

# Towards a Liberal Theory of International Relations

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The Rationalist school, with its emphasis on the existence of an international society, is arguably the most liberal of the three main international relations theories.



Classical liberals seem to be on solid Hayekian ground when engaging in debates about the domestic political realm. But can they look to a complimentary philosophical school or tradition when they discuss international relations? What is it about the international system that would prevent the easy transition of liberal ideas from the domestic realm? The answer has never been entirely clear. As international theorist Martin Wight put it:

Political theory and law are . . . systems of action within the realm of normal relationships and calculable results. They are the theory of the good life. International theory is the theory of survival. What for political theory is the extreme case (as in revolution, or civil war) is for international theory the regular case.<sup>1</sup>

The reason is anarchy. The international realm is anarchical not in the sense that it is chaotic—in fact, it displays an extraordinary amount of order and cohesion—but in the sense that there is no higher authority with a monopoly on the legal use of violence. It's every state to itself.

There is, of course, international law, but there is no sovereign legislative authority to make such laws. Sometimes the United Nations or other international organisations are responsible for making it; at other times, it is the product of treaties between two states. Nor is there an impartial means to enforce international law. When it is enforced it is generally done so by the affected parties themselves, not by a third party like a police force.

So what does this mean for the application of liberal principles to the international realm? It is useful to look

at this problem through the prism of three traditions of international thought.

This division into traditions or schools is the work of the British international relations theorist Martin Wight, whose name is not prominent outside academic international relations circles. But Australians ought to know the name of one of his disciples, Hedley Bull, for Bull is surely one of Australia's greatest political philosophers. Bull's most famous book, *The Anarchical Society*, is written broadly from within what Martin Wight called the Rationalist or Grotian School. As mentioned, there are three schools:

- Realism or Macchiavelianism
- Revolutionism or Kantianism
- Rationalism or Grotianism

Liberalism, it could be argued, is at home in all three traditions of international theory.

## Power politics

Realism emphasises the role of the state in international relations, and argues that states always act in their national interests, with these interests defined solely in terms of power. Military and economic strength, geographical location and the balance of power are for Realists the chief governing considerations of foreign policy.

The Realist tradition can be traced back to Thucydides and Hobbes, although it rose to great heights as the dominant paradigm in American policymaking during the Cold War. The Realist notion of balance of power

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was embodied in Truman's containment doctrine, and has been maintained, in some form or other, by every President up to George Bush Snr. The Realist textbook, *Politics Among Nations*, by Hans Morgenthau, became 'perhaps the single greatest influence on the way Americans thought about foreign policy during the Cold War', according to Francis Fukuyama.<sup>2</sup>

In many ways, the rise of Realism during the Cold War was a reaction to the perceived failures of Revolutionism, as embodied in the League of Nations. Revolutionism is the great transformative doctrine of international relations. Whereas Realism is distinguished by its claim to see the world as it is, Revolutionism focuses almost exclusively on how the world should be. It argues that the perennial problems of international relations can only be overcome with the imposition of one true ideology over all states, either through the creation of a world state or at the very least a global commonwealth of like-minded and like-governed states. Revolutionism is most often associated with the radical left, but as we shall see there is more to it than that.

#### **Liberal realist or liberal revolutionist?**

Which tradition best serves classical liberals? It seems that the most immediately attractive one would be Revolutionism. What often makes conservatives nervous about classical liberalism is its evangelical tone. But as Revolutionism is the great transformative international relations tradition, perhaps it would suit liberals to support an ideology that promotes the conversion of the entire world into one gigantic free market, with each state promoting identical liberal democratic ideals. Francis Fukuyama will tell you it has already happened!

Such radicalism is the prerogative of the young. But older heads will no doubt recognise the practical constraints against trying to convert the world to Hayek. Liberals say they believe in democratic government and free markets, but would they advocate going to war to further these ideals? Or more, would they advocate the abrogation of Australian sovereignty into a liberal democratic world state?

This is where Realism takes over. Realists see the world more in terms of gaining temporary advantage in an endless struggle. But would liberal radicals allow

these older heads to advocate the kinds of policies that flow from such logic? Should Australia mix with international tyrants who run command economies and oppress their people, just because these tyrants are our enemy's enemy?

