

---

## Original Article

# The politics of liberal internationalism

Tim Dunne\* and Matt McDonald

School of Political Science and International Studies, University of Queensland,  
St Lucia QLD 4072, Australia.

E-mails: tim.dunne@uq.edu.au; matt.mcdonald@uq.edu.au

\*Corresponding author.

This Special Issue developed out of a workshop convened at the University of Queensland 13–14 July 2011. Funding for the workshop was generously provided by the Academy of the Social Sciences Australian and the School of Political Science and International Studies, University of Queensland.

**Abstract** How is it that internationalism has become the dominant form of statecraft pursued by liberal states and by international organisations, and yet it has received relatively scant attention in International Relations (IR) both historically and conceptually? It is time that the field addressed the paucity of writings on an institutionalised idea that has shaped order-building for more than two centuries. The article opens with a consideration of internationalism and its status in political theory and IR, arguing that a variety of different configurations have taken hold in different historical moments. We then consider the coexistence of internationalism and imperialism as an illustration of how the ambiguities and tensions in liberal statecraft can be manifested. The article closes with a consideration of the international normative order-building that has taken place after 1945 and the critical issue of the resilience of liberal internationalism given the ‘crisis’ identified with it. For all its dangers and dilemmas, we make the case for engaging the politics of liberal internationalism as a site in which normative and practical concerns of global politics meet, and in which the calls to protect the interests of national communities are mediated by the imperative of ‘purposes beyond ourselves’.

*International Politics* (2013) **50**, 1–17. doi:10.1057/ip.2012.25

**Keywords:** internationalism; imperialism; responsibility to protect; rules; order-building

---

## Introduction

On the eve of the Kosovo campaign, the then British Prime Minister Tony Blair (1999) confidently declared that ‘we are all internationalists now’. This confidence was well founded. The ‘liberal decade’ of the 1990s saw



international cooperation and collective security displace traditional realist grand strategies of balancing, accommodation and self-help security policies. Yet more than anything, what marked the 1990s out from previous decades was the striking ascendancy of the liberal democratic model of governance: in 1946 there were 20 liberal states, in 2011 there were 95.<sup>1</sup> For the first time in history, authoritarian and semi-authoritarian countries were outnumbered by democracies. When coupled with the Kantian hope that liberal or republican states will form a federation that will pacify as it expands, it was reasonable for internationalists to conclude that realists (and neo-realists) had been proven wrong – the international system was not as war-prone as they had led us to believe.

By the time of Blair's downfall in 2007, internationalism was in retreat. The 'holiday from history', as one prominent neoconservative put it (Krauthammer, 2008) had come to an abrupt end. The post-9/11 'wars of choice' had proven to be more costly and less winnable than the public in Western states had been led to believe. Beyond the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, internationalists have to admit the uneven record of liberal states in delivering a more just world, even before the global financial crisis was threatening to generate economic insecurity in the global north that would impact adversely on the global south. Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that a growing chorus of scholars have questioned the resilience of the liberal order and the ability of its institutions to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century (Koivisto and Dunne, 2010).<sup>2</sup>

The 'intervention' debate is one among many examples of how internationalism endures criticisms both from fellow travellers as well as from critics situated within an alternative tradition, whether communitarian or cosmopolitan in philosophical orientation. NATO's patrolling of the no-fly zone in 2011 in response to atrocities committed by Gaddafi's armed forces was met with resistance inside and outside the academy despite the fact that the intervention had gilt-edged legal cover and that there was a reasonable consensus in late February and early March that 'something had to be done' to stop the carnage. Willing the ends but not the means is a familiar dilemma of statecraft, or any kind of institutional politics for that matter. What made the Libya case so intriguing was the depth of antipathy towards the military action from intellectuals, such as David Rieff and Alex de Waal, who would not regard themselves as being anti-internationalists. To go back to the Blair axiom, in an era of globalisation, even if 'we are all internationalists now' there remains significant divisions among sovereign states and within global public opinion as to the appropriate response to governments engaging in widespread atrocity crimes. Agreement on the need to respond to humanitarian catastrophes is as wide as the agreement on strategy is shallow.



This opening essay of the Special Issue does not hide from the tensions and contradictions that haunt the politics of liberal internationalism. Instead, it advances inter-related arguments that enable us to lay bare a number of dilemmas associated with liberal statecraft, such as: the liberal arguments for/against intervention (noted above); the practical question about appropriate institutionalised forms of cooperation and whether it is ever right to ‘go it alone’; the relationship between cultural diversity and moral purposes (and their priorities); the question of whether non-liberal states can be internationalists; how far the burdens of building an internationalist order are to be shared; and specifically what special responsibilities do great powers – and key international institutions such as the United Nations Security Council – have for order-building and justice-enhancing.

