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The Liberal Order and the Modern Project¹

Tim Dunne

A persistent struggle within liberal thought is how to recognise cultural particularity within an ethical system in which toleration does not become indifference. The liberal internationalism espoused by leading US-based authors assumes a single logic of modernity, in which adherence to liberal rules and institutions is both necessary and inevitable. The article finds an echo of this view in earlier English School work on the expansion of international society, and subsequently teases out some lessons from recent revisionist accounts of how international society and its institutions were shaped by the multiplicity of their interactions. Historical and cultural encounters in international society show that liberal internationalists are mistaken in their belief that there is only one pathway to modernity and that re-rising powers, such as India, Russia and China will sustain the liberal order after American hegemonic decline.

Keywords: emerging powers, expansion of international society, liberalism, modernity, order

Introduction

In his plenary lecture to the *Millennium* conference, G. John Ikenberry argues that the liberal order remains resilient despite the decline in US relative power and its concomitant capacity to provide hegemonic leadership. His confidence that this is a ‘crisis of success’ and not a crisis born out of failure crucially rests on a reading of the singularity of the modern project. In Ikenberry’s words, ‘the leading states of the world system are travelling along a common pathway to modernity’. The locomotive of modernity is the shared interests of leading international actors in the reproduction of a liberal order that delivers benefits to all and excludes none (at least in principle). In fact, far from viewing Russia and China,

1. The outline ideas in this paper derive from a research project on *Liberal World Orders* involving the University of Exeter and the Danish Institute of International Studies (DIIS). The theoretical architecture draws on the framing paper for this project, co-authored by Marjo Koivisto and published later in this special issue.

and other pivotal non-Western powers, as undermining the liberal order, Ikenberry claims that their demands are most likely to be satisfied by *more liberalism*.

This argument mirrors a great deal of early post-1945 thinking on modernisation – ideas that informed the Marshall Plan and also crept into George Kennan's prognosis of the eventual demise of the Soviet Union. More directly, the theory and practice of economic development² was predicated on the assumption of a linear model of modernity, while decolonisation was frequently understood as evidence of the globalisation of a particular and singular form of state authority. With the demise of communism, advocates of a singular logic of modernity gained further ground, albeit this time linking the sovereign territorial state form to the universal entitlement to democratic governance.³

Conservatives responded by accusing liberals of taking 'a holiday from history'.⁴ It was, they claim, self-evident that democratisation had run its course – and the lesson for civilised societies was that they must defend their way of life from existential threats posed by revolutionary jihadis.⁵ The markers of this new barbarism included the absence of rationality and the presence of ethnic and religious hatreds that could not be mediated by diplomacy or contained by deterrence.

Anti-liberal thinking on world politics is evident today in recent realist writings on the (re-)rise of the new global powers such as Russia and China.⁶ Rather than believing the 'more liberalism' prescription set out by Ikenberry, or the 'higher liberalism' as he puts it in an article with Deudney,⁷ realists argue that re-rising powers foreshadow a world of

2. See Walt Rostow's stage-theory of growth being paradigmatic, Walt W. Rostow, *The Five Stages of Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto, Third Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 123–31; and Mitchell Seligson and John Pass-Smith, *Development and Underdevelopment: The Political Economy of Global Inequality* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003).

3. For exponents of the idea of democratic entitlement see Thomas M. Franck, 'The Emerging Right to Democratic Governance', *American Journal of International Law* 86, no. 1 (1992): 46–91. For a version of this argument which connects sovereignty to responsibility, see Chris Reus-Smit, 'Human Rights and the Social Construction of Sovereignty', *Review of International Studies* 27, no. 4 (2001): 519–38.

4. Charles Krauthammer, 'Holiday From History', *The Washington Post*, 14 February 2003.

5. Samuel P. Huntington, 'The Clash of Civilizations', *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993): 22–49.

6. See Azar Gat, 'The Return of Authoritarian Great Powers', *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 4 (2007): 59–70.

7. See Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, 'The Unraveling of the Cold War Settlement', *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 51, no. 6 (2009–2010): 39–62. To describe all proponents of a post-liberal order as being 'anti-liberal' would be a mistake. See, for example, Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World: The End of*

competing ideologies and interests.⁸ Authoritarian modes of governance are in the ascendance in Russia and persistent in China, what is more, there is evidence that such an alternative is attracting imitators in other parts of the world.⁹

Later in this special issue, Marjo Koivisto and I argue that the liberal order is more resilient than its supporters proclaim and its opponents fear. At the same time, the reasons for this resilience are not located in the capacities of great powers to 'steer' international order and provide public goods. Rather, they reside in the integrative mechanisms that bind states together into the globalised world economy, through interdependences in several sectors, including security, trade, finance, ecology. In his opening lecture at the 'After Liberalism' conference, Ikenberry usefully refers to this process as one of 'outward' and 'downward' integration.

