

Interwar Liberal Internationalism: Doomed to Fail?

Written by Jamie Gostlow

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JAMIE GOSTLOW, FEB 26 2014

Liberal internationalism gained prominence in the immediate years that followed World War One. It postulated that we apply 'broadly liberal political principles to the management of the international system'[1], so that 'all sides end up better off than they would be otherwise'[2]. Woodrow Wilson's proposal for a League of Nations embodied the ideals of a liberal internationalism, and encouraged cooperation from states on an international scale. Criticisms of a proposed liberal internationalism have been argued in various forms, most notably in the Realist writings of E. H. Carr and Hans Morgenthau.

Firstly, Carr arguably precipitated debate; he suggested the 'harmony of interests' has created a 'dominant voice in the community' which favours only the 'prosperous and privileged class'[3]. Morgenthau furthered this notion. He argued that, 'where the currency is power', it is the duty of each state to take 'whatever action is necessary to protect its physical, political, economic and cultural identity'[4]. Morgenthau, along with Carr, reinforced a realist notion that institutions are a reflection of the distribution of power, and are based on the 'self-interested calculations of the great powers'[5].

Secondly, the critiques presented by both men differ in their perception of morality and its relevance to international relations. For Morgenthau, international relations should be viewed outside the spheres of normative, moral and idealistic considerations. Conversely, Carr believes it is morality that allows for perspective within a dominant group, and a state 'identifies the morality which protects (their) interest with absolute and universal good'[6]. It is interesting to note the differing role morality plays in neglecting liberal internationalism as a credible reality.

Where Carr allows for aspects of morality, it has been argued that he allows for a 'utopian realism' perspective. This interpretation, put forward by Brincat, is my third point of discussion, and it allows us to examine how realism and utopianism, or idealism, can offer an interesting parallel between the two theories.

Lastly, Angell offers perhaps the most compelling argument as to why liberal internationalism is doomed to failure. That 'man is naturally so quarrelsome and unreasonable', means it is therefore, 'so important to talk reason ... to devise suitable disciplines, and create suitable institutions'. Angell's second warning in 1938 is a credible and relevant conclusion to the discussion of liberal internationalism during the interwar period.

The Realist Critique

Firstly, the appeal of liberal internationalism is weakened by the threat of a dominant and influential power in the international system. For example, British nineteenth-century statesmen were convinced that, because free trade promoted British prosperity, it also promoted the prosperity of the world as a whole[7]. In this way, Carr argues, 'international peace becomes a special vested interest of predominant Powers'[8]. This 'harmony of interests' provokes an acceptance of the status quo that singularly benefits the state which is powerful, thus ensuring 'international order' and 'international solidarity' are 'slogans of those who feel strong enough to impose them on others'[9]. When Great Britain and France endeavoured to create a new international order, a German correspondent for *The Times* described how, 'by international, we have come to understand a conception that places other nations at an advantage over our own'[10]. Similarly, Morgenthau was unconvinced by the notion of a world government due in part to the rise of Stalin's Soviet Union. He viewed the USSR 'as absolutely cynical and hence a poor partner in

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any quest for global government'[11].

Importantly, when states are able to gain influence over another state, the outcome is not always profitable. Angell argues 'it is a fallacy, an illusion, to regard a nation as increasing its wealth when it increases its territory'[12]. If Germany, for example, successfully invaded Great Britain or France, German capital would, 'because of internationalization and interdependence of modern finance ... also disappear in large part'. Similarly, when Germany annexed Schleswig-Holstein and Alsace-Lorraine, 'no ordinary German citizen was enriched by goods or property taken from the conquered territory'[13]. Yet, such evidence provides reason to suggest liberal internationalism would benefit the international system. While it may be true that mutual co-existence would be beneficial, the threat of one state gaining influence over another creates a balance of power, rather than cooperation. Indeed, the balance of power 'might deter war if status quo powers outgunned imperialist challengers' but, significantly, it can 'make war more likely because of the impossibility of assessing ... the motive, capability and resolve of other states'[14]. This is an idea rooted in the foundations of realism. States achieve defence and security through self-preservation, where, by 'claiming the right of defence by superior power', they deny it to the other; 'security for one was to be purchased at the price of the insecurity of the other'[15].

Central to Carr's critique of liberal internationalism is the belief that 'pleas for international solidarity and world union come from those dominant nations which may hope to exercise control over a unified world'[16]. France and Britain had used slogans for peace to accentuate their position in the international system, and as a result enabled Germany to turn the desire for peace to her own advantage in the inter-war period. In other words, liberal internationalism allowed for Germany to 'bolster up her own power'[17] at her convenience. The example of Germany shows how liberal internationalism during the interwar period was doomed to fail, and it was arguably the encouragement of its principles through the League of Nations that allowed for German aggression and instability in the international system.

