Liberal Institutionalism: An Alternative IR Theory or Just Maintaining the Status Quo?

The emergence of liberal internationalism and institutionalism as an alternative to realism in International Relations (IR) theory has led to heated debate since the 1970's about the validity of liberal institutionalism as a real alternative to realism. Liberal institutionalism argues that emphasis should be placed on global governance and international organizations as a way of explaining international relations. Institutionalism places emphasis on the role that common goals play in the international system and the ability of international organizations to get states to cooperate. Institutionalism therefore rejects the realist assumption that international politics is a struggle for power in which military security issues are top priority and argues that instead we can 'imagine a world in which actors other then states participate directly in world politics, in which a clear hierarchy of issues does not exist, and in which force is an ineffective instrument of policy.'[1]

As the main analytical competitor to realism in IR theory, Institutionalism has been met with much criticism with critics such as Stanley Hoffman stating that 'international affairs have been the nemesis of Liberalism.'[2] Furthermore the inability of the United Nations and the World Bank to address issues such as nuclear proliferation, poverty reduction and environmental issues effectively suggests that internationalist theory is failing in practice. That said the development of globalization and technological advances has led to greater interconnectedness and the internationalist theory has also developed and led to greater analysis of international relations through concepts such as collective security and critical theory. Internationalism therefore remains an important alternative to the realist approach to international affairs. In order to understand the impact of internationalism on IR theory and its criticisms we must first look at its definition and how it differs from realist perspectives.

INTERNATIONALISM AND INSTITUTIONALISM: A CHALLENGE TO REALIST THINKING

Internationalism and institutionalism have developed as key concepts in the Liberal school of international relations theory and had by the second half of the of the 20th century become the dominant challenge to realist analysis of world affairs.[3]

Internationalism places emphasis on the role that international organizations and international society play in world affairs. International society exists when according to Hedley Bull 'a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions.'[4] This international society is based on the idea of cooperation between states for common goals and interests. Liberal institutionalism argues that in order for there to be peace in international affairs states must cooperate together and in effect yield some of their sovereignty to create 'integrated communities' to promote economic growth and respond to regional and international security issues.[5]

Liberal institutionalism focuses on the idea of complex interdependence as first argued by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye in the 1970's placing emphasis on four characteristics which differentiate institutionalism from realism these include: multiple channels which allow for interaction among actors across national borders and which increases the interaction and links between actors and non-state actors; attention is given equally to all issues, that is

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there is no distinction between high and low politics unlike realism in which the emphasis is placed on security issues and the decline of military force as a means by which policy is determined.[6]

Furthermore within a liberal institutionalist model states seek to maximize absolute gains through cooperation, states are therefore less concerned about the advantages achieved by other states in cooperative arrangements. The greatest obstacle to cooperation in world affairs is non-compliance or cheating by states. By focusing on International organizations such as the United Nations, the European Union and the World Bank, liberal institutionalism argues for greater emphasis on soft power and cooperation through 'the forms and procedures of international law, the machinery of diplomacy and general international organization.'[7] This focus on international organizations and international regimes that are based on rules, norms and principles that help govern the interaction of state and non-state actors on issues such as human rights are what makes the institutionalism argument so compelling as it allows for non-state actors and those that would be marginalized by the modernist project to be brought back into world affairs.

Regimes and institutions place emphasis on the use of multilateralism and cooperation as a means of gaining interests for states. International regimes such as principles, norms, rules and procedures all contain what David Keohane sees as injunctions about behavior: ' they imply obligations, even though these obligations are not enforceable through a hierarchical legal system.'[8]

In Keohane's view international regimes should be seen within the boundaries of issue-areas and since issue-areas depend on actor's perceptions and behavior, 'their boundaries change gradually over time.'[9] It is this, liberal institutionalists say that differentiates their theory from realism as institutions can develop rules and norms that promote environmental sustainability, human rights and economic development.

More radical institutionalists have placed greater importance on the role of multilateralism and cooperation focusing on global governance and the effects that globalization has had on the theory. Institutionalists like Graham Allison argue that the rise in globalization and concerns over terrorism, drug trafficking and pandemics such as HIV/AIDS has shown that states can no longer react unilaterally to these threats and that it is only through regional and global regimes that policy responses can be coordinated to deal with new security threats.[10] The development of the European Union is another example of how states have formed a regional community to deal with policy issues and also raises questions about whether sovereignty is indeed sacrosanct. The European Union it can be argued has created a set of rules permitting states to collectively 'achieve outcomes unavailable to them individually.'[11]

Whilst the development and growth of the European Union raises questions about state sovereignty and the legitimacy of states claims on unilateral action in dealing with world problems, liberal institutionalism as a theory remains within the paradigms of a rationalistic and modernist system. Liberal institutionalism still recognizes that states are the key actors in international relations and that states seek to maximize absolute gains through cooperation.

This idea of absolute gains in cooperation between states has led to common criticism of institutionalism as it focuses much of its time on issue areas in which states have mutual interests such as the liberal economic system rather then cooperation on military or security issues.[12] Criticisms such as these are not without merit and it is these issues that we shall turn to next.

LIBERAL INSTITUTIONALISM: A REAL ALTERNATIVE?

As mentioned above liberal institutionalism still places emphasis on the role that states play in international relations and there has been considerable debate about whether liberal institutionalism is really an alternative to realism in IR theory, with compelling arguments to suggest that it is not.