In what follows, which is an addendum to our article 'Crisis, what Crisis?', I probe Ikenberry's claim that 'the future belongs to liberal international order'. There is a danger, inherent in much liberal international thought, to commit the dual error of equating modernity with Westernisation, and Westernisation with liberalism. These are errors that we have seen in other theoretical accounts of international and world order, as I discuss in the opening section of the discussion. This leads logically to a reflection upon the possibility of decoupling modernity from Westernisation, and Westernisation from liberalism – with the latter being one particular resolution of collective identity formation inside sovereign structures of power and authority.

Writings on modernity in the global order need to take seriously claims by political theorists and cultural geographers that there are distinctively postmodern forms emergent in the process of globalisation (new struggles between centre and periphery, with transnational collective identities taking hold). The politics of these historical and normative claims for future internationalisms are significant. It is also in a sense predictable what will happen if assumptions about the singularity and universality about liberalism prevail over local, regional and global conceptions of community. In short, the future may well belong to the liberal international order, but there is nothing natural or inevitable about this process.

the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order (Middlesex: Penguin Press, 2009).

8. What is overlooked in these realist accounts is how selective engagement with the rules and institutions of international society is convenient to Russian and Chinese strategies of strengthening national sovereignty. This complex interplay between power and law is underplayed in realist accounts of the new league of autocracies. For an excellent discussion of this in relation to Russia, see S. Neil MacFarlane, 'Post-1945 Soviet Perspectives on Order and Justice', in *Order and Justice in International Relations*, eds Rosemary Foot, John Lewis Gaddis and Andrew Hurrell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 202–5.

9. Gat, 'The Return of Authoritarian Great Powers', 59–70.

Expanding and Rising – Convergent Discourses

Much of what animates Ikenberry and Deudney's work on international order today is the concern about so-called rising powers.¹⁰ Their significance lies in the fact that, despite their material power, Brazil, India, Russia and China are outside the system of alliances built up by the US in the post-1945 world. Their challenge is broadly similar – being socially recognised as great powers with a corresponding view that they are entitled to take on a greater leadership role in world affairs. This is viewed by Ikenberry as a passive position on the part of the re-emerging powers, since ultimately they believe that 'their interests are well served within a liberal international order'.¹¹

The fact that we are witnessing increased interactions between these new global power centres has been noted by proponents of liberal internationalism. But as Bull reminded Deutsch in the second great debate, the density of interactions is not in itself a marker of a thickening sense of community. If the test for convergence was not mere interaction but ideological convergence – in Rawlsian terms, the extent to which the 'comprehensive doctrines' of the new great powers overlapped – then the future of the liberal international order is anything but bright.

In an important sense, this dispute between liberal universalists and particularists (cloaked in realism) is miscast. Arguably both sets of protagonists understate the extent to which the contemporary international order is itself a product of globalisation. The conventional account of the imposition of 'the West' on 'the rest', which permeates a great deal of theory and practice in international relations, rests on a naturalised narrative of European expansion to the 'periphery'. Such narratives have turned history into myth, turned the spiritual into the secular, and the local into the general and universal.¹²

Elsewhere in the field of International Relations, such conceits and myths are being exposed through critique. An example, relevant to liberal internationalism, is the rewriting of the English School story of 'the expansion of international society'.¹³ As Barry Buzan argues, this narrative relies on a historically implausible assumption that the West was the sole

10. In light of the history of Indian, Russian and Chinese empires, it is churlish to talk about them as though they were rising for the first time – consequently, I employ the term re-rising.

11. G. John Ikenberry, 'Liberal Internationalism 3.0: America and the Dilemmas of Liberal World Order', *Perspectives on Politics* 7, no. 1 (2009): 83.

12. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

13. Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, eds. *The Expansion of International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

driver of the development of a global inter-state order.¹⁴ The effect was both material and institutional: interaction capacity in the system rose as a particular economic and political logic prevailed, and, critically, this was accompanied by the imposition of cultural 'standards of civilisation' that became the criteria for accession into the Western-dominated order. This narrative has always been overly benign and too statist, as writers steeped in other regions and civilisations have noted.¹⁵ In Buzan's terms, the expansion is Eurocentric all the way down. Eurocentric in the immaculate emergence of Westphalian international society; Eurocentric in demanding assimilation or acquiescence on the part of other civilisations; and Eurocentric in the reproduction of this order through contemporary levers and mechanisms associated with trade conditionality, opening up of markets (as an indicator of fiscal responsibility) and accepting the liberal humanitarian values embedded in leading security institutions.¹⁶

