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Reinisch, Jessica (2024) On the stubborn resilience of liberal internationalism. Past and Present , ISSN 0031-2746. (In Press)

Viewpoint

On the stubborn resilience of liberal internationalism*

Are we witnessing the collapse or entropy of post-Cold War liberal internationalism? Early twentieth-century internationalists knew that three overlapping sets of problems would undermine any attempts to prevent wars and to secure international stability: economic crises, refugee crises, and epidemic crises. Since the end of the Cold War we have witnessed a persistent stream of all three, alongside civil wars and military invasions from Iraq to Ukraine. The last five years have seen both direct and symbolic pushback against some tenets of the international system: the United Kingdom's Brexit referendum began the process of withdrawing the country from the European Union, at the same time as Donald Trump won his term as 45th US president on a platform of 'America First', just when under President Xi Jinping China's ambitions for global influence accelerated, and when anti-consensus, anti-globalization, disrupter parties scored important electoral victories in various corners of the globe.

Pessimism about the future of internationalism is particularly marked among those who have taken comfort in the existence of a stable, regulated, rules-based international system that seeks to prevent war and limit the global damage that can be done by individual demagogues. Certainty in this system's stability and survival has been widely eroded; it is tempting to identify the collapse of a post-war 'liberal international order' as the root cause.

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* This essay was written in October 2022, following a workshop in May 2022. At the time of writing, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February that year was the main topic in discussions about the past and future of liberal internationalism. Since that time, other wars and conflicts have continued to shape debates about the so-called liberal order and its future – perhaps none as much as the attack, in October 2023, by Hamas militant groups on Israel. I have resisted the urge to re-write the paper in the light of more recent events, in the hope that the basic argument about long-term continuities in the liberal internationalist programme remains intelligible.

In this piece I cannot tell the pessimists that their dejection is misplaced. Rather, I would like to invite them to reconsider their sense of a happy past — of earlier good times that have been cut short — which has often given their despair its shape and strength.

Liberal internationalism is many things: it is a body of thought about foreign policy and diplomacy, a moral philosophy, a category of analysis, an actors' category, a rhetorical phrase, a prescriptive ideology and normative yardstick for judging individuals' intentions. It is perhaps the most taken for granted, but also the most caricatured of the 'internationalisms'.[1] Textbook definitions often still use the term 'liberal internationalism' as a shorthand and baseline for 'internationalism' in general — as a kind of poster-child or advert of the one and true version, from which all others apparently departed and which they failed to emulate.[2] Yet it also appears as a cartoon villain for self-proclaimed realist thinkers, who, while divided on many issues, appear united in their criticism of liberal internationalism as a 'moralizing and legalistic liberalism'.[3]

Even after years of scholarship on many different political contexts, applications and interpretations of internationalism, some assumptions seem hard to overcome. In the world of political theorists and International Relations scholars, liberal internationalism is still often equated with the much-maligned concept of 'idealism', or even 'utopianism', and contrasted

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[1] Scholars have by now studied a large variety of international projects, including socialist, communist, fascist, conservative, Jewish, Islamic, Christian internationalisms, as well as anti-colonial, scientific and technocratic internationalisms, women's internationalism, students' internationalism, and the list goes on. On the benefits of studying internationalisms in the plural, see Jessica Reinisch, 'Agents of Internationalism', *Contemporary European History*, xxv (2016). Also see Glenda Sluga and Patricia Clavin (eds.), *Internationalisms: A Twentieth-Century History* (Cambridge, 2017); Abigail Green and Vincent Viaene (eds.), *Religious Internationals in the Modern World: Globalization and Faith Communities since 1750* (London, 2012).

[2] For example, Duncan Bell's *Encyclopaedia Britannica* entry on 'liberal internationalism' slips between 'liberal internationalism' and 'internationalism' in general. See <https://www.britannica.com/topic/liberal-internationalism> (accessed 4 Oct. 2022).