In exploring these dilemmas and tensions, and attempting to situate liberal internationalism in both International Relations (IR) thought and political practice, the article proceeds in four stages. First, we look at what the relatively meagre writings on internationalism in IR have to tell us before making the case for bringing internationalism back into key debates in mainstream and critical approaches to the discipline (a position internationalism held in the early part of the twentieth century). Second, we look more closely at the normative dimensions of internationalism and its limits, particularly in relation to pure communitarian and cosmopolitan positions. In exploring internationalism’s place with reference to these positions, we also note the diversity of internationalisms that have existed historically and potentially co-exist today, locating our version as one form (albeit the dominant one) of internationalism. Third, we build on the previous points by showing how liberal internationalism has shaped ‘order building’ in the twentieth century, with specific reference to the end of empire and the emergence of the American-led system of the post-1945 world. Finally, we consider how far liberal internationalism is in crisis today, and argue that for all its drawbacks and limitations, liberal internationalism offers a promising avenue for mediating between the competing interests of national and global society, and for enabling the meaningful pursuit of ‘purposes beyond ourselves’.

## **Internationalism in IR**

Writing in 1988, Fred Halliday argued that internationalism had for too long been an unfashionable topic in IR (1988, p. 187). There is good empirical evidence to suggest this has not changed in recent years. As a proxy for evaluating the academic interest in and outputs on internationalism, we did a headline search of six leading journals based in the United States and Europe.<sup>3</sup> In an 11-year period, from 2000, only nine articles appeared with



internationalism in the title. This compares with much higher figures for titles with other institutionalised ideas such as ‘hegemony’ (22 articles) and ‘regionalism’ (23).

While internationalism as a specific category became unfashionable in IR, issues and debates central to the internationalist tradition were revived owing to three trends that were underway: first, the ‘normative turn’ in IR which brought cosmopolitan thinking to the fore (Linklater, 1990); second, the engagement with critical social theory and its emphasis upon transformative change and human emancipation (Ashley, 1981; Hoffman, 1987; Booth, 1991); and third, the revival of an English School interest in the social and normative dimensions of international society (Vincent, 1986; Jackson, 2000; Wheeler, 2000).

One particularly productive research program associated with the normative turn in IR, which connected with a central preoccupation of internationalists over several centuries, was the relationship between ‘ethics and foreign policy’ (Keal (ed.), 1992; Dunne and Wheeler (eds.), 1998; Smith and Light (eds.), 2001). The dilemmas that were addressed in this literature reflected the stark tension that existed in world politics between the dominant sovereignty-based order and the growing aspiration for all peoples to have their basic human rights protected. Thinking about ethics and foreign policy according to this order/justice dualism – and the different configurations of it advanced by pluralists and solidarists – proved to be both productive and limiting. Productive in the sense that normative change within international society was illustrated by the emergence of practices that challenged the sovereignty-based order; limiting in the sense that the cases tended to be restricted to a handful of Western middle powers (Lawler, 2005).

Indeed while promising, the ethical foreign policy literature has been limited in important ways in terms of engagement with a range of pressing questions regarding the possibilities for – and content of – progressive state practice. This literature has had little to say, for example, about enabling and institutionalising such practice at a domestic level, a point taken up in Matt McDonald’s contribution to this special issue. For him, a crucial part of the puzzle of how internationalism becomes possible is the extent to which such a political project is articulated effectively to, and able to find resonance or support among, domestic constituencies within states (McDonald, this special issue).

On the other side of the equation, this literature also arguably elided critically important issues to do with the contemporary global order, such as the structural limitations acting upon small and middle powers who try to act as ‘local agents of a world common good’ (Bull, 1984, p. 223). As the classical realist Arnold Wolfers (1962, p. 74) pointed out many decades ago, when thinking about the relationship between means and ends, it is critical to distinguish between a state’s ‘possession goals’ and its ‘milieu goals’. For most



states, most of the time, changing the milieu – or what we might call the normative framework of international society – is beyond their capacity, which is why the community of states is overly dependent on responsible action on the part of great powers.

The capacity to significantly affect the normative framework in which states operate is clearly within the capability of a hegemon. Yet curiously, debates about the ‘good state’ have also paid little attention to the United States and its foreign policy orientation,<sup>4</sup> except perhaps to lament the ways that several US governments have either retreated from internationalism or used it as normative cover for pursuing narrow national security interests.

The general inclination in literature on ethical foreign policies to focus on the ‘usual suspects’ of wealthy, small and middle power liberal democratic states arguably draws attention away from crucial questions about the contexts in which powerful states and institutions pursue a particular vision of the good and attempt to influence the construction of the broader normative framework of international society. There is a failure to engage sufficiently with what Ian Clark and Christian Reus-Smit (this special issue) refer to in their contribution to this special issue as ‘special responsibilities’ that are beholden on such actors. The context of these states’ pursuit of a ‘progressive’ foreign policy, they argue, is complicated by the particular obligations these actors face in upholding an international order, obligations not beholden on small or middle power states who can pick and choose issue areas upon which to concentrate their attention.