Parallels with Ikenberry's (and, at times, Ikenberry and Deudney's) characterisation of the 21st century liberal order are evident. Both are overly reductive, implying that the expansion of the West is at the same time the development of a single logic of modernity.¹⁷ Legal historians and institutionalists dispute this claim.¹⁸ In the early maritime encounters between Europe and indigenous rulers and princes in the Indian Ocean,

14. See Barry Buzan's excellent critique of the expansion thesis in 'Culture and International Society', *International Affairs* 86, no. 1 (2010): 1–25. Other revisionist accounts of 'the expansion' include Shogo Suzuki, *Civilization and Empire: China and Japan's Encounter with European International Society* (London: Routledge, 2009).

15. Fred Halliday, 'International Relations in a Post-Hegemonic Age', *International Affairs* 85, no. 1 (2009): 43.

16. It is possible to overstate the degree of Eurocentrism in 'the expansion' story. Bull's essay on 'The European International Order' recognises that the interwoven history of certain institutions of international society, and that what Alexandrowicz and others have to say, calls for 'minor qualification' of the proposition that the rules and institutions evolved by the European powers 'were of their own making'. See Hedley Bull, 'The European Order', in *Hedley Bull on International Society*, eds Kai Alderson and Andrew Hurrell (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000), 180.

17. Timothy Mitchell encapsulates the singular logic of modernity argument neatly: 'Modernization continues to be commonly understood as a process begun and finished in Europe, from where it has been exported across ever-expanding regions of the non-West. The destiny of those regions has been to mimic, never quite successfully, the history already performed by the West', Timothy Mitchell, *Questions of Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 1.

18. More recent English School writing has been sensitive to the interpenetration of the West and non-Western civilisations. See Richard Little, 'The English School and World History', in *The English School and its Critics*, ed. Alex Bellamy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 45–63. See also Edward Keene, *Beyond the Anarchical Society: Grotius, Colonialism and Order in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

'two worlds' collided on a 'footing of equality', and, as a consequence, the law of nations evolved in a fairly hybrid manner.¹⁹ This interplay between Europe and the non-European world became more hierarchical in the 19th century as the West's economic and military advantage became decisive, and as assumptions about racial categories entered the moral and institutional vocabulary of international society. At this point, countries that had been participants in shared practices around recognition found themselves to be unequal partners – they were now, as positivist lawyers described them, categorised as 'semi-sovereigns' or full-blown 'barbarians'.

Despite the hardening of the hierarchy between the European international society and other states and civilisations, what Buzan calls the 'polycentric' understanding of 'the expansion' is historically and sociologically more defensible than the starker 'monocentric' account.²⁰

In contemporary liberal thinking on internationalism the shadow of monocentrism remains. The current malaise is attributed to a lack of 'steerage' capacity on the part of the US and its allies, a diagnosis that overlooks the pivotal role that non-Western regions and powers have played in maintaining international order since at least the end of the Cold War. The record of these countries in complying with international rules and norms – for instance, contributions to peacekeeping missions and restraint in terms of the use of force – stands up favourably in relation to Western powers. For instance, progress towards universal jurisdiction for war crimes – through the establishment of the International Criminal Court – was advanced largely by a like-minded group of 60 countries including membership from numerous developing countries. The institutions of international society today continue, as they have in different ways from Grotius's time, to reflect the fact of cultural diversity and the dynamic process of co-evolution. Interestingly, this polycentric account enables Buzan to conclude that re-rising powers do not prefigure a cultural crisis in international society because 'international society and its political and cultural underpinnings evolve together'.²¹

Contested Modernities

Recognising that globalisation was a condition of possibility for 'the expansion'²² is one necessary revision to our thinking on the

19. C. H. Alexandrowicz, *An introduction to the History of the Law of Nations in the East Indies: 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967); and C. H. Alexandrowicz, *The European–African Connection: A Study in Treaty Making* (Leiden: Sijthoff, 1973).

20. Buzan, 'Culture and International Society', 20.

21. *Ibid.*, op cit.

22. This argument is set out in Barry Buzan and Richard Little, *International Systems in World History: Remaking the Study of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

contemporary liberal international order. A second strand, which is mutually compatible, is to connect international norms and institutions more closely to the character of domestic orders.

If part of what is meant by modernity is the separation of economics from politics, then the development of the international is a very modern project. The non-Western influences on this institutional order are evident in a multiplicity of forms – think here about how the non-aligned movement strengthened the pluralist norm of sovereignty in the post-1945 period. Yet we should be cautious in assuming – as ‘the expansion story’ does – that the adoption of sovereignty-based institutions and practices evidences the success of a single Western way of statehood.