Morality

Secondly, a paradox emerges in the realist critique of liberal internationalism. Carr subscribes to the Machiavellian maxim that 'morality is the product of power'[18]. For Carr, the supremacy within a community 'may be so overwhelming that there is, in fact, a sense in which its interests are those of the community'[19]. As a result, morality plays a fundamental role in dictating the behaviours of states and deciding whether or not cooperation under a liberal ethic is possible. Indeed, 'the morality of a dominant group is always distorted by the perspective of its own interest'[20]. States tend to 'rationalize a profitable status quo'[21], and utilise morality in order to achieve their intentions.

In contrast, Carr does not downplay the role morality can play in achieving effective liberal internationalism. Such was his 'coherent and provocative philosophy', that he believed, 'along with healthy measures of utopianism', a peaceful atomistic international system could be achieved[22]. Carr was optimistic that an emphasis on morality could improve Western democracies and liberal economics. Writing about the outbreak of the Second World War, he argued that 'the crisis cannot be explained ... by constitutional, or even in economic, terms. The fundamental issue is moral'[23]. Yet a transformation in the role morality played in international relations was always difficult. Indeed, man is 'a member of a number of collective groups struggling for power', of which the most powerful is ultimately the state[24]. Furthermore, Carr suggested that people's morality suffers when they act together in groups and, as a result, the adoption of universalist ideologies cannot translate into foreign policy[25].

Alternatively, Morgenthau is much more critical than Carr in assessing the role morality can play in international relations. Idealism, put into practice by liberal internationalism, was too far concerned with moralism, and was 'more interested in the reform of international relations than in understanding ... tasks in theory and practice'[26]. Moreover, Morgenthau argues that normative, moral and idealistic considerations cannot be used as a guide for actions in international relations. Good motives guard against deliberately bad policies, but 'they do not guarantee moral goodness and political success'[27]. Morgenthau uses the excellent comparison between a photograph and a painted portrait to illustrate how 'realism presents the theoretical construct ... which experience can never completely achieve'[28]; a photograph can show what is there but a painting goes beyond that, and creates an emotional layer of

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understanding.

This belief, that morality cannot play a role in international relations, can be seen in two examples. Neville Chamberlain's policy of appeasement was inspired by good motives, and was 'less motivated by considerations of personal power than were many other British prime ministers'. Despite this, appeasement helped to 'make the Second World War inevitable'. Winston Churchill's foreign policies, on the other hand, were 'much less universal in scope and much more narrowly directed toward personal and national power'. Yet the policies that resulted from these inferior motives were certainly superior in moral and political quality than those of his predecessor, Chamberlain[29]. In addition, Britain went to war with Germany in 1914 because Germany had violated the neutrality of Belgium. Morgenthau argues that Britain intervened because of the 'hostile intentions of the violator' rather than the 'violation of Belgium's neutrality'. In this way, 'if the violator had been another nation but Germany, Great Britain might well have refrained from interfering'[30]. Both of these examples highlight how morality in the international sphere can have differing consequences. It also weakens the argument for liberal internationalism, proclaiming that a reliance on morality produces unreliable results. States, therefore, should look to ensure their own survival rather than deliberate the practice of good ethics.

Utopian Realism

We have seen how Carr believed that, 'along with healthy measures of utopianism ... a peaceful atomistic international system could be achieved'[31]. It has been argued that Carr was a potential 'utopian realist' because of the way he 'saw the need to balance realism with utopianism for effective political thinking'[32]. Indeed, Carr was critical of the way liberal internationalists 'invested their hopes in an assumed 'harmony of interests' ... and not because of their utopian imagination of a better world'[33]. In other words, liberal internationalism gains credibility when it considers the moral strive for an improved way of living. A view to a better world ultimately transcends the power-struggle between states. Carr was much less critical of liberal internationalism than he was of two other aspects of liberalism in general; Hobbesianism, the strong international authority to law down the law, and Codenism, the advocating of non-interventionism and laissez faire[34].

Importantly, Morgenthau also 'looked forward to a world government'[35]. Bull, another Realist thinker, argued how 'Grotianism acknowledges anarchy in the international system but also recognises that states respond to international law and morals'[36]. Realism and utopianism, therefore, can offer similarities not often considered in a discussion of them both. For Brincat, 'to extol either realism or utopianism at the expense of the other would lead to an analytic imbalance'[37]. For instance, realism is 'too constrained by 'reality' to make progressive changes', while at the same time utopianism is too 'idealistic ... to bring about desired changes in reality'[38].

