Chapter 6

Liberal internationalism

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Framing Questions

- **How has liberal internationalist thinking evolved?**
- **Why is there a persistent imperial impulse in the practice of liberal states' foreign policy?**
- **When it comes to international reform, is liberal internationalism flawed but indispensable?**

Reader's Guide

The practice of international relations has not been accommodating to **liberal internationalism**. 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 political realm in the era of the modern states system has been characterized by a precarious order and the absence of justice. Liberal internationalists do not accept that the world has to be this way. The international—a term coined by the liberal philosopher Jeremy Bentham—could be a place where states follow the rule of law as well as furthering moral purposes such as civility, prosperity, and peace. The chapter argues that it is important to think about three waves of liberal internationalist thinking: the insights of visionary nineteenth-century philosophers and reformers; the idealist moment of the inter-war period; and the current crisis that confronts liberal internationalism in an era in which democracy as a system of government is in 'recession' and the capabilities of key Western states to drive liberal world order are in decline.

Introduction and context

Liberalism as a model of government has been remarkably successful. On one simple but important measure, there are 75 liberal democracies in the world, which is more than any other regime-type. While liberal democracies predominate in Europe and the Americas, and increasingly in parts of Africa and Asia, it is also the case that liberal values and institutions have made fewer inroads into global governance. This point was made several decades ago by Harvard scholar Stanley Hoffmann, who famously said, 'international affairs have been the nemesis of Liberalism'. His explanation was equally stark: 'the essence of Liberalism 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**' (S. Hoffmann 1987: 396). Hoffmann's reasoning 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 (**see Ch. 8**). Despite the weight of this realist argument, those who believe in the liberal project have not conceded defeat. Liberal internationalists believe that power politics itself is the product of ideas, and—crucially—ideas can change. Therefore, even if international affairs have been inhospitable to liberal ideas of progressive change, this does not mean that the international cannot be remade in liberalism's own image.

Writers and intellectuals as far back as the **Enlightenment** have advocated for conceptions of liberal internationalism in which governments are just when they face the people, and lawful when they face each other (see **'Founding ideas of nineteenth-century liberal internationalism'**). These great but flawed thinkers—Immanuel Kant, J. S. Mill, and Jeremy Bentham—provided the language and concepts used by later liberals who were able to embed them in international practice (albeit not without setbacks). Bentham, for instance, first used the term 'international' as he was dissatisfied with the phrase 'the law of nations', used by predecessors such as Emer de Vattel. Bentham thought 'international' was a more accurate adjective to describe relations between sovereigns—and very soon after his use of the term in 1780 it was in widespread use (Suganami 1978: 231).

The second wave of liberal internationalism concerns the 'idealist moment' that occurred after the First World War (see **'Internationalism and institutionalism: peace through law'**). After the futile slaughter of around 40 million soldiers and civilians, the League of Nations was created to solve disputes between countries rather than allowing them to degenerate into open warfare. The birth of the League coincided with the establishment of the world's first dedicated Professorship in International Politics—appropriately named the Woodrow Wilson Chair—at what was then called the University College of Wales in Aberystwyth (**see Box 6.1**). Not only was the First World War a trigger

Box 6.1 E. H. Carr and the critique of liberal internationalism

A major component in the story of the development of academic thinking on International Relations (IR) was the inauguration of the Woodrow Wilson Chair in Aberystwyth (**see 'Introduction and context'**), soon to be followed by two other Chairs at the University of Oxford and the London School of Economics (also funded by philanthropy). E. H. Carr was appointed to the Woodrow Wilson Chair in 1936, and held this position for ten years; thereafter he concentrated on a monumental 14-volume study, *A History of Soviet Russia*. In so doing, he turned his back on the newly developing field of IR that he had done so much to create.