If domestic and structural limitations to progressive state practice and the actions and responsibilities of the United States have been overlooked in discussions of the ‘good state’ and an ethical foreign policy, so too has engagement with the possibility for non-liberal states to act in such a way as to help uphold the liberal order. Much ‘second image’ liberalism operates with an assumption that the liberal character of the values animating the ‘good state’ must be acknowledged more openly than it has been in the literature. So must the possibility that ‘the international’ is itself constituted by rules and institutions that have an affinity with liberalism without necessarily being dependent upon the preferences of liberal states. Once this has been admitted, we open up the possibility that the Liberal world order could be held together by the actions of the non-Liberal states. Think here about the behaviour of several non-liberal yet well-ordered states – those who are not aggressive to their neighbours; who may contribute to peacekeeping and peace building; who conduct cooperative diplomatic relations; and who seek multilateral solutions to severe and pressing problems; and who use diplomatic leverage to persuade others to uphold the rules. Countries who are candidates for the oxymoron ‘illiberal internationalists’ include Bhutan, Qatar, Singapore and China – though the latter would be contested by purveyors of the China threat theory (such as Mearsheimer, 2001).



A further limitation in the ‘good state debate’ was the relative lack of historicity. There was something of a failure to identify what, if anything, was *new* about the dilemmas of the contemporary order that was absent in other historic periods in which states have pursued ‘purposes beyond themselves’ (Bull, 1973, p. 137). Internationalism had been present in the IR debates on the inter-war period, yet such an account of the origins of the concept is open to two significant revisions. As the political theorist Micheline Ishay argues in one of the few book length studies of internationalism, the emergence of the idea can be found in the disintegration of Christendom and the opening up of a space for merchants and the rising bourgeoisie to pursue their earthly interests. Cooperation among this new class generated a different kind of politics in which the identity and beliefs of individuals is secondary to their instrumental worth. Such a language of common interest found its way into the early texts on the ‘law of nations’ written by philosophers of law such as Hugo Grotius. Individuals, he believed, promote peace and harmony through the pursuit of their rational interests, expressed through trade, discovery and the acquisition of legal title. The holy wars of the seventeenth century that threatened an end to all civility were exacerbated, Grotius argued, by the fact that both sets of protagonists believe that God was on their side. What was required was to replace god’s law with the law of nations such that mankind’s [sic] natural interests could flourish.

The task for the rules and institutions in the emerging European system of Grotius’ time was to regulate patterns of cooperation and competition such that the newly minted sovereign states were able to organise themselves independently from external political authorities such as the Catholic Church and the Habsburg Empire. As Ishay points out, by the time of the Enlightenment, this inter-state order was becoming modified as absolutist state forms were undermined by the calls for popular sovereignty. The fact that figures such as Rousseau, Paine and Kant privileged the interests of the bourgeoisie (Ishay, 1995, p. 72) leads Ishay (1995, pp. 72–73) to conclude that internationalism was a failure: in his words, ‘their internationalist theory ultimately favoured particularism over universalism and their National interest over global principles of justice’. Thus, the roots of the idea of a ‘betrayal’ of internationalism reach right back to its earliest articulation.

It is hard to evaluate the validity of this critique because Ishay does not provide a clear definition of internationalism, let alone the kind of nuanced criteria that is required in order to judge the success or failure of internationalist designs.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, the same normative ‘fog’ hangs over many contemporary disputes between internationalists and their critics today, such that many arguments against liberal internationalist practices – humanitarian intervention being the most obvious – are advanced by liberals themselves (Rieff, 1999; Mazower, 2006, 2008, 2009). While such disputes are framed in an



either/or manner, what is at stake quite often is *rival conceptions of liberal internationalism*.<sup>6</sup> Teasing out these contending internationalisms is the task we set ourselves in the following section.

## Internationalism as a Theory and Doctrine

Whereas internationalism is a term that is frequently used by practitioners, it remains underdeveloped as both a theory of global order and as a basis for a foreign and security strategy. As a theory, it has proven to be too normative for American-style rationalists (Reus-Smit, 2001) and too liberal for their critical theory counterparts (Chandler, 2010). Yet, as Halliday argues, internationalism is one of the few grand theories in IR that ‘bridges the categories of the analytical’ with ‘the normative’ (1988, p. 187). Building on the possibility that internationalism might enable us to mediate between pure communitarian and cosmopolitan positions, the possibility that internationalism can effectively bridge the analytical and the normative underscores the attraction of the concept itself, for all its dangers and limitations (McDonald, this special issue).

Of course, the analytics of internationalism are complicated by the fact that we see a multiplicity of variants associated with it. Carsten Holbraad (2003, p. 1), for instance, distinguishes between variants of a progressive doctrine – liberalism and socialism – that both seek to modify international order from a conservative internationalism that is designed to preserve it. His contention is that the point of departure for all types of internationalism is a common realisation that they find themselves located in an inter-state order with recognised institutions and conventions. Other contenders for internationalism related to the formation of historical ‘blocs’ include the non-aligned movement of mainly formerly colonised ‘southern’ states. During the 1960s and 1970s this became a powerful regime for resisting the ongoing interventionism of the two superpowers in the ‘third world’, as well as using the movement for advocating greater economic and political justice. While the non-aligned movement was neither avowedly liberal nor anti-liberal, there was undoubtedly a strong rhetorical solidarity among the members (numbering the majority in the international system for all of its 50-year history). The depth of this solidarity may have been fractured as the economic and social forces of globalisation create new alignments while melting others ‘into air’ (to borrow Marx and Engels’ metaphor); nevertheless, an internationalism that is *against* western power and its attendant abuses remains a powerful animating force in the global south.

