Chapter 9

Liberal Institutionalism

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Liberal Institutionalism presumes that domestic and international institutions play central roles in facilitating cooperation and peace between nation-states. But currently, this influential approach to thinking and practice appear to be in jeopardy. The United Kingdom seeks to be the first state ever to withdraw from the European Union (EU). The United States threatens to renegotiate or leave several international arrangements that it has recently signed or long supported. Meanwhile, China hints that it would be happy to take on greater global leadership if the United States retreats from this traditional role.

It is hardly unprecedented to see states reconsidering or rejecting cooperation. But what *is* surprising is the rhetoric. Liberal Institutionalism presented itself as a corrective to conventional international relations theory, which held that powerful nation-states dominate world politics and international institutions are inconsequential. And yet today, liberal democracies—which are some of the world's most powerful states—seem to be desperate to escape the clutches of formidable international institutions that supposedly demand too much. Meanwhile, non-liberal authoritarian regimes are willing not only to stay, but to take on greater burdens.

To fully fathom the irony, it is necessary to understand Liberal Institutionalism in tandem with historical events and competing theoretical views. Hence, the chapter begins by explaining how this theoretical approach has developed in response to both the conceptual world and the real world. In doing so, it tracks major critiques of Liberal Institutionalism, which have spread

from realists, Marxists, constructivists, non-liberal governments, feminists, and developing countries to the general publics in North American or European liberal democracies. Then, the chapter concludes with open questions about the survival of the contemporary world 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 first 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.[1] 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) Nation-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 realists' 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.[2] First: internally, each state should embrace a republican form of government in which legislative power and executive power are separated. Such domestic institutions make war more difficult to wage because the citizenry, who bear much of the cost, would need to approve it. Second: 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. Third: 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 pieces 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 at both

the domestic and international levels.[3] Marxism clashes with the Kantian premise that 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.[4] 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 inter-dependent 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 into the Fourteen Points he articulated for the post-war system.[5] 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 co-exist. 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.[6] 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 had 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.[7] 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 Agriculture Organization (FAO), the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank—that the US government helped to design and fund at the end of World War II. These values and institutions are the foundations of today's liberal world order.[8]

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 Morgenthau's *Politics among Nations*, marginalized international institutions as epiphenomenal: if institutions merely reflect the balance of power among states, then it continues to be 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," Kindleberger 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 built 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*, bridges realist and liberal interpretations of post-war institution-building.[11] For Ikenberry, state power is important, but international institutions and liberal values are 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 raw power 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 helps to convince other states to join—and as a greater number of states become invested in the institution, the institution is even more likely to persist and propagate. That helps to explain why the liberal world order,

initiated following World War II, has expanded and still exists today.

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 has soared after its proponents are 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 argues 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 1967, the ECSC merged with two sister bodies to form the European Communities (EC). In 1973, the original six-state membership expanded to encompass Denmark, Ireland, and the United Kingdom. Throughout this process, numerous European policymakers expressed an Angell-like insistence on making their states so inter-dependent 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 "neofunctionalist" 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 US was thinking about rolling back its support for international institutions—and certainly not making them broader and deeper. American 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 United Nations system. Nevertheless, inter-dependence across the world proved difficult to reverse. Not only states, but also firms, sub-national 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 monolithic states do not dictate international affairs. Instead bureaucrats, legislators, judges, international institutions, firms, civil society groups, and

others interact with each other domestically and internationally. Consequently, states' fortunes were now 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.

Yet realist Kenneth Waltz's 1979 book *Theory of International Politics* took a different tack.[16] According to Waltz, the world's ostensible complexity had a very 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."

But 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 do not go to war against each other, but they do go to war against illiberal, non-democratic states. He posited that this "democratic peace" is not maintained via a hegemonic overseer. Rather, it results 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 groups 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 FAO, GATT, IMF, UN, and 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

Liberal Institutionalism was not universally embraced. Instead, the new strains of Realism and Liberalism would engage in a so-called "neo-neo" debate for over a decade. For instance, Joseph Grieco argued that international cooperation could not be as easy as Keohane and others asserted. Attempting to reinstate the rejected realist premise, he argued that international politics indeed is a zero-sum game, and therefore each state will fixate on relative gains rather than being satisfied with absolute gains. Presented with any arrangement from which it derives some benefits but another state derives even more, it will refuse to participate. Grieco concluded that this dynamic would unravel international cooperation and institutions.[20]

However, a variety of formal models countered this view. For example, Duncan Snidal and Robert Powell concluded that a fixation on relative gains occurs only under particular conditions. The fixation can 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. Moreover, Robert Axelrod acknowledged that numerous situations in international politics share 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 iteration makes prolonged cooperation possible through reputation-building and other means.[23] Hence, formal models delivered a further departure from Classical Liberalism: it was unnecessary to aim for world government, 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 early 1990s, after 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 reining 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 broadening the region's supranational institutions. In 1993, the Maastricht Treaty formed the European Union (EU), an even bolder form of economic and political integration. The EU expanded its membership to include numerous Eastern European states, and eventually it developed a common currency for states opting into its Euro-zone. In work such as Andrew Moravcsik's 1998 *The Choice for Europe*, scholars strived 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 attempt at replication.