In common with many other intellectuals in the period between Versailles in 1919 and the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, Carr was much more than a scholar—he was variously a diplomat, commentator, and agitator. His classic work, *The Twenty Years' Crisis 1919–1939*, wove these strands together. Carr's preferred title for the work is worthy of note: he wanted to call the book *Utopia and Reality*, but this was thought by the publisher to be too abstract. What was important for Carr was to show how liberal conceptions of a rational and moral world order (utopia) needed to be corrected by an analytical approach to politics that understood how power operates (realism).

The rise of internationalism, Carr argued, could not be separated from the interests of the most powerful states in the system. Internationalist ideas of perpetual peace flourished during the height of French military hegemony in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; internationalist ideas of free trade and the right of great powers to dominate the non-European world flourished as Britain became the dominant world power in the mid-nineteenth century. As America became first among equals after 1919, internationalist ideas of democracy, self-determination, and **collective security** became the universal moral principles of the era. The task for political realism is to show that these various articulations of internationalism were all connected to prevailing patterns of power and interests. Despite the inadequacies of internationalism, Carr recognized that the struggle to uncover a moral code that was applicable to all members of international society was an indispensable part of building a theory of international politics.

for the teaching of international politics in many countries, but the concern to prevent future destruction on a global scale was a priority for a large coalition of committed internationalists—activists, writers, representatives, intellectuals, and societies—that sought to build a new international order.

A third wave of liberal internationalist thinking takes us to the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century (**see 'The challenges confronting liberal internationalism'**). In the US heartland of liberal internationalism, there is a sense of crisis pervading both leadership and followership in world politics. Many leading thinkers, such as Princeton's G. John Ikenberry, question whether other states and institutions are in a position to take up the mantle of leadership given America's relative decline. Despite the increased visibility of and coordination among the so-called rising powers (such as Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, and Russia), there is no evidence that they believe themselves to have a special responsibility for managing world order in a manner paralleling the role played by the US after 1945. Does this mean that a post-Western world will be hostile to liberal internationalist norms and purposes? Or do we need to take seriously the belief that there are moral universals that unify the plurality of peoples and societies, and that liberal internationalism has come closer to articulating those shared values than the alternatives? The position adopted in this chapter can be summed up in the following way: liberal internationalism is inadequate in many respects, yet at the same time internationalist thinking remains indispensable as a way of mediating between different values and preferences (Chakrabarty 2000).

Founding ideas of nineteenth-century liberal internationalism

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) were two of the leading liberal thinkers of the Enlightenment. Both reacted to the barbarity of international relations, or what Kant graphically described as 'the lawless state of savagery', at a time when domestic politics was on the cusp of a new age of rights, citizenship, and constitutionalism. Their abhorrence of the lawless state of savagery led them separately to elaborate plans to establish governance over matters of peace and war. Although written over two centuries ago, their moral and political philosophies contain the seeds of core liberal internationalist ideas, in particular the belief that reason could deliver freedom and justice in international relations.

The term 'international' was invented by Jeremy Bentham, along with other terms that have also found their way into the political lexicon such as 'codification' (**see 'Introduction and context'**). Bentham was an expansive thinker, writer, and publicist. He hoped to do for law and morality what Captain Cook and other voyagers had done for exploration, namely conquer the world: at one point, he immodestly declared that 'The Globe is the field of Dominion to which the author aspires' (Armitage 2011: 65). It was in his book *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1780) that Bentham argued for a new concept of international jurisprudence that was based on the equality of sovereigns. Bentham applied his utilitarian maxim of 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number' to the international, such that the task for a judge or legislator would be to establish the greatest happiness among the family of nations.

Forty years later, a new edition of the *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* was published. By this time, the term 'international' had come into widespread usage. And by the middle of the nineteenth century, it had become an *ism*. Internationalism became a shorthand to describe the growing band of activists, feminists, publicists, and organizations, all pushing for various reforms in domestic society and in the wider international society.

For Kant, the imperative to achieve perpetual peace required the transformation of individual consciousness, republican constitutionalism, and a federal contract among 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 6.2**.