[3] Duncan Bell (ed.), 'Under an Empty Sky: Realism and Political Theory', in *Political Thought and International Relations: Variations on a Realist Theme* (Oxford, 2009), 7 (editor's intro).

with 'realism' as the dispassionate, detached force to counter idealists' flights of fancy. Partly this is a product of how the academic discipline of International Relations came to life in the inter-war decades, and the long shadow cast by E. H. Carr's portrayal of idealists as people who naively tried to end all wars by creating the League of Nations, but were proved horribly wrong.[4] The chasm between the two ideal types is cemented by the fact that many authors writing about liberal internationalism actively take sides and place themselves on one or other side of the binary: political activists and their historians often describe themselves as foot soldiers of the liberal international order, while realist scholars try to burst their bubbles.

Growing out of the philosophy, political doctrine and movement of liberalism, nineteenth-century liberal internationalism originated as a series of assumptions about fairness, justice, order and progress at home and in the wilderness that was 'abroad'. In the words of Casper Sylvest, liberal internationalism is best thought of not as 'an ideological straightjacket but as a political vocabulary, which, as a result of its ambiguities, flexibility and commitment to attractive causes such as peace, progress and order, managed to attract a great deal of popular and intellectual support'.[5] Liberal internationalists supported a spectrum of political agendas, with somewhat different emphases in different national contexts. They often did not even use the term 'liberal internationalists' to describe themselves. Nonetheless, they tended to share a desire to apply and spread ideas about what constituted good government, representative democracy and liberal capitalism across the world.

From the beginning and on both sides of the Atlantic, the liberal internationalist programme was inherently adversarial: it was defined in opposition to real and imagined ideological enemies. In Victorian Britain, the main opponents included the old order of

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[4] E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939*, 2nd edn (London, 1981). See Bell, 'Under an Empty Sky', 12–13.

[5] Casper Sylvest, *British Liberal Internationalism, 1880–1930: Making Progress?* (Manchester, 2009), 45.

hereditary privilege and absolute monarchy, but more specifically the Conservative party, with its foreign policy driven by rivalry, competition and 'Realpolitik' in place of moral principles. At the same time, advocates opposed the class-based internationalism proclaimed by the Socialist Internationals. Woodrow Wilson, leader of the Progressive Movement and 28th US president, went to Versailles to proclaim an apparently simple choice between, on the one hand, the old Concert of Europe's murky dealings, marked by power play and backroom deals, and the promises of a new, open, US-led diplomacy built on liberal internationalist principles of national self-determination and equality before the law, on the other.[6] After the Russian Revolution cemented an impassable fault line within the Left, socialists could be co-opted into the liberal internationalist cause, but communists could not. In subsequent decades, liberal internationalists identified themselves in opposition to two main ideological positions and political movements: communism, organized under the umbrella of the Comintern, and fascism, particularly the 'might is right' claims by Adolf Hitler and his supporters.

Against these and other alternative models, they fiercely set out to protect their ground against encroachment from both political far left and right. Consider for example the language used by the British historian and long-time director of Chatham House, Arnold J. Toynbee, in the memoranda he wrote during the Second World War. People had to make a stark choice between 'a tyrannical German world-empire' on the one hand and a 'democratic Anglo-American world-commonwealth' on the other. The right outcome required democratic leaders' willingness to 'coerce and convert simultaneously', to draw on 'authoritarianism and regimentation' as required — it demanded the formation of 'nothing less than a "world

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[6] On Woodrow's world view, see, for example, Ray Stannard Baker, *Woodrow Wilson and World Settlement* (3 vols.) (New York, 1922); and Ray Stannard Baker, 'The Versailles Treaty and After', *Current History* (Jan. 1924; repr. 1989).

directorate" of the United States and the British Commonwealth'. Eventually, Toynbee wrote, 'practically the whole world except the Soviet Union' would be included, and 'neutrality or non-alignment would no longer be permissible. Recalcitrant states would, if necessary, be forced to join'.[7] Even firm opponents of Nazism might have had reservations about these conclusions, but this black-and-white presentation of choices allowed for no alternatives or discussion of details. It was either the 'British-American World Order' or world fascism — choose your side. Subsequently, the argument of 'Never again' could be used to justify even the most questionable means and ends.