The non-aligned movement is internationalist for the reasons Holbraad made clear: their case was generally a ‘reformist’ agenda that took the central institutions and values of international society – sovereignty, independence,



recognition, self-determination from colonial rule – and sought to adapt these institutions to suit their interests and purposes. Other transnational and international ideas have rejected even a minimum conception of international society: there might be a variety of internationalisms but there are certainly limits to their proliferation. World government, universal empires, civilisations premised on religious or racial homogeneity – none of these can be reconciled with internationalism.

Andrew Phillips' essay in this special issue reinforces the view that liberal internationalism has historically had a succession of 'others'. He shows how the post-9/11 world has seen a clash of internationalisms, with a highly interventionist US-led strategy responding aggressively to the jihadist declaration of war against the West. This is a good illustration of the fact that internationalism can take many forms; and when an ostensibly *liberal* internationalism is threatened, it can be violently illiberal in its reaction.

The 9/11 wars remind us of the dark side of liberal internationalism. They also reveal the complex relationship between theoretical frameworks and public policies. The 'neocons' who dominated the political agenda during the George W. Bush administrations managed to combine elements of internationalism with conservative nationalism. Such intellectual ambiguities are evident in the key texts associated with the articulation of the 'Bush Doctrine', not least the National Security Strategy of 2002 that advocated a highly interventionist military doctrine of 'preemption' alongside the pursuit of liberty and freedom (mentioned 60 times in the strategy document).

Democratic realism, as Krauthammer called it, might have some coherence in the minds of lobbyists in Washington DC, but in the minds of academic theorists it is an unstable convergence of countervailing ideas and principles. Historically, realist theories of order have been inimical to internationalism. As befitting their communitarian principles, realists understand the limits of the territorial state to be the limits of the political community; hence, realists are thoroughly sceptical of those who claim that solidarity in international society is either already existing or desirable. Internationalists do not accept such a stark duality between the 'inside' and 'outside'. Instead they are inclined to apply a 'domestic analogy' (Suganami, 1989) to the international; just as institutions can be built to promote the common good within a state, likewise it is possible for shared interests and purposes to be realised in the great society of humankind. Important disagreements exist among internationalists as to how far the domestic analogy can be pursued. But we need not dwell on this fault-line from now: the critical point is to convey the fact that internationalism is incompatible with a strict logic of *raison d'état*.

While internationalism is flanked on one side by a pure communitarianism evidenced in realist thought, on the other lies cosmopolitanism. The internationalist-cosmopolitan boundary, however, is more permeable for the



reason that cosmopolitans differ largely with respect to the *means* of progress: the institutional arrangements most likely to bring about ‘a kingdom of ends’. Cosmopolitans who regard sovereign states as having the potential to play a positive role in world politics are accepting of states but only conditionally. For them, the legitimacy of states will wither as new and more just forms of community evolve depending on the extent to which states perform functions consistent with cosmopolitan principles. This point is explored further in Anthony Burke’s contribution to this special issue, in which he suggests that attempts to articulate progressive global moral roles for states often work from and validate a ‘statist’ rather than human-centred ontology. Such an ontology is, for Burke, inconsistent with the pragmatic and moral imperatives for dealing effectively with transnational change in a global society. By contrast, according to internationalists, a world made up of 195 states that were committed to peace and justice would not be a second-best normative outcome. For them, a system of just states would bring about an end to ‘the state of war’ identified by Rousseau and Kant as an impediment to progress. Whereas cosmopolitans see states as being at best transient historical forms, internationalists contend that particular kinds of state can promote the global good, while also noting the moderating impact that a balanced interstate order can exert over erstwhile revisionist states looking to transform the international in their own image.

Once the outer reaches of internationalism have been discerned, and the ideologies and histories of anti-internationalism have been negated, we are left with the realisation that there is not one liberal internationalism but several. In the essay that follows Peter Lawler (this special issue) re-examines the debate that in many ways defined the turn to ‘ethics and foreign policy’ in the 1990s. Specifically, he reminds us of the differences between the archetypical internationalism conceived of and promoted in Sweden, and the internationalism associated with Western state practice after 9/11 – an internationalism that he refers to as having a ‘dangerous notoriety’.