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 (1986: 1151) argued that liberal states have created a 'separate peace'. 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

Box 6.2 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)

evidence seems to support the **democratic peace** thesis, it is important to bear in mind the limitations of this argument. First, for the theory to be compelling, believers in the thesis need to explain why war has become unthinkable among liberal states. Kant 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. Logically, this argument also implies a lower frequency of conflicts between liberal and non-liberal states, but this is contrary to 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 allies who share the same approach to managing economic and political affairs. Indeed, war among states with contrasting political and economic systems may also be unthinkable when they have a history of friendly relations. One such example is Mexico and Cuba, two countries that maintain close bilateral relations despite their history of divergent economic ideologies.

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

Key Points

- Early liberal internationalist thought on International Relations took the view that the natural order had been corrupted by secret treaties and outdated policies such as the balance of power.
- Enlightenment liberals believed that the problem of war could be solved through the development of a body of international rules and laws constraining the self-interest of states. In addition, they believed that trade and other cross-border flows would further facilitate more peaceful international relations.
- Jeremy Bentham, the creator of the term 'international', argued for a new concept of international jurisprudence that was based on the equality of sovereigns. He saw the task for a judge or legislator to be to establish the greatest happiness among the family of nations.
- Immanuel Kant argued that a 'perpetual peace' could be achieved through the transformation of individual consciousness, republican constitutionalism, and a federal contract among states to abolish war.
- In the 1980s, Michael Doyle revived Kant's claim that liberal states are pacific in their international relations with other liberal states. Although the empirical evidence seems to support the democratic peace thesis, it is important to bear in mind the limitations of this argument.
- In 'The End of History' (1989), Francis Fukuyama famously celebrated the triumph of liberalism over all other ideologies, contending that liberal states were more stable internally and more peaceful in their international relations than illiberal states. Others, such as Doyle, recognize that liberal democracies are as aggressive as any other type of state in their relations with authoritarian regimes and stateless peoples.

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 (Fukuyama 1989: 3–18). Other defenders of the democratic peace thesis were more circumspect. As Doyle (1995: 100) recognized, liberal democracies are as aggressive as any other type of state in their relations with authoritarian regimes and stateless peoples. How, then, should states inside the liberal zone of peace conduct their relations with authoritarian governments? How can the positive Kantian legacy of restraint triumph over liberal states' historical imperial temptation? These are fascinating and timely questions (**see 'Conclusion: incomplete, but indispensable, internationalism'**).

Internationalism and institutionalism: peace through law

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 First World War (1914–18) seemed to confirm the fatal flaw in the association of economic interdependence with peace. From the dawn of the twentieth 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 war, killing 15 million people. The war not only brought an end to three empires, but was also 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 regulations for addressing 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 Wilson's famous '**Fourteen Points**' speech, addressed to Congress in January 1918, he argued that 'a general association of nations must be formed' to preserve the coming peace—and 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 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 central 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 from liberal powers and public opinion. Yet 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 community should be self-determining? 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 League's creation was decidedly idealist, in practice states remained imprisoned by self-interest. There is no better example of this than the US' decision not to join the institution it had created. With the Soviet Union in opposition 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).

The collapse of the League of Nations brought a swift end to the idealist moment in the first half of the twentieth century. It is important to note that the thinkers of the inter-war period were not straightforwardly Benthamites who thought that reason and science could resolve political disputes. Instead, there was a backward-looking and conservative strand to their internationalism. Idealists such as Gilbert Murray and Alfred Zimmern opposed the idea that the League of Nations should have the kind of coercive authority that was reserved for sovereign states. Such a radical alteration to the structure of the system might have risked non-Western powers—such as the Bolsheviks, or the colonized races considered not yet 'fit' to govern—taking control. 'Their dependence on this strikingly conservative understanding of international order became a kind of supplement … for their unwillingness to imagine political alternatives to sovereignty, to envision a global economy regulated by workers, and to theorize a democratic form of international governance with real political (not just moral and symbolic) power' (Morefield 2009: 15). A powerful strand of internationalism in the inter-war period was backward-looking, privileging an international order that was hospitable to empire and inhospitable to radical internationalist ideas about democracy and the subordination of sovereign authority to the rule of law.

