

Let's talk about the interregnum: Gramsci and the crisis of the liberal world order

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The liberal international order (LIO) is in crisis. The near-collapse of the global financial system in 2008; the emergence of 'statist' economies (especially the BRIC(S) states) as a counter-model; the rise of right-wing movements across Europe and the United States since the crisis; the Brexit vote and Trump's election in 2016—these are just the most obvious signs.¹ All these events challenge the various pillars of the LIO, from institutions of global governance to economic openness or multilateral trade and security cooperation.² Few scholars and commentators would deny that the LIO currently faces the greatest and deepest challenge since its establishment after the Second World War.³ Two core questions accompany this diagnosis: Is there a possibility of 'renewal and reorganization' to save the LIO for the future?⁴ And: What comes next? Authors who engage with the first question usually tend to accentuate the merits of the LIO and its role in building and maintaining a relatively stable, cooperative and prosperous order.⁵ Most of those who address the second question are concerned with the rise of China as a rival superpower to challenge US hegemony.⁶ The two questions have

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¹ For some of the more subtle crisis phenomena see: Elizabeth Pearson, 'Extremism and toxic masculinity: the man question re-posed', *International Affairs* 95: 6, Nov. 2019, pp. 1251–70; Marlies Glasius, 'What authoritarianism is ... and is not: a practice perspective', *International Affairs* 94: 3, May 2018, pp. 515–34; Ian Klinke, 'Geopolitics and the political right: lessons from Germany', *International Affairs* 94: 3, May 2018, pp. 495–514.

² G. John Ikenberry, 'The end of liberal international order?', *International Affairs* 94: 1, Jan. 2018, pp. 7–23.

³ Ikenberry, 'The end of liberal international order?'; Naná de Graaff and Bastiaan van Apeldoorn, 'US–China relations and the liberal world order: contending elites, colliding visions?', *International Affairs* 94: 1, Jan. 2018, pp. 113–31; Richard Haass, *A world in disarray: American foreign policy and the crisis of the old order* (New York: Penguin, 2017); Constance Duncombe and Tim Dunne, 'After liberal world order', *International Affairs* 94: 1, Jan. 2018, pp. 25–42; John Peterson, 'Present at the destruction? The liberal order in the Trump era', *International Spectator* 53: 1, 2018, pp. 28–44; Inderjeet Parmar, 'The US led liberal international order is in crisis', *OUP blog*, 15 Feb. 2018, <https://blog.oup.com/2018/02/us-liberal-international-order-crisis-trump/>; Jeff D. Colgan and Robert O. Keohane, 'The liberal order is rigged', *Foreign Affairs* 96: 3, May/June 2017, pp. 36–44. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 19 Nov. 2019.)

⁴ G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: the origins, crisis and transformation of the American world order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

⁵ Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*; Tim Dunne and Trine Flockhart, eds, *Liberal world orders* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁶ Astrid H. M. Nordin and Mikael Weissmann, 'Will Trump make China great again? The Belt and Road Initiative and international order', *International Affairs* 94: 2, March 2018, pp. 231–49; Bentley B. Allan, Srdjan Vucetic and Ted Hopf, 'The distribution of identity and the future of international order: China's hegemonic prospects', *International Organization* 72: 4, Fall 2018, pp. 839–69; Shaun Breslin, 'Global reordering and China's

different temporal perspectives: while the first looks to the past and the history of the LIO to formulate conclusions about its fitness to meet present challenges, the second is clearly orientated towards the future. And yet, while both perspectives raise key questions about the past and the future of world order, there is an analytical blind spot in the discussions about the LIO: we lack an analysis of *the nature of the crisis itself* as it unfolds. By that I mean a comprehensive account that brings together the various different strands and dimensions of a crisis of world order that amounts to more than the sum of its parts. How can we describe and analyse the crisis *as a crisis* and not only as the period between what is eroding (the LIO) and what will emerge instead (a future world order)? This article proposes an answer by outlining an analytical framework drawing on three Gramscian concepts related to crisis—processuality, organicity and morbidity. I argue that these elements capture conceptually three dimensions that are crucial to a comprehensive understanding of the crisis of the LIO: the global political economy, the state level and societal dimensions. This framework does not itself provide an overarching and definitive analysis of the crisis, but rather establishes the basis for a research programme that can help to move beyond the isolated analyses of various dimensions of the crisis to a more encompassing assessment.