The notoriety of internationalism today concerns its association with interventions in the name of the common good. This includes most obviously humanitarian interventions, but also measures taken to enforce disarmament on a state that could threaten peace and security, or even to prevent a so-called failed state or terrorist network from acquiring weapons with massive destructive capability. Here we see how several post-9/11 agendas converged in a manner that emboldened the United States and its allies in their confrontation with failed states and ‘unjust enemies’. Richard Haas, an official in the US State Department, captured how this new interventionism was compromising the pluralist norm of sovereignty. There is, he argued,

an emerging global consensus that sovereignty is not a blank cheque. Rather, sovereign status is contingent on the fulfillment by each state of



certain fundamental obligations, both to its own citizens and to the international community. When a regime fails to live up to these responsibilities or abuses its prerogatives, it risks forfeiting its sovereign privileges including, in extreme, its immunity from armed intervention. (in Ikenberry, 2011, p. 249)

For reasons of international security and human rights protection, internationalists in the 1990s increasingly advocated interventionism.

Critics of liberalism argue that the experience of lawful and unlawful interventions in the early twenty-first century is unexceptional (Jahn, 2009; Hall and Hobson, 2010). According to these writers, liberal internationalism has always exhibited a pathological means/ends logic. For them, it is possible to draw a straight line from late nineteenth century advocacy of imperial authority over ‘backward peoples’ to contemporary doctrines of liberal interventionism such as the ‘responsibility to protect’ (Hall and Hobson, 2010).<sup>7</sup> Yet such claims are themselves vulnerable to critique. They overlook certain liberal aspects of the nineteenth century, such as the efforts made by the British government to end the trade in slaves (Simms and Trim (eds.), 2011), and the activism of an emerging international civil society around values of peace and understanding (Iriye, 2005, p. 115). It could also be argued that the link between imperialism and contemporary liberal internationalism is tenuous in light of the consensus that has been established around key universal rights and protections. This would apply, for example, to the diplomatic consensus that has been forged in relation to measures taken to prevent and respond to human rights atrocities – even while acknowledging the fact that such responses remain both inconsistent and vulnerable to the charge of double standards.

Viewed in this light, merely pointing out the congruence of liberal internationalism and interventionism does not take us very far. Granted it provides a better account of the origins of the discipline of IR than the largely mythical ‘great debate’ between realism and idealism (Long and Schmidt, 2005). What it leaves untouched is the specific character of the internationalism in question and the needs of the target group to whom intervention is being considered. An internationalism animated by a concern to take decisive action to prevent or limit the committal of the worst atrocities – genocide and crimes against humanity – is differently grounded than the norms of conquest and expropriation that enabled a ‘right’ of conquest during the period of European colonial expansion.

This is not to say that internationalism can forget its past. It is now widely accepted that a great deal of internationalist thought and action in the nineteenth century was infused with imperialist assumptions about the natural right of Europeans to rule over ‘lower races’. The power of this revisionist



literature lies in its promise to explain how it was that the ascendancy of liberal theory and practice in British politics co-existed with a highly illiberal empire. As we discuss below, the gap between internationalist purposes and cycles of major war and conflict narrows after 1945 as the United States sought to construct an international order based on open markets, responsible states and a rules-based system.<sup>8</sup> The gap narrows, although shared moral purposes are never able to entirely extinguish the infernos of endless wars and the experience of chronic insecurity.

### **Liberal Internationalist Order-building**

By the turn of the twentieth century, liberal voices on world politics were arguing that international institutions were required in order to close the gap between the values of internationalism and the practices of individual sovereign states. The onset of the Great War had the effect of accelerating this paradigmatic shift in internationalist thought. We refer both to the establishment of the League of Nations, and the subsequent founding of the United Nations, as instances of normative order-building. Two critical issues follow from this institutional ‘turn’ in world politics: the role played by internationalism in providing a normative context within which institutions are regarded as being both efficient and legitimate; and related, the extent to which they are dependent upon hegemonic states for their durability. As we look to the future re-ordering of the world, captured by the over-simplistic slogans that foretell ‘the decline of the west’ and the ‘rise of the rest’, these questions about the resilience of liberal internationalism will become increasingly prominent in theoretical and empirical inquiry in IR.

That internationalist ideas and values exerted influence over world politics during the early part of the twentieth century is a claim that no historian of the discipline of IR would contest. What the ‘first great debate’ elides, however, is the way in which internationalism failed to become an ‘institutionalised idea’ (Crawford, 2006, p. 261) because it relied on sovereign states acting collectively through shared liberal principles and ideas. In this respect, the internationalism of the inter-war period was extremely ‘thin’ and vulnerable to states defecting from the agreed rules. Although as Richard Shapcott argues in his contribution to this special issue, agreed rules (in the form of international law and treaties, for example) are always vulnerable to being ignored if insufficiently embedded within the domestic institutions of states themselves.

During the inter-war period, internationalism’s other was not nationalism – as it had been for eighteenth century cosmopolitans – but isolationism. Following Woodrow Wilson’s failure to persuade Congress to accept the League of Nations Covenant, the United States continued with a strategy of



isolationism; by 1942 there had been a decisive shift in orientation as the American political establishment accepted that their security was intimately tied to the security of Europe. Isolationism and unilateralism had made way for cooperation and multilateralism, and with this shift, internationalism was installed ‘as the new orthodoxy in foreign policy thinking’ (Legro, 2000, p. 261). In this sense, liberal internationalism came of age when it became *American* internationalism.

