Why the liberal international order needs revitalising in the 21st century?

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When comparing our world to that of our forbearers, all signs point towards better standards of living for the majority when compared to the privations suffered by humanity before this technological age. Since the end of the World War 2, the global community has made enormous progress towards a freer and fairer society based on principles of international law and human rights. During the last decade, however, along with globalism has come disillusionment, social backlash, and a return to more nationalistic rhetoric in some countries. In turn, this has led to a deeper existential rejection of the very concept of the liberal bargain, putting into sharp focus its champions and transnational bodies, and their ability to provide adequate universal support for all. Which begs the question, how might the international community avoid further backsliding into unilateralism and better address the needs of those whom have found it wanting?

At present, as globalisation has expanded at an unprecedented pace a prominent trend is the deepening of a set of social contradictions and "*intense fragmenting and reconfiguring of social relations at the level of community and locality*"[1] (James 2006:27). Attempts to rationalise markets have brought along with them social ideologies of homogenisation and integration, which while laudable in principle, in practice can be viewed as "*material and lived contradictions rather than simply inexplicable paradoxes.*"[2] (James 2006:27). The liberalisation approach has had economic globalisation as its primary goal with market forces being the main drivers of change, and the globalisation of welfare, freedom, society, politics, democracy, environmental awareness, culture, and morality as secondary interests. According to some analysts, this is where the global community is failing, in that its social responsibility to ensure those most at risk are provided for has been of less import than promoting material benefits. Conversely, it is also argued that with a global system of laissez-faire comes social freedom due to the inexorable forces of international norms which accompany it. At present, having experienced almost three decades of such market reforms and opening of trade the broader embrace of liberal values has stalled. What is needed to regain trust in the international order to redress the economic, societal, and political imbalances?

To provide the world structure, order, and stability, what are needed are shared ideas, expectations, and beliefs about appropriate actions. These norms are actively built by agents having strong notions about desirable behaviour in their community, and this calling attention to issues or even creating issues is referred to by Social movement theorists as "framing."[3] (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998:894-896). The core framing of globalism arose from the presumed moral superiority of the liberal Western model of civilisation with its clearly circumscribed unequivocal universal norms and values which ought to apply worldwide because they are inherent in human nature, as per Roosevent's four human freedoms. In due course, the liberal order was a club many wanted to join and "*democracy and the economic liberalism enshrined in the Washington Consensus marched forward*"[4] (Mastanduno 2019:53).

Over the past decade, however, the Western tide has been turning with events such as Brexit and the election of Trump signalling that "*at the trans-Atlantic core, significant parts of the electorate have concluded that the liberal internationalism is a project promoted by elites for their own benefit.*"[5] (Mastanduno 2019:53). Furthermore, across the wider world, it has been rightly argued that "*globalisation in its present form is occurring in an ethical vacuum in which the attitude of 'the winner takes all' is undermining social cohesion within communities and societies*"[6] (Nieuwenhuys 2006:72). Hence, groups whom are exposed to the risks of the global economy "*are less inclined to trust democratic institutions to protect them from the material risks accompanying openness, instead they are becoming more attracted to appeals from far-right populist parties and politicians.*"[7] (Bisbee et al 2019:2). While this may be considered part of the natural swing-voting cycle or a reaction to the excesses of the Western liberal ideologies, such as regime change, offshoring, and trade imbalances, it cannot be ignored that international institutions "*often place great constraints on national governments which also can foster hostility toward multilateral governance.*"[8] (Bisbee et al 2019:2). For instance, "*national institutions may lose their ability to mitigate*"