An example may help to illustrate the difficulty of the debate. One of the great surprises of international relations theory is that it creates some interesting bedfellows, and some even more interesting opponents.

Henry Kissinger illustrates this beautifully in his book *Diplomacy*, where in one chapter he contrasts Ronald Reagan with Richard Nixon. Both men were Republicans and conservatives (in the American tradition at least), and both had built their early political careers around the struggle against communism.

But how radically different were their philosophies of foreign policy.

Nixon was a true Realist. The rapprochement with China is a perfect example of the 'billiard ball' approach Realists take to foreign policy—the internal composition of the ball is not important; all that matters is how the balls bounce off one another. It is an endless power struggle in which nations sometimes fight and sometimes cooperate for their own advantage. Nixon was resigned to the fact that although he might not like the Soviet system, the US had to do its best to accommodate it and occasionally to contain it in what was an interminable struggle for world influence.

Reagan was burdened with no such pessimism, and in terms of the three schools of international relations theory, he was a true Revolutionist. What endeared Reagan to Americans was his sincere commitment to 'American exceptionalism', which led him to believe that the Cold War was not an endless struggle for influence at the margins—with the theatre shifting occasionally from Europe to Southeast Asia to Africa to the Middle East—but that the Soviet Union could be confronted directly on the economic front, and eventually be defeated. For Reagan, as opposed to Nixon, the internal composition of the Soviet Union meant everything. Nixon would never have described the Soviet Union as the Evil Empire, because from his standpoint it would have brought the US no geostrategic advantage to do so. For Reagan, however, the battle was not for international advantage, but for good against evil.

What conclusions can we draw from these two traditions? It could be argued that both Realism and

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Revolutionism are dead ends for the liberal. Realism is ultimately too pessimistic and maybe even too relativist for the liberal disposition. This is because Realism argues that a state's power should be our only concern and that its internal composition is of interest to us only insofar as it serves that power, but not as it might serve justice.

And Revolutionism is really too radical for the latent conservatism that exists among many classical liberals. First, it would mean eventually abandoning the idea of national sovereignty. And second, any scheme purporting to be one by which the entire world ought to be governed falls into the trap of considering government an *a priori* science rather than a continuous process of muddling through, thereby implying that it has somehow 'solved' the problem of government. Hedley Bull put it best when he wrote:

The vision of a states system that achieves order or harmony through the triumph in all countries of the true ideology . . . maintains that when the true ideology is universally enthroned, conflicts of interest will not exist or will only be of slight importance.<sup>3</sup>

Liberal Revolutionists have not been immune from this type of utopianism. The 19th century Manchester School argued that not only free trade but also international links of all kinds (linguistic, cultural, intellectual, sporting) were the road to peace. The Manchester School doctrine reflected an optimistic view of human nature, arguing that knowledge and familiarity would overcome prejudice, and that without prejudice there would be no war. But as Geoffrey Blainey has pointed out, the physical instruments of international understanding—railways, canals, steamships—were easily turned into instruments of war. On the eve of World War I 'more Europeans were travelling, conferring, holidaying or working in foreign lands than ever before'.<sup>4</sup>

This is not to argue against free trade, as to a non-economist the benefits of free trade seem too obvious to ignore. Nor is it to question the value of the free movement of people and ideas across borders. But in a Realist vein, it is simply to counsel against the kind of optimism which insists that ever closer cooperation can only be a good thing for the cause of peace. For war is not solely caused by a lack of understanding, it is caused by the clash of interests. It can just as easily be argued that if avoiding

war is the sole aim, complete national isolation might be a surer method.

### Rationalism

This leaves us with what has been called the 'middle of the road' of international relations theory: Rationalism.

Rationalism is in some ways an outgrowth of Realism in that it too recognises anarchy as the defining characteristic of the international system. But Rationalists see more order than Realists to the extent that they believe in the existence of something called *international society*. This international society is an organic or traditional institution that has grown out of centuries of diplomatic practice, the balance of power, international law, and sometimes war.

Rationalism argues that different traditions and institutions help bring states together into an international society. The key point is that these traditions and institutions exist as procedural frameworks, not as means to particular ends. To clarify: the great traditions of diplomacy, for example, continue to exist not because they allow for the expeditious attainment of some extrinsic aim like world peace. If they did serve such aims they

would have been abandoned decades ago as states bickered over the worthiness of the aim and how they ought to attain it.