The contours of the ‘new orthodoxy’ have been outlined in several publications by G. John Ikenberry. He agrees with Fred Halliday’s view that internationalism is compatible with the exercise of hegemony; indeed, for Ikenberry, internationalism is one element in the distinctive exercise of American hegemony in the post 1945 period. The institutional features of United States hegemony include the following: first, that the hegemon operates within the agreed system of rules; second, the hegemon agrees to provide ‘system services’ in view of its preponderant power; third, voice opportunities are granted to other members of the system by their participation in alliances and international institutions.

The system of rules and bargains that evolved after 1945 were undone, Ikenberry argues, by the Bush administrations. In his words, ‘its vision of unipolar security’ shifted American foreign policy ‘away from liberal internationalism ...’ (2011, p. 264). Particular targets for the administration were multilateral rules and treaties – in fact, global governance *per se* – as they associated these with America’s declining power and prestige. John Bolton (2003) expressed this anti-internationalist exceptionalism in the following terms: ‘[o]ur actions, taken consistently with Constitutional principles, require no separate, external validation to make them legitimate’. For Ikenberry, such claims amount to an imperial grand strategy rather than the exercise of liberal hegemony – a strategy that was ultimately unsustainable because it encouraged others to treat international rules with disdain as well as more generally sowing the seeds of discord rather than collaboration.

Ikenberry’s account of the rolling back of liberal internationalist commitments by the Bush administrations risks overstating the extent of America’s support for an open rules-based order before the rise of neo-conservatism. Let us consider two aspects of longstanding American indifference to global norms. First, humanitarian protection: despite being a signatory to the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, successive United States governments have failed to take risks to prevent or contain genocidal slaughter (Power, 2007). Second, global justice: officials in Washington DC have consistently sought to advance liberal modes of democratic governance while denying that they have a responsibility to provide real development assistance for the ‘bottom billion’ (Collier, 2007). The ‘liberal ascendancy’ that Ikenberry and other institutional liberals allude to is unlikely to be sustainable while such pathologies of the liberal order are allowed to persist.



What of the challenge of liberal order-building today? From the vantage point of the second decade of the twenty-first century, the confidence in liberal internationalism has ebbed and the liberalism project is now in question in international theory and in practice. Recurring disagreements over the design and purpose of the multilateral institutions put in place to provide governance over security, trade and finance have demonstrated that cooperation is harder to achieve and to sustain than generations of liberals had anticipated. The ongoing violence in relation to the so-called global war on terrorism, the uneven record of post-Cold War liberal foreign policies in delivering a more secure and just world order and the global financial crisis have contributed to a sense of despondency among many states and peoples.

Humanitarianism provides an alternative architecture for liberal internationalists seeking to manage a complex but increasingly interdependent international arena. These include, but are not limited to, the challenges of delivering universal rights while preserving cultural difference, the circumstances of the use of force to protect suffering others, the extent to which concerns with order are prioritised over concerns with justice and the challenges of mediating between the concerns of domestic populations and those of (vulnerable) outsiders. These are the big questions that confront practitioners in the international public sphere – whether state actors, international organisations or humanitarian NGOs – as Jacinta O’Hagan’s contribution to this special issue reminds us. And it is here we find some resources of hope for liberal internationalism, in the willingness to ask and attempt to find answers to these questions, to relate normative and practical research, and to operate in the space between oppositional moral discourses that oscillate between a communitarianism that is increasingly at odds with the realities of global politics and a sweeping cosmopolitanism that risks wishing away those realities.

## Conclusion

It has often been remarked, perhaps unfairly, that the study of IR borrows incessantly from other fields but contributes little itself. Internationalism is a doctrine that is central to the study of IR while also being part of the repertoire of everyday language, describing events that have relevance to politics beyond domestic orders. This special issue is designed to breathe new theoretical and empirical life into an idea that is as old as the state system itself. In so doing, we hope not only to stimulate further debate within IR but also to contribute to wider discussions in the human sciences about how governments and other actors further moral purposes beyond the horizon of their self-interest.

Despite the dangers and pitfalls of liberal internationalism, the myriad dilemmas confronting its application, and the perception of a crisis of the



project related to the pathologies of internationalism(s) in the post-9/11 era, we find significant theoretical and normative promise in an ongoing and critical engagement with the politics of liberal internationalism. As this essay has shown, liberal internationalism has a long history; a history in which heroic struggles for universal human rights stand side by side with self-interested interventions designed to embolden the status of colonial great powers.

