

Student Feature - Spotlight on Liberal Internationalism

Written by Th.W. Bottelier

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TH.W. BOTTELIER, JAN 31 2020

Liberal internationalism is one of the dominant traditions of international relations (both discipline and practice). Indeed, as this Spotlight essay will demonstrate, it is inextricably tied up with the emergence of the concept of 'the international' itself, much more so than realism, which is traditionally (but misleadingly) seen as the field's hegemonic tradition.

What is liberal internationalism? This is less straightforward a question than it may seem. The term is used in a variety of ways, not all of them compatible. If we are to understand what liberal internationalism means and assess its importance in international relations—as this Spotlight aims to do—then it is important first to clear up this confusion.

Rarely is a consistent attempt made to define liberal internationalism. It is sometimes taken, especially by diplomatic historians, to be a doctrine of US foreign policy, opposed to 'conservative isolationism.' In IR theory and political science, the term is frequently used as a synonym for liberalism, both by liberals and their critics. In the ongoing debate on the future of world order, it has taken on yet another meaning, as a synonym for the 'liberal international order,' especially following the 2016 Brexit referendum and US presidential election. Some authors, like the prominent liberal John Ikenberry, use all three meanings interchangeably.

Liberal internationalism can thus shift meanings between a foreign policy, a theory of international politics and international structure. But these common understandings of liberal internationalism in IR do not exhaust the term's definitions. Indeed, they are in fact rather narrow, ahistorical and US-centric. Liberal internationalism is more than a concept or even a body of international thought. Historically, it has also encompassed a set of *practices*, which have left an indelible mark on the conduct of international relations across the world in the past two centuries. In order to make this clear, this Spotlight will focus not on the *liberal* part of the compound, which has gotten most of the attention, but on the other half, *internationalism*.

Internationalism

Liberal internationalism is most associated with the figure of Woodrow Wilson, US President between 1913 and 1921. In January 1918, during the First World War, Wilson addressed the US Congress to outline what quickly became known as the Fourteen Points, his war aims. The most important were free trade, disarmament, self-determination, and an end to secret, balance-of-power diplomacy.

In the traditional (but mythical) origin story of IR, the Fourteen Points are remembered as the taproot of Wilsonian 'idealism,' which was vanquished by so-called 'realism' in a first 'Great Debate' around the time of the Second World War.

In reality, however, internationalism is closely tied up with the concept of the 'international' itself, coined in 1780 by the English jurist Jeremy Bentham to distinguish between law *within* and law *between* states. Bentham's intent was to replace the older phrase 'law of nations,' which could be mistaken for domestic law, and so to rationalise thinking about relations across borders. The word had entered into widespread usage by the 1820s. The -ism was added in English in the 1840s.

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Internationalism was originally a synonym for the older, now forgotten word 'internationality.' This was a notion remarkably like today's globalisation: old national, imperial and social borders were being progressively eroded by revolutionary developments in technology and economics, such as the telegraph, the railway or the gold standard. States and societies all over the world were becoming increasingly interdependent as a result.

Internationality also had normative connotations, namely that it would advance international peace and harmony. Advocates of 'free trade,' such as the Briton Richard Cobden, sought to advance such causes through tariff abolition. Not coincidentally, Cobden was hailed as the first 'international man' after his death in 1865.

Internationalism, then, originally connoted more than just a foreign policy doctrine or type of international order. It embraced a very broad conception of world politics, which, besides interstate diplomacy, included the transnational movement of people and their ideas, networks and imaginations across the world. It was inseparably intertwined with the idea of the international itself. And from the outset, both were closely associated with classic liberal projects: international law, barrierless commerce and peace.

From the 1860s onward, these projects were joined by a fourth one: international organisation, which experienced a boom in the last decades of the century. Some of the oldest still-extant NGOs and institutions of global governance date to this era: the International Red Cross (1863); the International Telegraph Union (1865, now the International Telecommunication Union, the oldest global IO); the International Council of Women (1888); or the Inter-Parliamentary Union (1889). Such bodies further strengthened the belief in the advance of internationality, or 'international society' (a synonym).

The later nineteenth century also saw the first systematic efforts of progressive international peacebuilding and keeping. An international arbitration movement emerged, as did efforts at disarmament, the codification of the laws of war, and a ban on certain forms of organised violence (such as the killing of prisoners). These culminated in the Hague Conventions (1899 and 1907). Significantly, the Great Powers called and helped define these Conventions, even if they were not legally bound by them.

It is crucial to note that there was a powerful sense of realism to all these projects. Internationalism meant adjusting to the brute facts of internationality. Free trade, international organisations, arbitration: all sought to manage the new reality of global interconnectedness. To nineteenth-century internationalists, there was no opposition between liberalism and realism.