In the United States, liberal internationalism was not just contrasted with party political conservative or radical versions of foreign policy, but with a position of 'isolationism'. While the degree to which the United States had ever really isolated itself from international affairs remains disputed, the accusation of a selfish neglect of America's international obligations became a mechanism for convincing political opponents and the American public that there were no palatable alternatives to a liberal international path.[8] After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the United States' role in the world was discussed as a 'second chance' to shoulder its responsibilities and to make up for its withdrawal from the creation of the League of Nations in 1919. 'We failed once, we dare not

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[7] Arnold Toynbee, 'The Continental versus the Oceanic Pattern of World Unification', 5 Apr. 1941, 'Prolegomena to Peace Aims', 5 Apr. 1941, and 'British-American World Order', 8 July 1941, quoted in R. M. Douglas, *The Labour Party, Nationalism and Internationalism, 1939–1941* (Abingdon, 2004), 107–8; and in Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea, 1815 to the Present* (New York, 2012), 194.

[8] For an overview of the arguments about isolationism, see Jessica Reinisch, 'Internationalism in Relief: The Birth (and Death) of UNRRA', in Mark Mazower, Jessica Reinisch and David Feldman (eds.), *Post-War Reconstruction in Europe: International Perspectives, 1945–1949* (Past and Present Supplement no. 6, Oxford, 2011).

fail again', proclaimed the US Democratic party politician and director-general of the new

relief organization UNRRA, Herbert Lehman, in a speech about the great tasks ahead.[9]

By this diagnosis, the failure to install Wilsonian (that is, liberal) internationalism at

home and the subsequent failure to take a leading part in international affairs had allowed for

the spiralling crises of the 1930s and another world war. The only hope now was for the US

to take up the mantle of leadership and bestow the gift of American democracy and liberal

market capitalism onto the world. As the American publisher and magazine magnate Henry

Luce declared in 1941, the twentieth century had to be 'the American Century'. After the

United States had 'miserably failed to solve the problems of our epoch', it had to face up to

'that old, old issue with those old, old battered labels — the issue of Isolationism versus

Internationalism'. The United States had

> failed to play their part as a world power — a failure which has had disastrous
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> consequences for themselves and for all mankind. And the cure is this: to accept
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> wholeheartedly our duty and our opportunity as the most powerful and vital nation in
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> the world and in consequence to exert upon the world the full impact of our influence,
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> for such purposes as we see fit and by such means as we see fit.

What would this 'American Century' look like? It would involve internationalizing the

greatest 'achievements' of American history, such as 'our Bill of Rights, our Declaration of

Independence, our Constitution, our magnificent industrial products, our technical skills', and

'a passionate devotion to great American ideals'.[10] Americans like Luce believed, in William

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[9] Herbert Lehman at UNRRA's founding conference in Atlantic City, Nov. 1943, quoted in 'UNRRA: In the Wake of the Armies', National Film Board of Canada, 1944,
<https://www.nfb.ca/film/unrra_in_the_wake_of_the_armies/> (accessed 4 Oct. 2022).

[10] Henry R. Luce, 'The American Century', originally published in *Life* magazine, 17 Feb. 1941, reprinted in *Diplomatic History*, xxiii (1999), 165, 168.

Walker's words, that 'theirs was a God-given mission to make the world a better place. American ends and means were therefore naturally congruent. This faith produced a sense of entitlement that history was theirs to shape'.[11]

British and American liberal internationalists institutionalized their convictions in the new international organizations and, to the best of their abilities, used them to exclude their opponents. The League of Nations apparatus, the Permanent Court of International Justice at The Hague and the International Labour Organization, all brought to life at Versailles, enshrined core tenets of the liberal international project, including the notion of sovereign nation states (universal in theory but highly conditional in practice) and a resolute anti-Bolshevism, evolving into a broad anti-communism. Racial equality was not enshrined in the League's Covenant. Thanks to a thriving scholarship we know how British influence on the League of Nations shaped key policies and structures. British officials recognized forums such as the League as a tool for reforming international politics while at the same time securing British influence and the British empire.[12] Nor was this just a British-run show.[13] As Sandrine Kott has pointed out:

> Through official representation, such as in the ILO and/or through private or semi-official actors such as in the LoN, the USA was already very much present in official international organisations [from the 1920s onwards] and, thanks to their expertise

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[11] William O. Walker III, *The Rise and Decline of the American Century* (Ithaca, NY, 2018), 2.

[12] See, for example, Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford, 2015); Patricia Clavin, *Securing the World Economy: The Reinvention of the League of Nations, 1920–1946* (Oxford, 2013); Mazower, *Governing the World*.