An avenue of particular normative promise, on which to close, is the call for a renewal of liberal internationalism that takes social and economic exclusion more seriously. Recognition that the current order is in a state of chronic crisis might hold with it the possibility of systemic change. We should not expect that change to be driven by a new concert of rising powers, picking up where the transatlantic hegemony left off. Instead, we should look to a humanitarian internationalism in which greater 'voice opportunities' exist for those previously silenced and where institutions are measured in terms of how far they advance global justice. This might seem hopelessly utopian, until we remember that the liberal internationalism of the last 60 years overcame fascism and communism and contributed to the ending of formal colonial rule.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the contribution of a number of scholars to the workshop, and as commentators and reviewers; these include Robyn Eckersley (a co-applicant to the ASSA), Richard Beardsworth, Roland Bleiker, Garrett Brown, Chris Browning, Richard Devetak, Ghassan Hage, Ian Hall, Marianne Hanson, Jack Holland, Ian Hunter, Katie Linnane, Iver Neumann, Phil Orchard, Jason Sharman, Heloise Weber, Martin Weber and Colin Wight. The editors would also like to thank Stephanie Ganeson for her support during the planning of the workshop, and Jocelyn Vaughn for providing valuable editorial assistance during the publication phase. Tim would like it to be noted that his chapter draws on research conducted as part of the activities of the Asia Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (AP R2P), funded through AusAID Agreement 63684. Lastly, the editor and managing editor of *International Politics* – Michael Cox and Fiona Stephen – have been a constant source of advice and support throughout the planning and submission of this Special Issue on the politics of liberal internationalism.

## About the Authors

Tim Dunne is Professor of International Relations in the School of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Queensland, where he



is also Research Director of the Asia Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. He recently co-wrote the book *Terror in our Time* with Ken Booth (Routledge, 2012). New editions of his two co-edited Oxford University Press books were both published in 2012 – *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases* (2nd edition); *International Relations Theories* (3rd edition).

Matt McDonald is Senior Lecturer in International Relations in the School of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Queensland. He is the author of *Security, the Environment and International Relations* (Routledge, 2012), and co-author of a forthcoming book with Anthony Burke and Katrina Lee-Koo, *Ethics and Global Security* (Routledge, 2013).

## Notes

- 1 According to Polity IV, 2011 Report.
- 2 See for example the *Princeton Project*, 2006, which concludes that the liberal order ‘is broken and needs to be fixed’. See <http://www.princeton.edu/~ppns/>.
- 3 The journals we selected as being indicative of mainstream thinking on IR were: *International Security*, *International Organization*, *Foreign Affairs*, *International Affairs (UK)*, *Review of International Studies*, *European Journal of International Relations*.
- 4 For an exception, see Legro (2000). Although significantly, internationalism here is understood in broad terms as a willingness to engage actively with an international society, rather than in terms of the specific content of such engagement.
- 5 Definitions of (liberal) internationalism are in short supply in the literature. Many articles in well-placed journals do not provide a definition at all (Hurd, 2005; Kupchan and Trubowitz, 2007, 2010).
- 6 Halliday refers to internationalism as a ‘cluster-concept’ – implying that it is not amenable to a straightforward analytical definition. See Halliday (2009, p. 47, note 8). In this article, Halliday provides probably the best definition of internationalism: ‘By “internationalism” I mean a loose set of ideas ... which have nonetheless formed much thinking on international matters these two or three centuries past, and which are much in evidence in the world of today; a set of ideas founded on a belief that the world is becoming more and more integrated and united, a belief that this objective process is accompanied by a growing sense of international belonging, identity, responsibility, even citizenship – and, most important, that these two processes, and their interaction, are broadly speaking to be desired, “a good thing”’ (2009, p. 47).
- 7 Even David Long, an advocate of liberal international theory rather than a critic, argues that R2P ‘replicates many of the liberal and paternalist themes’ of those like Hobson who promoted and defended the League of Nations policy of trusteeship (2005, p. 89).
- 8 Ikenberry defines a liberal international order as one ‘that is open and loosely rules-based. Openness is manifest when states trade and exchange on the basis of mutual gain. Rules and institutions operate as mechanisms of governance – and they are at least partially autonomous from the exercise of state power. [...] As such, liberal international order can be contrasted with closed and non-rule-based relations – whether geopolitical blocs, exclusive regional spheres, or closed imperial systems’ (2011, p. 18).