The same goes for nationalism and internationalism. Unlike today, nineteenth-century liberals saw nationalism, individual liberty and international harmony as complementary. This goes back on Kant, but the synthesis was most influentially made by Giuseppe Mazzini, who was both an ardent Italian nationalist and one of the century's most celebrated liberals and internationalists. Mazzini advocated a peaceful, confederated 'Europe of the Nations.' A league of national republics, he reasoned, would be much more peaceful than a balance-of-power system dominated by autocratic monarchs.

Liberal internationalism in the twentieth century

Nineteenth-century internationality—conferencing and conventions, international organisation and law, free trade and globalisation, nationalism and internationalism—deeply influenced the creation of the League of Nations in 1919, following the First World War. The League's name was not coincidental. It elevated the Mazzinian principle of national self-determination, popularised by Wilson, to an ordering principle of global political order.

The League was long regarded as a disastrous failure because of the Second World War. But historians have in the past twenty years shown that this viewpoint obscures its long-term impact on world politics.

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Modern global governance finds its origins in the League of Nations. Its three-tiered structure, with a Council (with permanent members), a General Assembly and a permanent bureaucracy, is preserved in today's UN. The League's was the first international bureaucracy. Building on the nineteenth-century boom in international organisation, it pioneered the first multilateral efforts to (re)settle refugees, police human and drug trafficking, and provide international public healthcare and binding conflict resolution.

The League was also deeply tied up with the exercise of power. Like the UN it was, after all, made possible by overwhelming military force. The League's founding document, the Covenant, was the first international treaty to criminalise aggression and to mandate sanctions in response. These were modelled on the economic and naval blockade of Germany, a global system of coercion designed to starve the enemy's economy. Contemporaries spoke forthrightly of an 'economic weapon' rather than euphemistically of 'sanctions.' This is still the basic idea behind sanctions today, such as on Iran.

Empire was also key to the League and UN. The Covenant created so-called 'mandates,' former German and Ottoman territories conquered by British and French imperial troops, stretching from Palestine to Nauru. Under the assumption that their twenty million-odd inhabitants were incapable of standing alone under the "strenuous conditions" of modernity, they were denied the right to self-determination and put under international oversight instead.

This fit perfectly with Wilson's thinking. Like many other liberal internationalists, he saw the world as a hierarchy of civilisations, with the English-speaking peoples on top. Self-determination was not meant for peoples outside Europe, for they lacked the rationality and experience required.

This thinking persisted for a very long time. The mandate system was continued, in modified form, in the UN's 'trusteeship' system. The last to go was Namibia in 1994, not coincidentally following the end of apartheid in South Africa (the trustee). Echoes of mandate thought are preserved in widespread contemporary talk of 'failed,' 'rogue' or 'pariah' states.

Nonetheless, one should avoid cynicism. Despite their deeply hierarchical character, both the League and the UN have provided crucial forums for the aspirations of lesser powers and disenfranchised peoples. In the 1920s and 1930s, mandate peoples vigorously petitioned the League to stand up for their rights against their rulers. After 1945, India and many other former colonies used the UN General Assembly as a rostrum against empire, with great success.

Concluding remarks

Liberal internationalism, in short, has historically both enabled hierarchy as well as created platforms to undermine it. Today, it seems to be in crisis. But, as this Spotlight essay indicates, anxieties about its imminent demise may be misplaced.

It is unlikely internationalist practices such as public diplomacy or transnational technical cooperation will go anytime soon. They survived the League's death, suggesting they are too useful to be discarded lightly. Nor do today's rising powers seek to. Thus the International Telecommunications Union is today the site of a three-way battle between China, the European Union and the US over who will get to set the standard of 5G, the next generation of mobile Internet.

Liberal internationalist practices of power are another matter. In the aftermath of the Kosovo and especially Iraq and Libyan wars, it has become increasingly difficult for the dominant liberal powers to mobilise international society behind multilateral sanctions and interventions. The vast reserves of military, economic and political power they were able to draw on to establish the League and the UN are increasingly dispersed in a multipolar world.

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The historic bond between nationalism and internationalism also appears to have loosened, especially in the West. Yet appearances deceive. Even as they rail against multilateralism, leaders of the 'new right' seek to build a league of sovereign peoples not unlike Mazzini's vision for Europe. It is no coincidence their electoral alliance in the European Parliament is now called Identity and Democracy. What they represent is not the opposite of liberal internationalism, but a strain within it—one that preserves nineteenth-century liberals' views about hierarchy and civilisation.

About the author:

Th.W. Bottelier is a historian of international relations and currently Lecturer at Erasmus University Rotterdam. He completed his PhD in History at King's College London in 2019. His work seeks to link the usually separate studies of (liberal) internationalism and global war. He is particularly interested in how the age of industrial warfare transformed military alliances. Further interests include the issues of rising powers, emerging economies and peaceful change.