[1] James, P. (2006) *Globalism, Nationalism, Tribalism, Globalism, Nationalism*. Sage publications, London.
[2] James, P. (2006) *Globalism, Nationalism, Tribalism, Globalism, Nationalism*. Sage publications, London.
[3] Finnemore, M. and Sikkink, K. (1998) International Norm Dynamics and Political Change. *International Organization* 52(4):887-917.
[4] Mastanduno, M. (2019) Liberal hegemony, international order, and US foreign policy: A reconsideration. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 21(1):47–54.
[5] Mastanduno, M. (2019) Liberal hegemony, international order, and US foreign policy: A reconsideration. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 21(1):47–54.
[6] Nieuwenhuys, E. (2006) *Neo-Liberal Globalism and Social Sustainable Globalisation*. Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, The Netherlands.
[7] Bisbee, J., Mosley, L., Thomas B. Pepinsky, T. B. and Rosendorff, B. P. (2019) Decompensating domestically: the political economy of anti-globalism. *Journal of European Public Policy*.
[8] Bisbee, J., Mosley, L., Thomas B. Pepinsky, T. B. and Rosendorff, B. P. (2019) Decompensating domestically: the political economy of anti-globalism. *Journal of European Public Policy*.

the risks of globalization and individuals experience threats of labour market dislocation in the context of local economic shocks"[9] (Bisbee et al 2019:3).

Therefore, to reinstate international social equality as the preeminent principle of world order, an expanding of goals beyond simply economic development needs to be realised and put into practice, and this should be "*based on a multidimensional view of humanity and a different understanding of the concepts of freedom, social justice, democracy, culture and morality*"[10] (Nieuwenhuys 2006:59). Typically, for an emergent norm, such as this, to reach a threshold of popular support it must be institutionalized "*in specific sets of international rules and organizations*"[11] (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998:899). However, the mandates and methods of the major international bodies are at odds as to the most effective routes to global fairness, for instance, the UN and ILO have very different opinions from the IMF, Worldbank, and WTO on how it should occur. Additionally, the markets and multinationals are beyond the sanction of most states, and as such, "*are free to act as they wish on an international level with no mandatory international regulations with regard to employment, safety, health and nature conservation*"[12] (Nieuwenhuys 2006:69).

Due to this lopsided implementation of what actually constitutes meaningful international development, social justice and national sovereignty can be undermined by the allowing the liberalised market to take its own course free from national political and social restrictions. Whereas, the real value of economic growth is in increasing human social welfare and improving the quality of life for a broad a spectrum of people as possible because no matter how much capital flows enrich if this is not accompanied by social freedoms, good governance, and long-term stability, then the wealth is unsustainable and/or benefits the few. For example, trade deals or development programmes have often been used as tools by which the desires of the powerful are forced upon those unable to refuse with the strings attached heavily favouring the lender, and this "*pursuit self-interest is difficult to reconcile with the potential that freedom, fairness, and dialogue might contribute.*"[13] (Nieuwenhuys 2006:73).

A case in point is the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. At a time when the global balance of power has been shifting towards Asia and the traditional champions of aid programmes have seen their influence wain, this has left an investment vacuum which is attracting the financial clout of China. Global trade requires modern infrastructure and human capacity but for many developing nations the financial burden is beyond their domestic means, and the international financial institutions have often left states with crippling debts which can only be serviced by exploitative mechanisms. Hence, many nations are open to new deals with new partners which on the surface appear to offer a lifeline to their burgeoning economies. However, the Belt and Road Initiative, "*rather than being an overall vision, seemed to support China's goals in particular, namely, the intention to expand China's political influence, the motivation for Chinese companies to invest, the willingness of Chinese financial institutions to invest and loan, and the willingness of Chinese enterprises to export excess products, such as iron and to secure necessary resources from abroad.*"[14] (Kitaoka 2019:10). Hence, it may be inferred that this most recent of global development plans has echoes of the past's Western colonial expansionism, in that, the financial support comes with many caveats, such as high interest rates, extractive industries, and security risks, and without liberal political freedoms.

