

Is liberalism a force for peace in the world?

Written by Holly Catling

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HOLLY CATLING, AUG 5 2011

The democratic peace debates show that while the democratic peace theory is attractive, it does not necessarily explain the 'zone of peace' (Doyle; 1983, p.30). This is because of a variety of factors; among others the central assumption made by the theory that liberal democracy is the final stage in the evolution of government and that it is a stable, ahistorical construct. I will show in this essay that liberal democracy is not the universally applicable governance model that the democratic peace theory has led to it be perceived as. Furthermore, because of the legitimacy given to liberal democracy by the democratic peace theory liberalism, in this form, becomes a source of coercion and violence. In doing this I will look at the democratic peace debates and their interaction with International Relations theory, as well as some of the critical work on the postcolonial implications of liberalism as a force for world peace.

The democratic peace theory, based on the 'Kantian' (Kacowicz; 1998, p.41) three part hypothesis, relies on the externalisation of liberal norms in the international relations of countries governed through a liberal democratic framework as an essential component of its causal logic (Rosato; 2003, p.586). In so doing it conflates the terms 'liberal' and 'democratic'. In simple terms, a democracy is concerned with the representation of the individual (Hobson; 2009, p.640) through an electoral system enabling their participation in the formation of the state (Barkawi and Laffey; 1999, p.412). Liberalism seeks to protect the rights of the 'atomistic' (Hobson; 2009, p.640) individual, such as property rights (Doyle; 1983, p.4). The tension between these positions is being borne out in the modern world in a tendency for liberal democracies to be less democratic than they are perceived to be and by their movement towards constitutional liberalism (Mair; 2006, p.29) whereby democracy is used as a label to legitimise elite rule. In this reading liberal democracy is more about the rights of the individual, as guarded by an elite, than about these individual's right to elect their government and thus direct policy.

However, the tendency of elected officials to act without the explicit approval of their electorate (the public constraint mechanism) is noted in Rosato's critique of the democratic peace theory (2005, p.595) and demonstrates the conflict between democracy and liberalism. His systematic deconstruction and falsification of the theory is convincing, although some academics have defended it, stating that Rosato fails to challenge the central logic and that the empirical examples he uses are of regimes that are not democratic enough to be relevant to the discussion of the democratic peace theory (Kinsella; 2005, p.455). Slantchev *et al* criticise Rosato's use of a probabilistic theory in deterministic terms (2005; p.460). Doyle counters Rosato's use of Cold War examples of US intervention as a way to disprove the theory by stating that these operations were covert and as such lacked one of mechanisms essential to the democratic peace theory (Doyle; 2005, p.465). Rosato provides convincing rebuttals to all of these counter-arguments and indeed welcomes them as his intention was 'to spark a debate' (2005, p.472) by showing that the democratic peace theory is not necessarily the answer behind the 'zone of peace'.

The democratic peace remains 'an empirical finding in search of an explanation' (Rosato; 2005, p.471) and the counter-arguments in defence of it sometimes fail to be convincing. Slantchev *et al* manage to neatly undermine all historical and possibly theoretical endeavours in their defence of the theory: 'any reasonably competent student of history can interpret a given case in various ways to support contradictory hypotheses' (2005, p.462). In an attempt to defend one theory they seem to be suggesting that any theory can be proven or disproven because it depends entirely on how the examples are manipulated. This delegitimizes their position as effectively as it does Rosato's (Rosato; 2005, p.469). Whether or not the democratic peace theory is widely applicable it is interesting to note that

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Rosato ends his 2003 critique by questioning the use of democratic peace theory in US international relations and whether or not it is useful in this context (p.600). What he shows by doing this is how the interests of the US and her allies are prioritised by International Relations and then legitimised through application of the democratic peace theory. This is possible because of the way liberal democracy has been idealised in International Relations.

Liberal democracy has been exported into, or onto, non-democratic states (Barkawi and Laffey; 1999, p.421. Hobson; 2009, p.654) because of the way democracy has been presented as the most legitimate or civilised form of the state (Fukuyama; 1989, p.106), and the ultimate, universal goal of modern society (Hobson; 2009, pp.633-34). However, liberal democracy is a product of its historical and social context, combining two philosophies that used to be thought incompatible (Barkawi and Laffey; 1999, pp.408-9). Current thinking does not tend to take notice of this though, and the acceptance of liberal democracy as an ahistorical constant by democratic peace theory, which has sent academic research down the wrong path (Barkawi and Laffey, 1999, p.600), has obscured other possible causes (Kacowicz, 1998, p.41) behind Doyle's 'zone of peace'. Even Doyle writes that 'Liberalism is not inherently "peace loving"; nor is it consistently restrained or peaceful in intent' (Doyle; 1983, p.4). Despite this it is assumed that liberal democracy is suitable in any context, no matter what the evidence to the contrary is (Darby; 2006, p.58). Darby and others, for example, note the role of caste and communal violence as a challenge to democracy in India (Darby, p.58). Liberal democracy joins other 'western' ideologies that tend to be applied as universal constants, such as human rights (Held; 2009, p.537).[1] This universalising tendency has led policy makers to pursue courses of action based on potentially flawed theory (Rosato, 2003, p.600).

