of international law. Some have advocated “soft law,” that is, rules and norms enforced through moral suasion and world public opinion; others have called for articulated sets of rules that prescribe and proscribe state action. The variety of liberal institutional and legal proposals have one thing in common: they have been “attempts to align an unwillingness to give up on the nation-state with a desire for peace.”⁵³

In sum, whereas liberal internationalists have shared a belief in international progress defined

as a movement toward increasing levels of harmonious cooperation between states, they have had varying views on how to achieve these goals. The “domestic analogy” pervades this debate, as “the competing liberal instruments with which to pursue individual freedom within the state have been directed outward as mechanisms for domesticating the international realm.”⁵⁴ Modes of governance within and between states are interlinked in the liberal internationalist conception.

Conclusion

The evolution of liberal internationalism in its first centuries reveals a set of recurring themes and unresolved issues. In the period covered here, liberal internationalism is best characterized as an ideology, pointing to a more peaceful and harmonious international order. Based on a belief in progress, it adapted continually to new circumstances. Both world wars represented serious disappointments and exposed liberal internationalism to charges of idealism. And the liberal vision of an improved international order did indeed remain a remote ideal for centuries.

Although there were earlier international developments in directions desired and proposed by liberals, it was only after the end of World War II—with the removal of a vast number of barriers to trade, successive waves of democratization, and the proliferation of international organizations—that significant parts of the classical ideals became reality. This development meant that liberal internationalism changed character from a prospective ideology to an analytical framework challenging realism; it substituted the prefix “neo” for the epithet “classical.” Yet classical liberal internationalism bequeaths a legacy of themes and issues that each new generation will relate to and recognize.

Additional reading

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