[13] For the purposes of this round-table, which is taking the 1990s as its starting point, I am concentrating on the Anglo-American brand of liberal internationalism. Much more should be said elsewhere about the proselytizing brand of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century French internationalism.

and their financial power, US actors had already exerted a considerable influence on the methods as well as on the settling of agendas.[14]

These patterns continued during the war in plans for post-1945 organizations. The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) was modelled on and merged with the US's Office of Foreign Relief and Rehabilitation Operations, and Americans dominated in UNRRA's higher echelons. The United States contributed 72 per cent to UNRRA's overall budget; it was able to dictate its policies and path, and pull the plug when a multilateral relief organization no longer appeared to be in the national interest.[15] Other organizations followed: the International Refugee Organization, the Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, the World Health Organization, and many more. In both inter-war and post-war organizations, the Anglo-American liberal international programme became a means to cement their hegemony and obliterate alternative models.[16]

It was the fusing of ideas about foreign policy with a strong sense of morality that gave the liberal international project such peculiar authority and equipped its practitioners with a remarkable lack of scruples or doubts. Their confidence drew on religious certainty. To many nineteenth-century liberal internationalists, the language of rational Christianity

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[14] Sandrine Kott, 'Internationalism in Wartime: Introduction', and the rest of the Special Issue: International Organisations during the Second World War, *Journal of Modern European History*, xii (2014), 320.

[15] On the gulf between American and European members of UNRRA, and the US decision to dismantle the organization, see Jessica Reinisch, 'Auntie UNRRA at the Crossroads', in Matthew Hilton and Rana Mitter (eds.), *Transnationalism and Global Contemporary History* (Past and Present Supplement no. 8, Oxford, 2013).

[16] On the British use of the 'language and structures of liberal internationalism' in the UN Secretariat, see Amy Limoncelli, 'Remaking the International Civil Service: The Legacies of British Internationalism in the United Nations Secretariat, 1945–7', *Twentieth Century British History*, xxxiv (2023). On how American agendas became operationalized in the UN, see Stephen Wertheim, 'Instrumental Internationalism: The American Origins of the United Nations, 1940–3', *Journal of Contemporary History*, liv (2019).

provided useful metaphors for the evil of war, the equality of individuals in the eyes of God, the immorality of conservative or radical politics, and the civilizational achievements of the Anglo-American world.[17] Influential Americans believed that Protestant Christianity, rather than the conservatism of the Catholic Church, was a spiritual requirement for modernization and progress.[18]

By the start of the twentieth century liberal internationalists' links with any specific churches had no doubt weakened, but the sermonizing language remained. During the Second World War, American advocates of a liberal internationalist US-led world regularly used Christian imagery of charity, providence, morality, fate, duty and the protection of individual dignity. 'Bread cast upon the water does return', proclaimed US Vice-President Henry Wallace, (mis)quoting Ecclesiastes in a speech on the United States' 'second chance', to suggest that generosity would demonstrate the power of American leadership and bring its own returns.[19] The outcome was a programme marked by its evangelical zeal and righteousness. Some scholars have pointed to the apparent contradictory commitment to internationalist ideals on the one hand and national projection and self-interest on the other, but both were in fact part and parcel of the liberal international conviction that the application of Britain's or America's influence abroad was of universal benefit. As a moral force for progress, liberal internationalism was beyond reproach — it was a missionary endeavour.[20]

Although a sense of the evil of war formed a central pillar of early liberal internationalist thought, from the start liberal internationalists were willing and able to

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[17] On Jewish elites acting as 'politically and sentimentally liberal', see Abigail Green, 'Liberals, Socialists, Internationalists, Jews', *Journal of World History*, xxxi (2020).

[18] Emily S. Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream: American Economic and Cultural Expansion, 1890–1945* (New York, 1982), 8.

[19] Henry A. Wallace, *The Century of the Common Man* (New York, 1944), 57.

