

In What Sense do Liberal Internationalists Believe in International Progress?

Written by Maciej Osowski

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MACIEJ OSOWSKI, MAR 15 2008

Ever since the beginning of International Politics as a social science, there has been a perpetual discourse between “realists” and “liberals” about the nature of interstate relations. The two sides cannot agree on whether there is a possibility of progress in the relations between states. In the present essay, the liberal internationalists’ belief that international progress is indeed possible will be critically approached. It will be argued that “liberals” understand progress as a process of spreading Western model of democracy. It is in this sense, it will be posited, that liberal internationalists believe that international relations can progress.

When addressing the issue of international progress, different liberal theorists focus on different areas in which this progress can potentially take place. The first part of this essay will thus focus on two of those areas: the rules of democratic peace and collective security, both in the context of the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. In the second part, the concept of states’ interdependence and the cosmopolitan model of democracy will be presented as crucial for liberal internationalists’ understanding of progress.

The views on interstate politics considered classical by modern “liberals” were first laid out by Immanuel Kant in his “Perpetual peace: a philosophical sketch”, published in the year 1795[1]. In his paper, Kant established three definitive articles which are still valid today and which are fundamental for most of “liberals” discussions. In the first article, the author states that the civil constitution of every state should be republican. This finds one of its many applications in the area of war issues: “If, as inevitably is the case under this constitution, the consent of citizens is required to decide whether or not war is to be declared, it is natural that they will have great hesitation in embarking on so dangerous an enterprise”[2]. This statement turns out to be crucial for the composition of the rule of democratic peace. Kant claims that citizens are unwilling to start a war with a democratic country because that decision would adversely impact their own lives and personal wealth. Nowadays, it is increasingly difficult to support that argument alone. This is mostly because the majority of democratic countries have professional armies, and thus, the impact of such a war on the citizens would not be such extensive as it might have been in the eighteenth century (even if, undeniably, wars still affect civilian population significantly, mostly from economic perspective).

Kant’s philosophy was further developed in the twentieth century[3]. It has been pointed out earlier in the essay that it is one of major planks of liberal internationalism, even though at the same time, much of what liberals postulate is very much different to the classical Kant’s ideas. One of the differences that might be pointed at is that liberal polities are restrained in their relations with other liberal polities, although they are reckless in relations with authoritarian states. The major advantage of such a state of affairs is permanent peace between the richest, the most developed, and the most influential countries, which are also the oldest democracies in the world, e.g. the USA, France, the United Kingdom, Switzerland. One criticism of much of the literature on this rule of democratic peace[4] is that republican states still do attack authoritarian regimes. This makes the issue of progress in relations not that much different to when democracies attack one another – it is only actors that have change, while war is always a war. This line of thought would suggest that in fact, there is no progress in relations between the states. One question that needs to be asked, however, is why democracies attack non-democratic countries in the first place. Some theorists[5] would argue that this may be the way of promoting democracy and an attempt at putting an end to

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authoritarian regimes, e.g. the USA invading Iraq.

The rule of democratic peace was intensely contested in international relations literature[6]. However, historical evidence strongly supports the claim that republics hardly ever fight one another. It is the only theory in international relations which can be considered a “law”. It can also serve as a basis upon which documented progress in interstate relations might be observed[7].

Some of the issues emerging from the historically proven relevance of the democratic peace rule pertain specifically to collective security. This is largely based on a claim one may venture that the only collective security systems that have ever worked in international relations (where the lack of actual aggression between its member states is considered to be a success of such system) have always had members generally recognized as democracies. The idea of collective security refers to a situation when each state in an organization accepts that the security of one member is a concern of all member states[8].