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. And numerous scholars unearthed answers. For example Jon Pevehouse, Edward Mansfield, and Bruce Russert argued that international institutions spread both peace and democracy.[27] Meanwhile, Helen Milner reasoned that democratic domestic institutions aid the diffusion of technology.[28]

Despite this progress, since the 1990s Liberal Institutionalism has 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 is assured. Both can be undone.

Beyond this, Constructivism directly disputes the realist assumptions of state-centrism, rationality, and anarchy.[30] Since Liberal Institutionalism also adopted these premises, it too is challenged by the constructivist confrontation with Realism. In fact, some observers conjoin the two as "rationalist" views that greatly differ from Constructivism. Ironically—although many liberals share constructivists' appreciation for ideas, non-state actors, and goals other than power—liberals can be painted with the same brush as the realists they had spent centuries contesting.[31]

Today, many researchers (including the authors of this chapter) eschew strict allegiance to a single paradigm and instead draw from multiple conceptual insights to thoroughly investigate pressing real-world developments,. For instance, Tana Johnson's 2014 book *Organizational Progeny* uses 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 intergovernmental organizations.[32] Meanwhile, Andrew Heiss' research on "amicable contempt" considers the role of both material and ideational considerations in authoritarian governments' interactions with nongovernmental organizations that appear to promote Western norms of behavior.[33]

The spreading critiques of Liberal Institutionalism

As Liberal Institutionalism grew more prominent, its critics grew more vocal. In fact, critiques that now circulate among the general public in North American or European liberal democracies have been swirling for years among non-liberal governments, feminists, and developing countries. The highlighted problems come in at least three strains.

One strain focuses on dangerous divergences from Kant's philosophical foundations. While Kant's great hope in liberal institutions was rooted in universality, the modern democratic peace is non-universal and may even be non-Kantian. According to Kant, peace emerges naturally when states and their citizens choose to embrace similar values and institutions, domestically and internationally. Peace spreads as more people adopt 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.

In the pursuit of peace, there has been a strong temptation to *impose* liberal values and democratic institutions on non-liberal states. Such interventions jeopardize Liberal Institutionalism itself. After all, spreading it through coercive means is "the propagation of particularist law under a universal guise," as "liberals disqualify non-liberals from choosing their own laws."[34] If real Kantian peace comes from states' spontaneous alignment of universal political principles, then forced adherence cannot bring real peace. Instead, it makes Liberalism operate illiberally.

Besides this problem with implementation, critics also denounce how Liberal Institutionalism's conceptual roots formed. In particular, feminists decry its reliance on

masculine perspectives. In responding to realists, liberals absorbed some of their rivals' fascination with power, nation-states, and the international system. This runs the risk of creating a body of knowledge that is based largely on the lives of power-seeking men—while neglecting other goals, actors, or communities.[35]

Non-Western critics, too, disparage the conceptual roots of Liberal Institutionalism. Western thinkers, generally arguing about Western states and institutions, dominated debates between realists and liberals—and later, between neo-realists and neo-liberals.[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 inter-governmental organizations reflect the experiences and expectations of the former Western bloc—a handful of North American and Western European states that were among the first liberal democracies. To the many additional states that willingly adopted these standards and organizations, the West still seems to have an edge, enjoying greater benefits from international institutions and greater influence over international norms. Reminiscent of Marxism, subaltern critiques argue that the structures of global governance privilege a small set of transnational elites. By repackaging elite interests as a "liberal consensus," global governance structures then oppress non-elites in developing and industrialized countries alike.[38]

The future of Liberal Institutionalism—and liberal institutions

Non-liberal states, feminists, and the Global South have long felt mistreated in the liberal world order. But now, the general publics in many Western liberal democracies bear grievances too. It is not clear whether injecting feminine or non-Western perspectives into Liberal Institutionalism would yield drastically different theoretical conclusions. The canon may look masculine and

Western because modern international relations itself has been dominated by men and the West. However, even if the same conclusions would be reached, the reasoning process itself could be more inclusive. After all, perceptions of Liberal Institutionalism's exclusivity have grown in recent years, fueling pushback against international institutions and the broader post-World War II liberal world order.

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 become vulnerable to its shortcomings. At the same time, they try 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, for values and institutions to generate long-standing peace, they must be embraced voluntarily, rather than foisted upon unwilling populations.[39]

Grievances, now trumpeted in the West in addition to 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. For instance, 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 world order, which was established 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 Institutionalism and liberal institutions, that has always been the case.

Additional reading

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