[20] On American 'missionary internationalism', see Reinisch, 'Internationalism in Relief', esp. 266–74.

endorse military solutions to international problems whenever it seemed expedient. More than that, war — perhaps none more so than the Second World War — was the making of generations of liberal internationalists: it gave them purpose, coherence and, above all, an enemy. By the end of the war, the new notion of 'totalitarianism' helpfully fused two old enemies into one: liberal internationalism became the backbone of and justification for Anglo-American dominance in the world and apparently the only way to contain the totalitarian threat. Subsequently, new enemies were added to the list of challengers or suspects that had to be contained, including at times a network of Afro-Asian solidarity movements and the Non-Aligned Movement.[21]

Arguments for the continued relevance of the Cold War mindset were often explicitly moral in tone. US President Ronald Reagan's 1983 'Evil Empire' speech to the National Association of Evangelicals denounced the Soviets as 'the focus of evil in the modern world' and a form of 'totalitarian darkness', in the face of which the United States would 'never compromise our principles and standards'.[22] To many, this language seemed to encapsulate the virtues of America's brand of liberal capitalism. It was adopted by scholars such as the political scientist Elizabeth Edwards Spalding, who described herself proudly as a 'third-generation anticommunist'.[23] She argued in a biography of her personal hero Harry Truman that his Cold War, as 'a conflict between good and evil, between freedom and tyranny, between liberal democracy and totalitarianism, between capitalism and communism', still

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[21] See, for example, Su Lin Lewis and Carolien Stolte, 'Other Bandungs: Afro-Asian Internationalisms in the Early Cold War', *Journal of World History*, xxx (2019); and Carolien Stolte and Su Lin Lewis (eds.), *The Lives of Cold War Afro-Asianism* (Leiden, 2022). On the inter-war context and consequences, see especially Carolien Stolte *et al*. (eds.), *The League against Imperialism* (Leiden, 2020).

[22] For example, 'Reagan Denounces Ideology of Soviet as "Focus of Evil" ', *New York Times*, 9 Mar. 1983, 1.

[23] See Spalding's blurb on the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation website, <https://victimsofcommunism.org/leader/elizabeth-spalding-phd/> (accessed 4 Oct. 2022).

provides the blueprint for the 'central political questions of our day'.[24] She saw 'striking' similarities between the early Cold War and today's 'war on terrorism': 'In both cases, the United States has faced an ideological enemy implacably opposed to liberal democracy generally and America specifically'.[25] Spalding is correct on one point: the western script of the Cold War, with its language of containment and the moralizing spread of market capitalism, was a logical product of the liberal internationalist programme.

English-language histories of the Cold War still often contrast the rigid ideology of Marxism-Leninism that permeated every aspect of private and public life in the East with the absence of ideology in the West. However, our understanding of the twentieth century in general and the Cold War in particular changes when we appreciate just how doctrinaire the liberal internationalist project was at its core. It was perhaps at its most prescriptive and intolerant not just in the 1940s, when the 'American Century' was proclaimed, but again in the 1990s, when it declared victory. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, American liberal internationalists — once again going by various names and coming from multiple political corners — celebrated by bringing the gift of market capitalism to the Eastern European wilderness. President Bush Sr promised, now that 'enemies' had become 'partners', the United States would help them to spread liberal democracy and transform themselves into capitalist societies. It was 'a victory for the moral force of our values', he proclaimed, though it did not spell an end to the mission: 'We will only succeed in this interconnected world by continuing to lead the fight for free people and free and fair trade'.[26]

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[24] Elizabeth Edwards Spalding, *The First Cold Warrior: Harry Truman, Containment, and the Remaking of Liberal Internationalism* (Lexington, 2006), 2, 223.

[25] Spalding, *First Cold Warrior*, 8. See also Elizabeth Edwards Spalding, 'The Enduring Significance of the Truman Doctrine', *Orbis*, lxi (2017).

[26] George H. W. Bush, 'Address to the Nation on the Commonwealth of Independent States', 25 Dec. 1991, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/3791> (accessed 16 Nov. 2022).

Even at this unipolar moment, American liberal internationalists continued to target alternative models or approaches wherever they encountered them. The war on terror required 'resolve', 'patience' and 'firm moral purpose', President Bush Jr explained. 'In this way our struggle is similar to the Cold War. Now, as then, our enemies are totalitarians, holding a creed of power with no place for human dignity. Now, as then, they seek to impose a joyless conformity, to control every life and all of life'.[27] A policy of de-ba'athification in Iraq could conjure up the apparent glories of denazification in Germany or the US-led occupation of Japan, both as exemplars of successful 'regime change' and the removal of obstacles for the spread of liberal democracies following military intervention. The Cold War script was infinitely adaptable to new requirements.