Perhaps more controversially, we can consider the argument that realism's account of the world is as 'ahistorical and idealised as any utopian fantasy'[39]. Such is the way realism 'is rendered without much reference to political history or political economy', and 'derived from systemic features alone', it can be argued that realism is, in fact, 'far removed from reality'[40]. In addition, the similarities work two-fold. Many contemporary utopians 'would argue that they were now realists in that they were looking at achievable utopias which allowed for the actual and not idealized characteristics of human beings'[41]. It can be concluded, therefore, that Realism and utopianism are much similar in their method of explaining international relations. With this in mind, it would be going too far to postulate that realism completely outweighs the arguments for liberal internationalism. The reality of achieving liberal internationalism is an ideal fundamental to both methods of thought; where utopians 'regard politics as a function of ethics', and realists 'regard ethics as a function of politics'[42].

While realism and utopianism appear to complement each other in this way, criticism regarding the plausibility of utopianism occurs. For Mannheim, what is known as utopian 'is that which is judged so by those representatives of the given order'[43]. Therefore, as Brincat suggests, 'it is the representatives of the given order who serve the privileged functions of determining what is considered utopian and possible or impossible in world politics'[44]. The utopian intentions of liberal internationalism are, on that account, dictated by the dominant and influential powers. As has been discussed previously, the threat of a dominant power precipitates a balance of power which, in the more convincing realist interpretation, discounts the possibility of cooperation amongst states ever occurring.

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Looking Forward

Lastly, utopianism fails as a theory of international relations due to its inability to provide 'any absolute and disinterested standard for the conduct of international affairs'[45]. It is unable to account for the biased interests of the powerful in the international system. This ensures that the 'abstract principles' that liberal internationalism uses to apply to politics, are revealed as the 'transparent disguises of selfish vested interests'[46].

This is not to say that utopianism cannot provide an important basis for realist thinkers. It can act as a 'crucial imaginary act ... to reveal the fissures in existing reality', and, more importantly, 'an ideational motivating force for progressive change in world politics'[47]. Indeed, it has been shown how liberal internationalism allowed for the rise of Germany during the interwar period. Should we intend to remove the threat of aggressive forces, we should look to change culture on a national level rather than the systems on an international level. As Angell suggests, we should 'make of power in the international field what it is within states', thus ensuring the 'settlement of disputes by sheer brute force ... is made impossible by common and collective resistance to aggression'[48]. In doing so, we are dealing with the imperfections of human nature; by changing human behaviour rather than trying to change human nature[49].

Angell provides the provocative anecdote of a theatre on fire. A manager of the theatre explains the situation and everybody escapes in a slow and orderly fashion, while the theatre burns to the ground. As a result, 'discipline intelligence, based upon experience of what results from blind experience to instinct, was made to guide behaviour'[50] – in the same way that discipline enacted at national level can educate and encourage progress on an international level. Liberal internationalism during the interwar period attempted to introduce a 'theatre manager' on an international level. However, realism correctly dictates that such attempts are doomed to failure; such is the way that the human nature to survive cannot be quelled.

Conclusion

The arguments against liberal internationalism have been postulated in various forms. The threat of a dominant power ensures that 'international peace becomes a special vested interest of predominant Powers'[51]. Moreover, 'pleas for international solidarity and world union come from those dominant nations which may hope to exercise control over a unified world'[52], and in doing so look to exploit a 'harmony of interests'. Liberal internationalism, therefore, remains subject to the demands of powerful states that can exact influence over other states.

Furthermore, we have seen how critiques of liberal internationalism differ in their interpretation of morality. For Carr, morality has the capacity to create a 'peaceful atomistic international system'[53]. Despite this, both Carr and Morgenthau remain cautious about the application of morality in international relations. Good motives guard against deliberately bad policies, but 'they do not guarantee moral goodness and political success'[54].

It is the idea of good motives that present the most interesting critique of liberal internationalism, and can offer a path that appeases both realism and internationalism. A disregard of either realism or utopianism at the expense of the other would lead to an 'analytic imbalance'[55]. Realism therefore relies on utopias to construct an idea of international relations. Indeed, 'with the relinquishment of utopias, man would lose his will to shape history'[56]. Realism, as pessimistic as it seems, still intends for a form of utopia, and unless we are certain we have exhausted our abilities to recreate ourselves, 'imagination still has a fundamentally important role to play in IR theory'[57].

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