## References

- Ashley, R. (1981) Political realism and human interests. *International Studies Quarterly* 25(2): 204–236.
- Blair, T. (1999) Doctrine on the international community. Speech delivered in Chicago on 22 April, [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/international/jan-june99/blair\\_doctrine4-23.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/international/jan-june99/blair_doctrine4-23.html), accessed 24 May 2012.
- Bolton, J.R. (2003) 'Legitimacy' in international affairs: The American perspective in theory and operation. Remarks by the Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security to the Federalist Society. Washington DC, 13 November. <http://2001-2009.state.gov/t/us/rm/26143.htm>, accessed 24 May 2012.
- Booth, K. (1991) Security and emancipation. *Review of International Studies* 17(4): 313–326.
- Bull, H. (1973) *Options for Australia*, Australian Institute of Political Science, Proceedings of the 39th Summer School, Foreign Policy for Australia: Choices for the Seventies. Sydney: Angus and Robertson.
- Bull, H. (1984) Justice in international relations: The 1983 Hagey lectures. In: K. Anderson and A. Hurrell (eds.) *Hedley Bull on International Society*. Houndmills, Basingstoke and New York: Macmillan Press Ltd. and St. Martin's Press Inc.
- Chandler, D. (2010) The uncritical critique of 'liberal peace'. *Review of International Studies* 36: 137–155.
- Clark, I. and Reus-Smit, C. (2013) Liberal internationalism, the practice of special responsibilities, and evolving politics of the security council. *International Politics* 50(1): 38–56.
- Collier, P. (2007) *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries are Failing and What Can Be Done About It*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Crawford, N.C. (2006) How previous ideas affect later ideas. In: C. Tilly and R.E. Goodin (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Dunne, T. and Wheeler, N.J. (eds.) (1998) *Human Rights in Global Politics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Hall, M. and Hobson, J. (2010) Liberal international theory: Eurocentric but not always imperialist? *International Theory* 2(2): 210–245.
- Halliday, F. (1988) Three concepts of internationalism. *International Affairs* 64(2): 187–198.
- Halliday, F. (2009) International relations in a post-hegemonic age. *International Affairs* 85(1): 37–51.
- Hoffman, M. (1987) Critical theory and the inter-paradigm debate. *Millennium* 16(2): 231–250.
- Holbraad, C. (2003) *Internationalism and Nationalism in European Political Thought*. London: Palgrave.
- Hurd, I. (2005) The strategic use of liberal internationalism: Libya and the UN sanctions, 1992–2003. *International Organization* 59(3): 495–526.
- Ikenberry, G.J. (2011) *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the Liberal World Order*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Iriye, A. (2005) Beyond imperialism: The new internationalism. *Daedalus* 134(2): 108–116.
- Ishay, M. (1995) *Internationalism and its Betrayal*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Jackson, R.H. (2000) *The Global Covenant: Human Conduct in a World of States*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Jahn, B. (2009) Liberal internationalism: From ideology to empirical theory – And back again. *International Theory* 1(3): 409–438.
- Keal, P.(ed.) (1992) *Ethics and Foreign Policy*. St. Leonards, NSW, Australia: Allen & Unwin.
- Koivisto, M. and Dunne, T. (2010) Liberal order building and world order conventions. *Millennium* 38(3): 615–640.
- Krauthammer, C. (2008) History will judge. *Washington Post*, 19 September, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/09/18/AR2008091803049.html>, accessed 24 May 2012.



- Kupchan, C.A. and Trubowitz, P.L. (2007) Dead center: The demise of liberal internationalism in the United States. *International Security* 32(2): 7–44.
- Kupchan, C.A. and Trubowitz, P.L. (2010) The illusion of liberal internationalism's revival. *International Security* 35(1): 95–109.
- Lawler, P. (2005) The Good State: In praise of 'classical' internationalism. *Review of International Studies* 31(3): 427–449.
- Lawler, P. (2013) The 'Good State' debate in international relations. *International Politics* 50(1): 18–37.
- Legro, J. (2000) Whence American internationalism? *International Organization* 54(2): 253–289.
- Linklater, A. (1990) *Beyond Realism and Marxism: Critical Theory and International Relations*. Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan.
- Long, D. (2005) Paternalism and the internationalization of imperialism in the discipline of international relations. In: D. Long and B.C. Schmidt (eds.) *Imperialism and Internationalism in the Discipline of International Relations*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, pp. 71–92.
- Long, D. and Schmidt, B.C. (eds.) (2005) *Imperialism And Internationalism in the Discipline of International Relations*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Mazower, M. (2006) An international civilisation? Empire, internationalism and the crisis of the mid-twentieth century. *International Affairs* 82(3): 553–566.
- Mazower, M. (2008) Paved intentions: Civilization and imperialism. *World Affairs Journal*. <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/paved-intentions-civilization-and-imperialism>, accessed 24 May 2012.
- Mazower, M. (2009) *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- McDonald, M. (2013) Foreign policy internationalism and political possibility. *International Politics* 50(1): 97–117.
- Mearsheimer, J.J. (2001) *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- O'Hagan, C. (2013) 'With the best will in the world ...?': Humanitarianism, non-state actors and the pursuit of purposes beyond ourselves. *International Politics* 50(1): 118–137.
- Power, S. (2007) *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*, 2nd edn. London: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Reus-Smit, C. (2001) The strange death of lib international theory. *European Journal of International Law* 12(3): 573–593.
- Rieff, D. (1999) A new age of liberal imperialism? *World Policy Journal* 16(2): 1–10.
- Simms, B. and Trim, D.J.B. (eds.) (2011) *Humanitarian Intervention: A History*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Smith, K.E. and Light, M. (eds.) (2001) *Ethics and Foreign Policy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Suganami, H. (1989) *The Domestic Analogy and World Order Proposals*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Vincent, R.J. (1986) *Human Rights and International Relations*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Wheeler, N.J. (2000) *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Wolfers, A. (1962) *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press.