Addressing the question of the changing character of international society, necessitates that we avert our gaze *away* from Western liberal inter-governmentalism, not towards it (as leading US-based internationalists argue). Textured accounts of political formations within re-rising powers is part of the story, which in turn requires an understanding of language and meaning, and, critically, an appreciation of the persistence of ‘multiple modernities’.²³ The West sought to impose a single logic of modernity on China during the Opium Wars, which were not about opium per se, ‘but about the determination of the Western powers to use their technological superiority to impose a world-view shaped by the idea of an imperial, globalised international society’.²⁴ The norms which prevailed in China’s encounter with Europe were expressed in a language that was constitutive of the European experience, true for liberalism, nationalism, socialism and, at the turn of the century, racial struggles for superiority. With this experience as a backdrop, Mao’s revisionist approach to the rules and institutions of international society is perfectly intelligible. Its subsequent shift, after Mao, to a more status-quo-oriented power, should not be regarded as an acceptance of the legitimacy of liberal internationalist ideas and institutions. Chinese adherence to democracy is a shorthand for the autonomy of the PRC, and rights are accepted providing sovereignty is privileged over individualism. And the contemporary struggle over the meaning of ‘responsibility’ shows that China is strategically engaging with the institutions and purposes of modern international society, meaning that terms such as ‘responsibility’ flip-flop into a reaffirmation of the coexistence of independent sovereign states in the face of

23. S.N. Eisenstadt, ‘Multiple Modernities’, *Daedalus* 129, no. 1 (2000): 1–29. See also Volker H. Schmidt, ‘Multiple Modernities or Varieties of Modernity?’ *Current Sociology* 54, no. 2 (2006): 77–97.

24. Rana Mitter, ‘An Uneasy Engagement: Chinese Ideas of Global Order and Justice in Historical Perspective’, in *Order and Justice in International Relations*, eds Rosemary Foot, John Lewis Gaddis and Andrew Hurrell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 207–35.

'hegemonism'.²⁵ The key lesson here is not to mistake this use of language with the internalisation of liberal internationalist values and institutions, which Chinese elites continue to regard with deep suspicion.

Our accounts of an evolving internationalism during the 20th century conveniently mask over the brute fact that internationalism and imperialism were two sides of the same coin.²⁶ And an imperial order is one in which institutional forms, such as sovereignty, take on different meanings. This point is nicely made by Edward Keene. In his words:

The fundamental normative principle of the colonial and imperial systems beyond Europe ... was that sovereignty should be divided across national and territorial borders as required to develop commerce and to promote what Europeans and Americans saw as good government.²⁷

The inference I draw from this is not to critique liberal internationalism for its cultural blindness or its double standards, as postcolonial writers are prone to do. Rather, we should see in liberalism the presence of a hierarchical ordering principle in which dominance and subordination are configured. Imperialism is a way of *doing* liberal world order. Modern theories of cosmopolitanism leave this framing intact, articulating 'the same anthropocentric and particularised political universe that they promised to deliver us from'.²⁸

One can see in the response to 'rising powers' a sense of alarm among liberal internationalists. These powers are either 'different, and a threat', or 'like us', and in need of socialisation and rule compliance. Both strategies, as Todorov reminds us, were present during the conquest of the indigenous peoples of the Americas by the Iberian powers in the post-Columbian period.²⁹

Supreme confidence in the singularity of modernity is evident in Ikenberry and Deudney's article published in *Foreign Affairs* in 2009. In response to the argument that authoritarian great powers might be leveraging their soft-power capability, and in so doing increasing their power of attraction, Ikenberry and Deudney responded with a strong policy prescription:

25. *Ibid.*, p. 225.

26. An ambivalence that is neatly captured in *Imperialism and Internationalism in the Discipline of International Relations*, eds Brian Schmidt and David Long (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).

27. Keene, *Beyond the Anarchical Society*, 98.

28. So argues Jens Bartelson in his book *Visions of World Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

29. See Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984). For an application of these ideas within contemporary political and international thought see, William E. Connelly, *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

The foreign policy of the liberal states should continue to be based on the broad assumption that there is ultimately one path to modernity – and that it is essentially liberal in character.³⁰

While there is no space here to contest this claim in detail, it is perhaps worth reminding ourselves of the provincial character of liberal thinking on modernity. As Dipesh Chakrabaty argues, Western thought 'is both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the various life practices that constitute the political and the historical' in countries like India and China. 'Indispensable and inadequate' is an appropriate characterisation of liberal internationalism in IR theory.³¹

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30. Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, 'The Myth of the Autocratic Revival: Why Liberal Democracy Will Prevail', *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 1 (2009): 93.

31. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.