Liberalism has as a result been used as an excuse for coercive force throughout modern history (Barkawi and Laffey; 1999, pp.416-421) rather than a force for peace. Barkawi and Laffey point to the use of 'client' forces by imperial colonial powers to maintain their rule and the US during the Cold War to maintain support 'projects of informal empire' (1999, p.414). Since the end of the Cold War and the failure of the alternative to liberal democracy (Hobson; 2009, p.632) western powers have used the rhetoric of freeing people under illiberal regimes to enable them to join the global order of democracies precisely because this will, according to the democratic peace theory, end all war: 'Peace was therefore fundamentally a question of the establishment of democratic institutions across the world' (Howard; 1978, p.31). Despite the numerous setbacks on this path, democratic peace theory has clung to Kant's prediction that liberal democracy would proliferate and result in world peace (Doyle; 1983, p.54). George W Bush's speeches on freedom in the Middle East are an example of this (Hobson; 2009, p.643) and more recently Bush has stated in his memoirs that 'There are things we got wrong in Iraq, but the cause is eternally right.'[2] If the spread of liberal democracy would guarantee the birth of a new international order of peace, then the temptation is to excuse any method in bringing this about.

Indeed Huntington provides an exhaustive list of the casualties of the violence associated with the creation of various emerging democracies and states that in relative terms 'the cost in human lives of the third wave was extraordinarily low' (Huntington; 1993, p.195). To say that in comparison to 'communal conflicts, civil wars, and international wars' (Huntington; 1993 p.195) this is not that bad feels inappropriate. Huntington seems to realise this as he scrambles to say that it was 'obviously, tragic that these people were killed' (p.195). It seems that in relative terms the cost of democratisation will always be presented as the lesser of two evils. As long as liberal democracy is seen to be a force for global peace and therefore worth any price, violence will be excused by the international community if it is seen to be bringing a country closer to liberal democracy: 'instead of assuming that liberalism is a force for peace, analysis must attend to the ways in which it promotes the use of force' (Barkawi and Laffey; 1999, p.423). This defence of democracy at any cost is reminiscent of Slantchev *et al's* defence of a theory with only 10% accuracy (2005, p.460). An idealistic belief in the democratic peace theory seems to be in operation without necessarily being supported by a convincing causal logic and exceptions are all too easily explained away (Rosato; 2003, p.598).

This idealistic defence has meant that the force inherent in democratic expansion is ignored because of the assumption that any other route would be more violent. This is in part a result of the conflation of the ideas of 'freedom' and 'peace'. For democratic peace theory a war is defined as interstate action resulting in 1000 military deaths (Barkawi and Laffey; 1999, p.405). This narrow definition means that peace is therefore simply the absence of state actions that result in 1000 military deaths. However, if peace is, more reasonably, defined as the security of

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the individual to exist free from threat (Smith; 2004, p. 508),[3] then the democratic peace theory's definition falls short. The Global Peace Index ranks global states in terms of their peacefulness and it uses peace indicators beyond the narrow definition used by the democratic peace theory, such as political instability and jailed population. In 2010 it ranked the US as 85 out of the 149 states it lists.[4] The Freedom in the World survey 2010 ranked the US as 'free' (it's 'freest' ranking).[5] This survey bases its methodology on liberalist ideology and 'operates from the assumption that freedom for all peoples is best achieved in liberal democratic societies'[6], meaning it should be relevant to the application of the democratic peace theory. However, the ways in which these indexes do not match show that the assumption that freedom equates to peace is not necessarily valid and it depends on the definition of 'peace'. Liberal states may not go to 'war' in terms of the democratic peace theory, but they do not necessarily experience peace instead.

The US project of the 'production of liberal spaces' has relied on coercion and violence (Barkawi and Laffey; 1999, p. 418). This has actually decreased the security of America, which was precisely the opposite of what it was, apparently, designed to achieve (Barkawi and Laffey; 1999, p.417). The ends justifying the means can be a self defeating ideology; means ultimately may produce unforeseen ends. For example the threat of terror attacks in western democracies justified as a reaction to US foreign policy by groups such as Al Qaida.[7] US foreign policy is informed by the democratic peace theory (Rosato; 2003, p.600).

This effect could be seen as evidence of the complicity of International Relations as 'a handmaiden to Western power and interest' (Smith; 2004, p.513) and Smith contends that the discipline of International Relations bears responsibility for the events of 9/11 because it constructed a world view that has prioritised western models of statehood and interests (2004, p.507). He focuses especially on the idea prevalent in International Relations theory that the whole world is progressing toward the same goal (2004, p.505), meaning that any deviation from this can legitimately be dismissed (Darby; 2006, p.57) as irrelevant on this path. Owen (1994, p.116) draws attention to the centrality of democratisation in US foreign policy in the post Cold War era (Clinton called it 'the 'third pillar' of his foreign policy'). Barkawi and Laffey state that US foreign policy has often sought to maintain order rather than support or encourage indigenous democratic movements (1999, p.418). These points together describe a US policy of furthering US interest through a process of democratisation, which is legitimised by the theoretical backing of the democratic peace theory.