Talk of an eclipse after the 1990s is closely tied to the identification of liberal internationalism as an American project, and the supposed decline of US rule as world power. Scholars are divided. Some point to the unravelling and growing inconsistencies of the liberal international project, 'never more than a thin veneer for American power', and its failure to deal with new challenges.[28] Some, like John Mearsheimer, want to revise timelines: while the Cold War order 'was neither liberal nor international', he argues, the United States has indeed led a liberal order since the 1990s, though it was doomed to collapse from the start.[29] Others insist that the main assumptions of liberal internationalism are still in place and widely supported. They point out that even recent opinion polling evidence shows 'robust

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[27] George W. Bush, 'West Point Commencement', 1 June 2002, in *Selected Speeches of President George W. Bush, 2001–2008*, 129, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/bushrecord/documents/Selected_Speeches_George_W_Bush.pdf> (accessed 16 Nov. 2022).

[28] For an overview of the debate, see Robert Jervis *et al*. (eds.), *Chaos in the Liberal Order: The Trump Presidency and International Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (New York, 2018), xi.

[29] John J. Mearsheimer, 'Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order', *International Security*, xliii (2019).

support' for key elements of liberal internationalism, such as the need for the United States to play an active role in the world and work within multilateral institutions.[30] Or they argue that, after all, liberal internationalism remains in the US national interest, as a result of which domestic and international pressures will continue to moderate any individual leader's desires for a radical new course in US foreign policy.[31]

It is also true that apocalyptic visions have been part of the liberal internationalist programme ever since the beginning, as a means of mobilizing support in the face of supposedly mortal, existential threats. This was the case in Wilson's proclamations in 1919 as much as in the work of the American and British propagandists in the 1940s; they remained an essential component throughout the Cold War. Even today, there is a popular sense that liberal internationalism or the 'liberal international order' is a fragile force for good that requires protection from evil endeavours.[32]

In practice, however, the language and tenets of early twentieth-century or Cold War liberal internationalism remain far from eclipsed in political practice or scholarly models and histories. After its apparent heyday in the 1990s key premises could spring back into action whenever required. On the eve of the American withdrawal from Afghanistan, Anne Applebaum maintained that the 'contest between "open" and "closed" societies, between democracy and dictatorship, between freedom and autocracy' remained 'so crystal clear'. 'In the real world', she added, 'the battle to defend liberal democracy is sometimes a real battle,

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[30] Joshua Busby and Jonathan Monten, 'Has Liberal Internationalism Been Trumped?', in Jervis *et al*. (eds.), *Chaos in the Liberal Order*.

[31] Stephen Chaudoin, Helen V. Milner and Dustin Tingley, 'Down but Not Out: A Liberal International American Foreign Policy', in Jervis *et al*. (eds.), *Chaos in the Liberal Order*.

[32] See, for example, the works by G. John Ikenberry, including 'The End of Liberal Internationalism?', *International Affairs*, xciv (2018) and *A World Safe for Democracy: Liberal Internationalism and the Crises of Global Order* (New Haven, CT, 2020). For a critique of Ikenberry, see, for example, Samuel Moyn, 'Soft Sells: On Liberal Internationalism', *Nation*, 14 Sept. 2011.

a military battle, not merely an ideological battle'.[33] The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022

similarly breathed new life into the liberal internationalist mission. As Eliot A. Cohen put it,

Americans have long known the Russians to be 'the bad guys', and it was therefore 'easy

(and correct) to conclude they remain the bad guys today'. It was important to tell people

both why fighting for Ukraine was essential for US security and welfare, and why it mattered

on 'moral grounds': when American self-interest and morals coincided, 'as they did during

World War II and the Cold War, the US can show remarkable perseverance'.[34] Anne

Applebaum went as far as to liken any western restraint in this war to a direct support of

Putin, continuing the Cold War practice of distorted assertions of disloyalty and treason.[35]

Throughout, American participation in international affairs continues to be presented as a gift

to the world, and its absence as a potentially fatal blow. In Dominic Tierney's words, since

the US military remains 'the world's anti-fascist insurance policy', the 'liberal hawks',

luckily, 'picked the right side'.[36]