These two current models of global order, neo-liberal capitalism and autocratic financing, are neither ideal nor desirable for both states and citizens since it leaves them vulnerable economically, socially, politically, environmentally, and with obvious security concerns. Furthermore, making the choice between the traditional lenders and the newly emerging banks is likely to increase diplomatic and security tensions, an unwanted position to be in for the most desperate of states. As Hosoya (2019:22) states, "*not so many Asian countries would welcome an increasing division between China and American alliances*"[15]. Thus, a reframing of the neo-liberal economic and liberal international order needs to emerge from within the international institutions which promote and govern the agreed shared-standards of humanity, but how can this be enacted if they have differing agendas and the main providers of international economic assistance attach harsh terms and conditions?

While those who have the most material resources tend to impose themselves upon others, their power ultimately rests on their perceived legitimacy, and it is generally accepted that authoritative power leads to more stable rule than material might alone since it depends voluntary compliance under an agreed set of norms; "*a key dynamic in the construction of any political order…is the necessary conversion of material might into political authority.*"[16] (Reus-Smit 2017:859). Due to this very fact, "*among statesmen, the lovers of naked power are far less typical than those who aspire to clothe themselves in the mantle of legitimate authority: emperors may be nude, but they do not like to be so, to think themselves so, or to be so regarded.*"[17] (Reus-Smit 2017:858). Hence, it can be argued that the perceived power struggle of the old West and the new East is actually a contest for order rather but that both sides have deficiencies in their right to claim absolute authority. As both Goh and Ikenberry assert, "*if there is a crisis in the modern order, it is a crisis of authority, driven by contests "over the distribution of roles, rights, and authority.'*"[18] (Reus-Smit 2017:879).

[9] Bisbee, J., Mosley, L., Thomas B. Pepinsky, T. B. and Rosendorff, B. P. (2019) Decompensating domestically: the political economy of anti-globalism. *Journal of European Public Policy*.

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[14] Kitaoka, S. (2019) Vision for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific. *Asia-Pacific Review* 26(1):7-17.

[15] Hosoya, Y. (2019) FOIP 2.0: The Evolution of Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy. *Asia-Pacific Review* 26(1):18-28.

[16] Reus-Smit, C. (2017) Cultural Diversity and International Order. *International Organization* 71:851–885.

[17] Inis Claude Jr, *cited in* Reus-Smit, C. (2017) Cultural Diversity and International Order. *International Organization* 71:851–885.

[18] Reus-Smit, C. (2017) Cultural Diversity and International Order. *International Organization* 71:851–885.

On the one hand, the validity of the Western liberal international order is being contested, concurrently, the growing ascendancy of Chinese internationalism is highly questionable in terms of its means and motives, and that any *"exclusion from the decision-making chambers of international politics reinforces their factions who see national interest in traditional ways"*[19] (Jones et al 2009:313). On the other hand, this arguably does not signal a collapse of the global international liberal order as some may fear, to quote John Ikenberry (2018:23), *"if there is an ideological 'centre of gravity' in the wider world of democracies, it is more social democratic and solidarist than [the] neo-liberal single-minded commitment to capital and markets."*[20]. While there is the risk that the Trump administration's purely transactional view of politics means they could abandon all notions of America's global responsibilities, and the international community must not *"overestimate[e] or underestimat[e] China's motives"*[21] (Kitaoka 2019:10), there remains much to be hopeful about. The long, slow passage of liberal internationalism has been frequently marked with crises and transformations, thus, *"if liberal democracy survives this era, so too will liberal internationalism."*[22] (Ikenberry 2018:23). As Fettweis (2018:238) puts it, *"Globalization appears less like a train racing in one direction in the twenty-first century than as a series of tides that will come and go."*[23].