Liberal institutionalism, like realism, acknowledges that the international system is anarchic and places emphasis on the fact that sovereignty is still sacrosanct. During the 1980's and 1990's there was great debate between realists and liberal institutionalists about whether liberal institutionalism was really an alternative to realism with critiques by

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Stanley Hoffman and Joseph Grieco pointing out that international organizations such as the United Nations during the Cold War were paralyzed by US-Soviet veto's and the financial needs of liberal states to deal with security issues led to 'meager resources for the development of poorer states.'[13]

Hoffman goes on to argue that Liberal institutionalism did not rely on global institutions of cooperation but relied on NATO and hegemons such as the United States during this time. Criticisms such as Hoffman's and Grieco's point to the fact that in a post Cold War climate of disintegrating states cooperation between states in a liberal system would be largely ineffective.

That said whilst Hoffman and Grieco are right to criticize liberal institutionalism and the ineffectiveness of the United Nations, many liberal instituionalists would argue this is a fallacy, as since the end of the Cold War, states have been dealing with security issues such as nuclear non-proliferation, civil war and the threat of terrorism through international organizations such as the United Nations. The Clinton Administration's emphasis on multilateralism and the United Nations during the 1990's to deal with conflicts in Somalia and Yugoslavia is an example of this shift in the belief that security issues could be dealt with unilaterally.

On the other hand both realists and liberal institutionalists neglect the impact that domestic forces and policies have in promoting a more cooperative strategy to deal with moral and ethical issues. Helen Milner in her book *Interests, Institutions and Information* highlights the impact that domestic policies can have on international cooperation stating:

'If the political actors making this choice are politicians who might be (re) elected to office then their reasons for seeking cooperation with other nations can be related to electoral concerns.'[14]

Domestic interests have had a major impact on cooperation in International Relations, public reactions to the deaths of US soldiers in Somalia led to the Clinton administration pulling out of a peacekeeping mission to the war torn country whilst public demand for action on Climate Change has led to member states such as Australia to sign up to the Kyoto Protocol. [15]

This reflects the fact that domestic issues and policies have a major influence on how states cooperate with other states on an international stage. If a state was to go into agreement with another on trade relations, but that state had a bad record on human rights, the government might reconsider doing a deal if its constituents elected them on the basis of a strong human rights stance. This reflects the need for greater development of the liberal institutionalists argument in terms of domestic influences on decision making at an international level.

Whilst Liberal institutionalists have acknowledged the influence non-state actors in world affairs such as transnational organizations and non-governmental organizations play, they have failed to recognize the role that global political advocacy networks have had in international relations. Advocacy work on human rights, the environment and poverty has had major effects on the way states are viewed and global movements have challenged the notion that sovereignty is sacrosanct. Technological advances and telecommunication networks have allowed for swifter mobilization and organization of groups that can lobby governments and organizations about issues such as human rights and questioned the liberal institutionalists argument that states remain the key actors in world affairs. As R.B.J Walker has stated:

'Critical social movements everywhere will continue to participate in struggles to make the exercise of state power less pernicious'[16]

Social movements challenge realist and liberal institutionalist ideas about what it means to know and 'be in the world.'[17] It is a way of bringing together people from all over the world and bringing those who are marginalized in the modernist system back into the picture. Social movements challenge the very institutions, structures and governments that explain in realist and liberal institutionalist terms how international relations and world affairs is conducted.

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As Innis Claude points out attempts at global governance and liberal institutionalism have failed in the past, as the League of Nations 'collapsed ignominiously, and the United Nations has assuredly not given grounds for confidence it can save the world.'[18] Whilst it can be argued that the United Nations has done little to save the world and merely acts as a means by which members of the Security Council can expand their power over other nation states, the fact remains that the UN is itself a contradiction, with its charter declaring that all states must respect each others sovereignty whilst at the same time engaging in peacekeeping operations that violate such an agreement. The Charter contains an 'inherent tension' between the non-intervention principles of state sovereignty and the principles of human rights which can require intervention.[19]

Additionally the World Trade Organization has been criticized as an undemocratic organization that represents the interests of global corporations as it has consistently ruled against governments that pass legislation that impedes the free flow of goods, services and capital. Liberal institutionalists clash on the role that free markets play in international relations with some arguing that there should be minimal government interference in the global market, whilst others support institutions and regimes that manage the economic processes of globalization to prevent the widening of the gap between the rich and the poor.[20]

The failure of the free trade market to close the poverty gap and the current global economic crisis suggest that the formers views are mistaken. Whilst liberal institutionalism in recent years has made a shift towards a more realist stance there are forms of the theory that should still be explored and encouraged.

CONCLUSION

Institutionalism's focus on international organizations and international regimes is incredibly important in the study of international relations and can make a significant contribution to IR theory in the future. The development of norms and principles such as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and humanitarian intervention question the validity and sanctity of state sovereignty whilst advocacy networks and domestic politics have a major impact on how states act on the world stage. [21] These developments suggest that the role international organizations play in international relations is changing and becoming more not less significant.

The globalization of world affairs has had a major impact on international relations theory and it is this that institutionalism must adapt to. An institutional perspective, which places emphasis on the structure of international society and focuses on the importance of institutions as advocates of norms and values such as human rights and which also takes into consideration domestic politics and outside players such as global movements would go a long way in combating criticisms that it is just another theory in the rationalistic paradigm.

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