     In the scholarly canon, the assumptions underlying the Anglo-American liberal

internationalist project have been so pervasive as to have a lasting impact on how the history

of internationalism is being told. In particular, the slippage between internationalism and

liberal internationalism remains a core pillar of the literature to date, even as scholars of other

internationalisms have set out to create space for their subjects. The tone was set by Akira

Iriye, who in two field-defining volumes traced the emergence of 'cultural internationalism'

and 'global community' from the late nineteenth century. In his narrative, the new global

[33] Anne Applebaum, 'Liberal Democracy Is Worth a Fight: Not All Battles Can Be Won with Language, Arguments, Conferences or Diplomacy', *Atlantic*, 20 Aug. 2021.

[34] Eliot A. Cohen, 'The Words about Ukraine that Americans Need to Hear: Wars Are Won by Deeds — but also by Persuasive Moral Arguments', *Atlantic*, 22 Oct. 2022.

[35] Anne Applebaum, 'Fear of Nuclear War Has Warped the West's Ukraine Strategy: Leaders Shouldn't Give In to Putin's Nuclear Rhetoric', *Atlantic*, 7 Nov. 2022.

[36] Dominic Tierney, 'The Rise of the Liberal Hawks: They Picked the Right Side', *Atlantic*, 4 Sept. 2022.

civil society was almost by definition 'liberal': 'Liberalism', he explained, as 'the body of thought that emphasized individual rights, initiatives, and freedoms against state authority, provided an ideological underpinning both for entrepreneurs and for philanthropists, both for traders and for organisers of humanitarian endeavours'.[37] Socialist internationalism, developing 'in parallel' with liberal internationalism, had waned by the 1930s as the Soviet Union under Stalin reverted to 'geopolitical nationalism', and with the Comintern never truly an international body — precisely when the United States, 'moving in the opposite direction, began to shed its nationalistic outlook and champion the cause of internationalism — political, economic, and cultural'.[38] Iriye's work opened up inclusion of 'culture' in the history of international relations, and helped to loosen the grip of the national focus. It also defined the conceptual parameters of internationalism as a liberal enterprise.

The appropriation of the term 'internationalism' by western liberal internationalists has obscured the existence and histories of other versions. But this is no coincidence: liberal internationalism is a political project with the purpose of concealing and eliminating alternatives. It is therefore not enough to argue, as Philippa Hetherington and Glenda Sluga have recently done, against 'conventionalised conceptual borders' of 'liberal and illiberal' iterations of internationalism, which, they suggest, were in practice less distinct and more fluidly '*one* manifestation of the shifting spectrum of liberal and illiberal politics through the modern era'.[39] Their juxtaposition continues to rely on the liberal benchmark, even while attempting to deconstruct it. More significantly, such a portrayal serves to bowdlerize what

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[37] Akira Iriye, *Global Community: The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World* (Oakland, 2002), 13.

[38] Akira Iriye, *Cultural Internationalism and World Order* (Baltimore, 1997), 34, 110; Iriye, *Global Community*, 31.

[39] Philippa Hetherington and Glenda Sluga, 'Liberal and Illiberal Internationalisms', *Journal of World History*, xxxi (2020).

was an explicitly adversarial project. In many cases there was no benign 'co-mingling' and 'co-producing'; not all internationalisms were created equal. We need to make visible the political drivers and consequences of the liberal internationalists' desire to rewrite history and rule alone.

Tracing straight lines between moments in the past and present is usually a questionable exercise, and writing about liberal internationalism in these terms is no exception. The liberal internationalist project in its multiple guises has changed enormously since its nineteenth-century origins; its diverse cast of protagonists may have agreed on certain points but it was more often divided on many others. Throughout this time, liberal internationalists used a variety of labels to describe themselves and their methods. By the late twentieth century, their focus had moved from a general (liberal) internationalism to what they called 'the liberal world order' and 'international society'. Nonetheless, I have attempted to identify continuities in their understanding of themselves and their mission, not least because these continuities have shaped how the history of internationalism is being narrated today. A critical examination of the weaknesses and limits of liberal internationalism, and the rhetoric it is built on, is essential if we want to think our way out of the current instabilities and hope for more peaceful, stable times.

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