Taken as a whole, *"The modern order is robust: its pluralist structure, based on formal sovereign equality, and its open, rules-based institutions are uniquely capable of accommodating states of diverse cultural backgrounds."*[24] (Reus-Smit 2017:852), but that in its course up to the present it has been all too successful in its goal of economic liberalisation which has brought about *"a world that has outgrown its political moorings."*[25] (Ikenberry 2018:10). In other words, *"[the] growing turmoil and instability resulting from the rapid mobilization and spread of global capitalism, market society and complex interdependence…has overrun the political foundations that supported its birth and early development."*[26] (Ikenberry 2018:10). Thus, the need for institutional reform and a reframing of the liberal order to recognise this new global reality. This would necessarily entail a greater emphasis on inclusion of the rising powers via the USA, Russia, Europe, and Japan *"accept[ing] that their seats at the table will be adjusted to accommodate"*[27] the emergent states demand for a more equal footing in world affairs (Ikenberry 2018:23). However, this is also heavily contingent on *"the willingness of the leadership of the rising powers to place long-term interests above short-term tactical advantage, to act with restraint rather than their own sense of hubris."*[28] (Jones et al 2009:314). Herein lies the real challenge to the fairness of the international liberal order, can it keep in check China's ambitions, address America's disinterest whilst keeping Europe and Japan content, and reconcile the needs of the other rising states whilst still remaining democratically appropriate?

Firstly, the global institutions must reflect the rise of the new economic landscape with countries such as India, Saudi Arabia, Brazil, Mexico, Indonesia, Korea, Turkey and others having been bit part players in the decision-making forums of the world. The formation of the G20 was a necessary step in the right direction, with more of the major economies being invited to the table. However, the present state of the reforms undertaken since the economic crisis of 2008 have not gone far enough as economic calamity in a single sector or country, particularly in America and China, can still reverberate around the world. Therefore, *"when global financial crises loom, the IMF should ideally play a preventive role, alerting the international community to the weaknesses in the system before a full-blown crisis unfolds"* and it *"should continue its work to lead regional and international negotiations on ensuring that global imbalances even out while sustaining global stability and growth"*, thus, *"the IMF would be the repository for global best practices on financial management"*[29] (Jones et al 2009:254). Furthermore, the World Bank's role as provider of developmental support for poorer nations must be realised. Its core mandate of promoting *"inclusive and sustainable globalization, particularly by helping developing countries link to the global economy"* needs to be bolstered by advising and assisting them to *"bridge the divide between rich and poor within their own borders"*[30] (Jones et al 2009:255). In short, the effectiveness of continuing reforms of both the IMF and World Bank depends on balancing the growing requirements for stronger oversight of both the traditional economic powers and emerging states as capital balances shift away from the US and Europe, and supporting developing economies with well-targeted affordable loans to ensure that access to markets is more evenly levelled. This refocusing neo-liberal economic institutions should provide greater security for all nations, but how to address the question of the reinstatement of the democratic values of the international liberal order?

International law is the foundation of global liberalism but it does contain a fundamental loophole, that being all states are considered equal with very little importance placed on their internal situation. This results in dictatorial regimes having the same international status and rights as democratically governed states which undermines not only progress within such

[19] Jones, B., Pascual, C. and Stedman, S. J. (2009) *Power & Responsibility: Building International Order in an era of transnational threats*. Brookings Institution Press, Washington, D.C.

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[28] Jones, B., Pascual, C. and Stedman, S. J. (2009) *Power & Responsibility: Building International Order in an era of transnational threats*. Brookings Institution Press, Washington, D.C.

[29] Jones, B., Pascual, C. and Stedman, S. J. (2009) *Power & Responsibility: Building International Order in an era of transnational threats*. Brookings Institution Press, Washington, D.C.

[30] Jones, B., Pascual, C. and Stedman, S. J. (2009) *Power & Responsibility: Building International Order in an era of transnational threats*. Brookings Institution Press, Washington, D.C.

autocratic states but also global efforts to strengthen the international community and "*good governance is a common concern*"[31] (Nieuwenhuys 2006:145). Further to this, international systems tend towards hegemony, and if a powerful but undemocratic state is not brought into balance by "'*flanking' or peripheral powers that can draw upon extra-systemic resources*"[32], then balance cannot be achieved as it does not occur naturally in international systems (Fettweis 2018:237).

