

Resenha

Liberal Internationalism: Theory, History, Practice¹

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‘Liberalism’ is famously difficult to define in politics around the world. In the United States, liberals are center-left, akin to social democrats in Germany. Similarly, in Sweden, the Liberal People’s Party supports social liberalism and has a strong ideological commitment to a mixed economy, with support for comprehensive but market-based welfare state programs. In Germany, liberals are nowadays thought to be center-right, and usually allies of the conservative party, even though they have worked with the social democrats in the past. In Brazil, the term ‘liberal’ is reserved for laissez-faire, right-wing libertarians. The term is so unpopular that political parties whose name included the term ‘liberal’ changed their name. When I decided to offer a post-graduate seminar called “The History of Liberal Internationalism”, a colleague suggested I change the name to “Liberal Internationalism and its Critics” to avoid running the risk of being called a liberal. International discussions about liberalism, in short, are bound to lead to confusion.

In the same way ‘Liberal internationalism’ is perhaps one of the most misunderstood theoretical strands in international relations. For some, it is best represented by liberal thinkers such as Harvard’s Michael Ignatieff, Princeton’s G. John Ikenberry and the New America Foundation’s Anne-Marie Slaughter, who see themselves as ‘Wilsonians’. Others -both in the United States and abroad- regard liberal internationalism as a dangerous school of thought which has provoked disasters such as the 2003 ‘missionary’ intervention in Iraq. Thinkers in the Global South tend to agree with the latter assessment. (The debate about whether Bush was a Wilsonian is best summarized in “The Crisis of American Foreign Policy: Wilsonianism in the 21st Century”). At other times, the term is used more broadly to describe the application of liberal principles and practices to international politics, and sometimes simply the foreign policies of liberal states.

Beate Jahn’s *Liberal internationalism: Theory, History, Practice* is, in this context, an interesting, if quite controversial contribution to the debate. Jahn, a critical theorist and professor at the University of Sussex, rightly points out that liberal theories have played a much more fundamental role in and for the discipline of International Relations than is often recognized – after all, with very rare exceptions, general accounts of liberalism are mostly restricted to textbooks. Furthermore, defining liberalism in contrast to realism is bound to lead to unsatisfactory results, given the often complementary relationship between the two theories. Jahn shows that even during the Cold War, usually seen as a time when realism dominated in both the theoretical and the practical realm, liberalism mattered greatly.

And yet, due to the rich, diverse, complex and even contradictory range of policies associated with liberalism, which present seemingly insurmountable challenges for theorization, there is no coherent overall account of liberalism. Jahn argues that different liberal thinkers make use of different aspects of liberalism according to their needs (e.g., either historic or contemporary liberalism), resulting in profound contradictions. For example,

¹ Jahn, Beate. *Liberal Internationalism: Theory, History, Practice*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 240p.

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liberalism tends to be peaceful, but its extension of economic interests worldwide may entail the use of force. This raises the question, she argues, what exactly is 'liberal' about all of these policies, and often the "anti-realism label" stuck to facilitate things. While the author is right to point out that liberalism is marked by some contradictions, it must also be kept in mind that realism, too, contains many seemingly contradictory claims and subtypes that do not fully align.

Jahn's account of Locke, whom she calls the father of liberalism, is instructive, showing that he saw himself confronted with the task of promoting liberalism in a nonliberal environment – a theme that marks liberalism until today. Yet the author describes the empirical support for Locke's claims as "thin" and the supportive evidence he presents "highly questionable" – causing a split between competing conceptions of liberalism on either its principles or its practices. Jahn's analysis focus on Locke's contradictions (for example, while English law of the land protects its commons against outsiders, Amerindian laws do not).

Locke is lambasted in a seemingly endless fashion. According to Jahn,

the practical importance of Locke's philosophy of history is not exhausted by these early cases of colonial appropriation. Rather, as an integral part of liberal theory, the philosophy of history has ever since been a dynamic tool protecting liberal theoretical evidence from empirical counterevidence. Favorable historical conjunctures (such as the end of the Cold War) – in which liberal forces appear to dominate – are interpreted as supportive evidence for liberal claims, while adverse historical conjunctures, instead of undermining liberal claims and principles, are simply interpreted as the result of lower levels of historical development.

Jahn is certainly right to paint early liberal thinkers as flawed and hypocritical (Uday Singh Mehta comes to a very similar conclusion in "Liberalism and Empire", reviewed here). And yet, while Mill and others were certainly wrong to condone and even support colonialism and slavery, their assessments must be seen in the context of their time, when such practices were commonly accepted, and it is questionable in how far Mill's nobler achievements can be discarded altogether because of his support of the British Empire's occupation of India. Early liberal thinkers struggled with applying their seemingly universal principles universally, yet rejecting their ideas as a consequence seems misguided.

Furthermore, Jahn challenges the notion that liberalism contains within itself the seeds of its own democratization, pointing out that universal political franchise was only introduced to avoid revolutions: "Democracy is usually not given by the elite because its values have changed." While this argument has some merit, it must equally be pointed out that it social movements at the time essentially adopted liberal ideas to make their case for reform – liberalism was thus far more important in the process of democratization in Europe that the book suggests.

Jahn concludes that, while liberalism keeps adapting to circumstances, its underlying dynamic is the same: Liberalism, she argues, is a political project that aims to establish individual freedom through private property and to protect and extend this freedom through government by consent – yet, it pursues this goal through the privatization/ expropriation of common property and hence requires the production and reproduction of unequal power relations domestically and internationally. Liberalism is thus, in essence, made viable through power politics, with the mere difference that it uses liberal rhetoric as a fig leaf to conceal the ultimate goal: To provide a justification for American hegemony.

In criticizing liberalism (and some realists) for espousing modernization theory, the author appears to be denying that economic development has generated conditions propitious for democratic stability, and that both are linked to interstate peace. Of course there are contradictions in liberal world order, evident throughout history, and so are some incoherences of liberalism itself. For example, democracy promotion is applied systematically wherever it aligns with economic interests (such as in Eastern Europe), half-heartedly in places where autocracy

assures stability (such as in Saudi Arabia and China) and not at all in places where democracy can endanger strategic interests (such as in Gaza). And yet, Jahn does not recognize that, despite its problematic elements, today's order has clearly contributed to the current era of unprecedentedly low and declining interstate conflict. Today's order is far from problem-free, and policy makers in the Global South who argue that the major threat to global stability emanates from the United States are not just engaged in empty rhetoric – yet Jahn's criticism is at times too sweeping to contribute to a constructive debate, and her book lacks concrete alternatives about how to organize the world differently.

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