This also has its roots in Kant’s Second Definitive Article, although Kant’s original ideas have been significantly expanded. In the article, Kant speaks of “a particular kind of league which we will call *pacific federation* [...]. [It] would seek to end *all wars* for good”[9]. The concept in itself is obviously praiseworthy; difficulties arise, however, when an attempt is made to implement such a policy. The first major collective security system to be established was the League of Nations, an organization shaped in line with the guidelines of interwar “idealists”. Many theorists would agree that it failed in its premises, laudable as they were, mostly because states remained imprisoned by self-interest and the demands of authoritarian regimes[10]. In general, however, it may be argued that collective security systems or federations of countries, e.g., the European Union can be successful in safeguarding peace for its members, but only if a condition of entirely democratic membership structure of such an organization is met.

Citizens of democratic states, as it seems, are less likely to withdraw their commitment, and, thus, their membership. It appears that, for the citizens of republics, collective security systems are a guarantee of their own safety, because aggressive movements of their government can be controlled not only by themselves, but also by other member states. Hitler’s road to power is, arguably, the most prominent example of the inefficiency of such international order. Considering Germany’s internal situation at that time, it is ample evidence that only democracies can serve as sovereigns of international progress. What seems to be a logical consequence of this line of thought is that collective security organizations such as the UN will not have the power to prevent conflicts among its members from breaking out until they unite literally all states in the world and until all of them are democracies.

States which are members of organizations or federations become more and more dependent on other countries, a phenomenon referred to, in liberal philosophy of international politics, as states’ interdependence[11]. In the interwar period, early idealists came up with the idea of the harmony of interests. Its main assumption was that there would be no real conflicts between people if there were no authoritarian leaders. That hypothesis came under increasing challenge from the proponents of realistic thought[12], although modern conceptualization of interdependence has its roots in that early idealism. As a result of economic globalization and free trade, states are becoming increasingly dependent on one another in the global economy[13]. It seems that it is an inevitable consequence of the said globalization and that it will only gain momentum in the future.

Already, pluralist wing of liberals admits that international relations are no longer the sphere of states only, but that NGOs and MNCs have come to play an increasingly important role on the international arena. In view of the above, it seems impossible for a single state to stand on its own and not take part in global economy – attempts to do so have led to economic disasters, as in the case of North Korea. As has been postulated, participation in global economy makes all states interdependent, whereby their citizens are ever more conscious of the discrepancies between the standards of living in their respective countries, and they also learn about the freedoms democracy allows people to enjoy. Thus, they may want to catch up with the countries which seem to be better-off. In that, they are luckier than the people of authoritarian regimes, where there is usually a narrow group of rich people and most of population lives under the poverty line. To sum it up, interdependence is bound to lead populations of non democratic countries to fight for democracy which guarantees freedom and, arguably, general well-being. Hence, interdependence should lead to the emergence of greater number of democratic countries.

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It must be borne in mind, however, that international progress does not only pertain to the democratization of authoritarian regimes[14]. Progress is clearly visible also between democratic countries themselves. It takes place because interdependence has the biggest impact on countries with liberal national economies. Entrepreneurs in liberal democracies look for highest profit opportunities. Hence, they decide to shift their facilities to countries where such opportunities can be found. When the web of economic connections spreads over a group of states, it is highly possible that a crisis in one country will have negative impact on other countries. Therefore, governments can only lose by getting involved in even a diplomatic conflict with any other democratic state. Problems or crises in one country will cause difficulties in other countries due to high level of economic interconnectivity. The last thing a government of a democratic state wants for its citizens is an economic crisis, as that would, probably, cause voters to change the government in the next elections[15].

One of the fundamentals of liberal thought is that people are interested in growing wealthy. Decisions contributing to the achievement of such goal will ensure the government's re-election. Hence, it can conceivably be hypothesized that mutually dependent states will be less willing to enter a conflict with one another. If it is assumed that interdependence of states with modern liberal economies is inevitable, international progress seems highly probable consequence of it too.