This balancing is due to the socialisation of norms via *flanking powers* within the international community, and even more so on a regional basis as a nation's identity is part of a wider "*cumulative effect of many countries in a region adopting new norms which "may be analogous to 'peer pressure' among countries."*"[33] (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998:902). Therefore, even though liberal democracies have to cooperate with autocracies in some areas, particularly certain aspects of trade, "*they should reserve their strongest forms of cooperation for other liberal democracies.*"[34] (Colgan 2019:92). The primary reason for this is to make certain the greatest advantages of such cooperation are shared internally, and that the partnerships are built on a win-win basis which do not weaken national security nor place each other's working classes at a greater disadvantage. In addition, this club model also creates stronger political incentives for "*semi-autocratic countries or fragile democracies to liberalize and maintain the rule of law.*"[35] (Colgan 2019:93).

Thus, what is urgently needed is public dialogue amongst democratic states to reassert their common understanding that while the business of liberal politics is often a fractious and perplexing business, it has made enormous advancements and can always be amended. This would also give less room for the hysterical narratives which have produced such fertile ground for the breeding of extremism and charismatic demagogues in recent years. Furthermore, this would serve as a reminder that the alternatives offered by such closed systems "*do not translate into a broad set of alternative ideas for the organization of world order*"[36] (Ikenberry 2018:23). For instance, China does not have a model that the rest of the world finds amenable due to its absence of freedom, democracy, and the rule of law, whereas, "*the values, interests and mutual vulnerabilities that drove the rise and spread of liberal internationalism are still with us.*"[37] (Ikenberry 2018:23). In short, the "*building of trusting relationships, development of human resources, and protection of individual freedom and the rule of law*"[38] (Kitaoka 2019:16) are the heartbeat of the international order, and Eastern authoritarian nor Western neo-liberal capitalism can replace them.

Lastly, is the issue of cultural anxiety. One of the driving forces behind the weakening of the international order, particularly in the eyes of some Americans, is the fear that as power has shifted the "*non-Western great powers will seek to reshape international order according to their own values and practices.*"[39] (Reus-Smit 2017:881). However, as outlined, this is simply a diffusion of material capabilities rather than outright ideological struggle. To quote John Ikenberry (2018:17), "*China will probably not replace the United States as an illiberal hegemon, and the global South will probably not emerge as a geopolitical bloc that directly challenges the US-led order. But the United States—and its old allies—will continue to be a smaller part of the global whole, and this will constrain their ability to support and defend the liberal international order.*"[40]. Hence, the emerging democratic states need a greater share of the torch of freedom. Their human capital, material wealth, shared values, and growing political influence are more than enough to provide added support for the next wave of globalism, as long as these nations are recognised as having the authority and given the economic integrity to do so. In fact, the international order is required to do so because "*the principal effect of cultural diversity on international order is not corrosive, any more than cultural unity is constitutive: diversity shapes international order as a governance imperative.*"[41] (Reus-Smit 2017:882).

To conclude, the international liberal order has faced many challenges since its inception and "*many of the world's intergovernmental organizations have now existed for longer than many nation-states.*"[42] (Sluga 2019:25), and their universal instruments, such as the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, remain the core principles and laws of global democracy. To claim the international order is failing is to ignore its strong foundations but this criticism does address its need for greater inclusion, fairer economic management, and for all democratic states to reassert their adherence its founding principles. The Western tide of influence is ebbing but this should be celebrated as the opportunity for the emerging democracies to peaceably negotiate a better deal with the old guard and to enter a new era in which *international* cultural diversity is embraced as the solution to *order* liberal politics and accountable leadership in the 21st century. We already have a world order built on fair rules, they just need to be adhered to more closely, shared more fairly, and strongly reasserted in the manner of our forefathers who fought so hard to build a better world.

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