Instead, these traditions and institutions exist because they are procedural. They are mechanisms which allow for the easy discussion of any number of freely chosen aims. The rules of the road are a useful metaphor.

These rules do not tell people where they ought to drive to—that's for them to decide—but they do tell them to stay on the left and stick to the speed limit, no matter which direction they freely choose.

Historically, such an international society was best embodied by the diplomacy of pre-French revolutionary Europe. The classical Realist Hans Morgenthau argued that one of the great virtues of the diplomatic culture of this age was that the diplomats were all members of the European aristocracy. For Morgenthau this had a number of advantages over more modern arrangements.

First, the aristocracy formed a cohesive European community—intermarriage, a common language (French), common cultural interests, and a common morality—all these factors ensured that these diplomats had more in common with one another than with the parties they represented. Second, the parties whom

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diplomats represented were not a people in the democratic or nationalist sense of the word, but rather a crown. The spirit of nationalism had not yet infected Europe, and it was considered common practice not only for diplomats but also soldiers to take up posts in various countries other than the one in which they were born. Even in 1862, when Bismarck was serving as Prussia's ambassador to Russia, an offer to take a position in the Russian diplomatic service was not met with moral indignation or a stern lecture about the act of treason he was being asked to undertake, but with nothing more than a polite refusal.

All these factors ensured that due to their own interests and those of the international community to which they belonged and felt allegiance, the statesmen of this age were not as devoted to a national cause as we might consider proper today.

By contrast, the common denominator in the post-French Revolutionary era was nationalism. Morgenthau demonstrates the significance of this change by asking what the reaction might have been at the height of the Cold War had the Russian government made a job offer to a high ranking American official similar to the one that had been made to Bismarck a century before. There would surely have been outrage at the idea that someone could change sides in a contest for international supremacy as readily as one changes one's brand of toothpaste.

In the post-French Revolutionary era loyalty was unequivocally tied to the state. Further, not only did diplomats develop new motivations and loyalties in line with the rise of nationalism, they also came from different classes. While some (authoritarian) states substituted aristocracy by birth with a political or party aristocracy, democratic states adopted a form of meritocracy.

So an age in which international diplomacy was characterised by an international culture gave way to one defined by loyalty to the state, and as a consequence, the strength of international society suffered. But even in the 20th century, the element of common international culture has not been entirely absent, and was famously described by Hedley Bull as an:

intellectual culture of modernity: some common languages, principally in English, a common scientific understanding of the world, certain

common notions and techniques that derive from the universal espousal by governments in the modern world of economic development and their universal involvement in modern technology.<sup>5</sup>

Because he felt that this culture only existed at elite levels, Bull considered it a fragile basis on which to build international society. He might have changed his mind, however, had he been witness to the speed of globalisation in the last decade.

Whatever the significance of the culture of modernity in the modern world, though, Bull is surely right in insisting that it does not represent anything like a shared moral outlook, 'embracing both common ideas and common values, and rooted in societies in general as well as in their elites.'<sup>6</sup> It can be argued though that the traditions of international society in use today are nevertheless effective

instrumental conditions. They do not make any comment about the good life or some other aim to be pursued, yet they act as rules to which states subscribe when performing freely-chosen actions.

### Conclusion

The Rationalist school is arguably the most truly liberal of the international relations theories. It imposes no extrinsic aims on states, but it allows states to decide freely which aims to pursue and then promotes the mechanisms by which they might do so peacefully. Liberals want individuals to be governed by such procedural rules because they leave each of us free to make choices about our aims. It seems just as sensible to support and promote the institutions and traditions that make up a state system along similar lines.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> M. Wight, 'Why is There No International Theory?' in *Diplomatic Investigations*, ed. M. Wight and H. Butterfield, (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1966), 33.
- <sup>2</sup> F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 246.
- <sup>3</sup> H. Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1997), 236-7.
- <sup>4</sup> G. Blainey, *The Causes of War* (New York: The Free Press, 1988), 88.
- <sup>5</sup> H. Bull, 305.
- <sup>6</sup> As above.

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