Democratization and interdependence may potentially lead to the so called cosmopolitan democracy, a model of direct relevance to the concept of functionalism. Functionalists would argue that integration between states is necessary if states want to cope with the effects of modernisation[16]. Hence, states strive for cooperation within federations, and this may lead to the establishment of federation orientated organisations like the European Union. Some liberal theorists like David Held and Daniel Archibugi would argue that from this level of cooperation there is just one step to cosmopolitan democracy. Such democracy needs extension of authority of regional bodies, e.g. human rights conventions must be monitored by a new international court of human rights, and the UN must be reformed into a truly accountable world parliament[17]. This utopian philosophy of radical liberals has its roots in Kant's Third Definitive Article[18]. Moreover, it cannot be overlooked that global civil society's achievements like the drawing up of humanitarian law and the establishment of many NGOs would not have been possible if it had not been for millions of citizens from democratic countries who have actively strived for the future of the world[19]. Thus, there is the arguably utopian vision of an accountable world parliament on the one hand, and the international progress based on hard volunteer work of millions of citizens of democracies on the other. With the current state of knowledge as a point of reference, it is not possible to predict if, after the democratization of all states, the cosmopolitan model of democracy could be implemented. This is an important issue to be tackled in future research of the liberal school.

There are more theories whereby democracy is seen as a final stage of international progress. In many of his publications, Francis Fukuyama argues that throughout the ages of conflicts and fights, the humanity have reached the final level of progress, that is liberal democracy and Western capitalism[20]. The major battle was won when the Soviet empire fell down. There is no other realistic alternative for political organization than democracy. In this way, Fukuyama argues that all other political, social and economic systems are now discredited[21]. Nevertheless, there is a long way for the rest of the world to catch up with the most stable Western democracies[22]. Thus, on the one hand there is an end of progress, including all Western civilizations and, on the other hand, the so called Third World countries which have yet to achieve their ultimate level of liberal democracy. However, one can argue that democracy is not in its final development stage, as there is still a potential for some kind of a world parliament or government as seen by other liberals[23].

Although the ideas of liberal internationalists sound sagacious as a whole, there are a number of shortcomings to their philosophy, and not only those presented earlier in this essay. These can not only be seen in the light of the realists' philosophy – it seems, at times, that the liberal thought lacks a single controlling idea. Difficulties arise, especially, when an attempt is made to implement the policy of democracy promotion. Fighting for democracy or trying to change authoritarian regimes into democratic republics all seem to be more in line with the realist philosophy rather than the liberal point of view. It is almost schizophrenic to say: yes, progress is possible, but first we have to break some of our own rules. As "liberals" would have it, regimes should implement democracy because it is simply a better system, however there is hardly historical evidence for this kind of behavior. Implementing democracy has usually been a result of the balancing of power between states, or between a state and its citizens.

In What Sense do Liberal Internationalists Believe in International Progress?

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The concept of liberal internationalism is flawed also in a way that interdependence is not necessarily a straight way to cooperation and progress. History shows that people and states can be made to suffer in order for the overriding aim of making other states or people suffer more to be achieved. The world is especially vulnerable to such danger when there is no equality in interdependence. Richer and stronger states have bigger impact than poorer and weaker states.

The aim of this paper was to prove that internationalists see international progress as the process of spreading democracy and as inextricably linked to Western civilization's achievements such as free market or capitalism. In the first part of the essay, the concepts of democratic peace and collective security were described. It was demonstrated that liberals perceive them to be fundamental on the road to progress. The rule of democratic peace is treated almost as a law today, whereas modern collective security is still a plan to be further developed in the future. Next, interdependence was shown to be the reason for stronger and deeper interstate connections, as they lead to stronger union between states and potentially to cosmopolitan democracy in the future. It is impossible to examine all the matters of relevance to the subject in an essay of this size, therefore these points should be treated as food for thought rather than as comprehensive analysis. In the light of the above discussion, it can be said that liberal internationalists believe in progress as in the democratization of states all over the world. Making all state actors democracies with pluralist societies is a potential major step to a close global unity between countries.

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In What Sense do Liberal Internationalists Believe in International Progress?

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