There is no doubt that, after 1945, the language of liberal internationalism 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, states recognized the need to replace the League with another international institution with responsibility for international peace and security. This time, however, in the case of the United

Case Study 6.1 The 1990–1 Gulf War and a 'new world order'

Fighter aircraft fly over burning oil wells in Kuwait during Operation Desert Storm, 17 January 1991

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 (1980–8), 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 West's support of Iraq during the Iran–Iraq War (because it considered the so-called 'fundamentalism' of Iran to be a graver threat to international order than the extreme nationalism of the Iraqi regime).

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990 prompted 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 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 US, rather than by a UN military command as envisaged in the UN Charter). President George H. W. 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'.

Question 1: Was George H. W. Bush right to repel Iraq from Kuwait but leave Saddam Hussein in power?

Question 2: Evaluate Bush's view that the international system after 1990 constituted a 'new world order'.

Nations, the framers of its Charter were aware of the need for a consensus among the great powers in order for enforcement action to be taken—hence the veto system (Article 27 of the UN Charter), which granted 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, as each of the great powers would veto any coercive action proposed by the others (Roberts 1996: 315). 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 realized, as was evident in the UN's response to the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq on 2 August 1990 (**see Case Study 6.1**). Later post-cold war interventions, particularly Kosovo (1998) and Iraq (2003), made it abundantly clear that normal business had resumed as the UN Security Council was once again sidelined by the US and its allies, who were not prepared to refrain from military action just because there was no permissive Security Council resolution.

As the end of the millennium approached, liberal internationalists saw America as the 'indispensable nation' who could use force without first asking for permission. As Secretary of State Madeleine Albright announced in 1998 in the context of disarming Iraq: 'if we have to use force it is because we are America. We are the indispensable nation. We stand tall. We see further into the future.' This imperial impulse lasted well into the first decade of the twenty-first century when the United States fought the so-called 'war on terror'. This global war required rules prohibiting war to be subverted when these rules became an impediment to the exercise of American power.

Key Points

- 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 as Britain and Germany went to war, despite their high degree of economic interdependence.
- The First World War shifted liberal thinking towards a recognition that peace is not a natural condition but is one that must be constructed. To this end, Woodrow Wilson advocated for the creation of a League of Nations to regulate international anarchy through the exercise of collective security.
- The League's constitution also called for the self-determination of all nations. However, despite widespread agreement on this principle, a host of practical and moral problems limited its implementation.
- Although there are important continuities between Enlightenment liberal thought and the 'idealist moment', the thinkers of the inter-war period were flawed. They overlooked the distribution of power and interests in the international system (a critique mounted by E. H. Carr), and they failed to understand that values and purposes were inextricably linked to power. Notably, leading internationalists in the inter-war period tied the future of the League of Nations to the dominance of international society by European colonial powers.
- The imperial impulse of the Anglo-American powers continued in the post-1945 order—in fact, after the fall of communism in 1989 internationalists hoped that the UN could impose collective security in response to a state that had traduced the rules-based order.

The challenges confronting liberal internationalism

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 defeated all other contending political ideologies. We have seen how, 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 UN Charter back in 1945. These new and welcome patterns of cooperation prompted the British prime minister Tony Blair (1999*a*) to declare at the end of the 1990s that 'we are all internationalists now'.

But 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 both in international theory and in practice (**see Box 6.3**). 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 Africa, the uneven record of post-cold war liberal foreign policies in delivering a more secure and just world order, and continued unrest triggered by global economic inequalities have turned the