However, this may be over stating the importance of academic theoretical debate in the realms of policy making (Smith; 2000, p. 379). Rosato's statement that 'democrats know that war involvement has little if any effect on their chances of retaining power' (2005; p.470) shows the belief of all participants in the democratic peace debates: political actors know about and are guided by the principles that academics see to be at work in international relations. It seems, however, that policy makers use whatever theory suits their project goals; Doyle's conception of the 'zone of peace' is at work in US foreign policy (Layne; 1994, p.46. Barkawi and Laffey; 1999, pp.422-3) but the debate around the theory is not.

Another example is Slantchev *et al's* (2005, p. 461) idealistic theory about the intentions of political actors, 'few leaders would deliberately begin wars that they expect to be costly and long'. The 2003 Iraq war has been seen as both.[8] If there was an attractive outcome to be gained from a long and costly war then a leader would find a way of convincing the electorate that entering into a state of war was the best option. As Rosato (2003, p.599) suggests election in a democracy requires the shaping of public opinion, and that therefore democratic government officials should be 'especially adept' at this. Tony Blair's Labour government went to war in 2003 in the face of widespread public protest. Despite this, Blair's government was re-elected in 2005.[9]

Labour and Tony Blair were not punished for entering a war even though their electorate had not wholeheartedly supported it;[10] as Rosato (2005; p. 471) notes 'Democratic leaders do not appear to be especially accountable to peace-loving publics'. As the US has taken on the role of world policeman (Layne; 1994, p.47)[11] a war that is in its best interests is likely to go ahead, in spite of the pressure against it from international norms, public and political opinion and a lack of UN approval for the war (Shannon, Keller; 2005, p.1). Indeed this has been called an 'elective war, not one of necessity' (Shannon, Keller; 2005, p.4). This war could be seen as evidence of the US liberal expansionist project at work and a situation where the desire among US elites to export democracy and create a

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wider liberal space has led to a long running, expensive war rather than the hoped for widening of the 'zone of peace'.

Instead of attempting to use theory to legitimise, and even recommend, the construction of a new world order, as seems to have been the case with democratic peace theory, it should be used to describe and potentially understand international relations. The idealistic, liberal interest in wanting the democratic peace theory to be correct rather than showing it to be has retarded academic debate and development in this field. The democratic peace theory supports, obscures and excuses the coercion and violence of a liberal expansion policy through its reliance on narrow definitions. The use and construction of the democratic peace theory has mainly been about preserving the peace and dominance of western powers under the guise of spreading liberty and equality. In certain contexts liberalism may be a force for peace, but to use these examples as an excuse to import liberal democratic structures into disparate contexts seems at once arrogant and misguided.

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[1] His argument for cosmopolitanism relies on the universality of concepts such as human rights across all cultural boundaries in the search for 'world citizenship' (p.542).

[2] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/nov/08/bush-memoir-iraq-war> accessed 08/Nov/10.

[3] Taking the UNDP idea of human security 'freedom from fear and freedom from want' as a basis for the idea of peace.

[4] <http://www.visionofhumanity.org/gpi-data/#/2010/scor> accessed on 9/Nov/2010

[5] <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=363&year=2010> accessed 9/Nov/10

[6] http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/fiw10/FIW_2010_Methodology_Summary.pdf accessed 9/Nov/10

[7] http://www.pbs.org/newshour/terrorism/international/fatwa_1996.html accessed on 10/Nov/10. See also Scheuer (2004, p.164) Al Qaida is more of a danger to theUS now than it was in 2001.

[8] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-11107739> 'Whitehall figures released in June 2010 put the cost of British funding of theIraq conflict at £9.24bn'. TheUK involvement in the war lasted for 7 years. Accessed 15/11/10.

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[9] http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/country_profiles/1038820.stm. The war was not the only factor at work in this election, but the regime was not 'punished' for entering a war in this instance, despite widespread resistance in the electorate democracy did not remove the regime responsible for an unpopular war. This undermines the diplomatic peace theory's use of the group constraint mechanism (Rosato; 2003; p.596).

[10] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/2765041.stm> details of the protests: 'Police said it was the UK's biggest ever demonstration'. Accessed 13/11/10. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/8247704.stm> "'Most against"UK troops inIraq. Six out of 10 people thinkUK troops should not have gone toIraq, a survey for theNationalArmyMuseum has found'. Accessed 15/11/10.

[11] In footnote 146 he attributes a sense of being 'the sole remaining superpower' to the Clinton and Bush administrations.

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