At the heart of the need for a comprehensive crisis analysis is the long-term nature of the crisis itself. Many observers go back at least to the financial crisis of 2008 as the starting-point for a decade of global turbulence, culminating in the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency.⁷ If the crisis of the LIO did indeed begin somewhere around the Great Recession, we need to provide an interpretative framework that will enable us to understand the crisis better as a distinct and decisive period for world affairs. If we furthermore think about when we might realistically expect to see the advent of a new, hegemonically stable world order, the time-span of the crisis extends further. Decades could pass until any such new equilibrium is found.⁸ In the meantime, significant global processes are taking place, such as the Brexit vote and its ramifications for the role of the EU in global affairs; the current US administration's erosion of the foundations of American hegemony; and the ascent of China as a new superpower under Xi Jinping.⁹ Analysing these processes only from a historical or future-orientated perspective fails to grasp their impact on present power relations and the crisis through which we are living. In order to make educated guesses about the future of world order, it is crucial that we gain a better understanding and analysis of its current crisis.

There is, then, ample reason to study the crisis of the LIO for itself; however, the attempt to do so faces particular difficulties. Fundamental political crises are often perceived as 'black swan' events that challenge well-established modes of thinking and generalizing and often even render them obsolete; the crisis appears

rise: adoption, adaptation and reform', *International Spectator* 53: 1, 2018, pp. 57–75.

⁷ Adam Tooze, *Crashed: how a decade of financial crises changed the world* (New York: Viking, 2018).

⁸ Wolfgang Streeck, 'The post-capitalist interregnum', *Juncture* 23: 2, 2016, pp. 68–77.

⁹ Xiaoyu Pu and Chengli Wang, 'Rethinking China's rise: Chinese scholars debate strategic overstretch', *International Affairs* 94: 5, Sept. 2018, pp. 1019–36; Wu Xinbo, 'China in search of a liberal partnership international order', *International Affairs* 94: 5, Sept. 2018, pp. 995–1018.

as the manifestation of historical randomness.¹⁰ The result is that severe political and economic crises provoke perplexity and a flood of alternative explanations about what went wrong and how to fix it.¹¹ As scholarship in international political economy (IPE) has demonstrated, crises are thus often interpreted from either 'old' and vanishing analytical frameworks and 'historical imaginations',¹² or from new perspectives that arise out of the crisis of the old. Inevitably, both perspectives are *asynchronous* to the event they want to describe. I argue that a Gramsci-inspired framework offers tools to overcome this analytical problem. By analysing the crisis as a distinct phase of instability and uncertainty (and not only as a transition between two stable periods), we are able to 'zoom in' on the particularity and idiosyncrasy of the crisis of the LIO. With Gramsci, we are able to think through the organic multidimensionality of a crisis, and are given words and concepts that enable us to assess this complexity in an appropriate way, as the empirical entry points described in this article show.

In what follows, I outline the different dimensions of the LIO that can be assessed empirically and argue for a Gramsci-centred analytical framework. In the main part of the article, I apply the different Gramscian crisis characteristics to the different levels of the LIO and delineate empirical entry points for their analysis. I end with a summary and a call for a research programme that gives serious analytical attention to the crisis of the LIO.

Understanding the politics of the interregnum: the LIO and Gramsci

The material and ideational sources of the multilevel LIO

Seeking to study the crisis of the LIO means first acknowledging that a (liberal) world order exists, and that this order is a significant constraining and enabling factor for international politics. Notwithstanding criticisms of the illiberal and 'imagined' characteristics of the LIO,¹³ or assertions of its irrelevance for explaining policy outcomes during recent decades,¹⁴ most mainstream and critical theoretical perspectives agree on the existence and relevance of some sort of liberal, American-led international order. In this article, I will work with a broad definition of the LIO, bringing together its material and ideational aspects. According to this view, the LIO consists of an institutional structure that is supported and legitimated by an ideational underpinning.

On the material side there are international institutions like the World Bank and the IMF, multilateral cooperation in various policy fields, a specific market-based economic model, and also an implicit and often explicit ranking order of state

¹⁰ Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The black swan: the impact of the highly improbable*, 2nd edn (New York: Random House, 2010).

¹¹ 'There are always more crisis-histories than there are crises': Amin Samman, 'Crisis theory and the historical imagination', *Review of International Political Economy* 22: 5, 2015, pp. 966–95 at p. 986.

¹² Samman, 'Crisis theory and the historical imagination'.

¹³ Patrick Porter, *A world imagined: nostalgia and liberal order*, Cato Policy Analysis no. 843 (Washington DC: Cato Institute, June 2018).

¹⁴ Graham Allison, 'The myth of the liberal order', *Foreign Affairs* 97: 4, July–Aug. 2018, pp. 124–33.

power, leadership and responsibility, headed by the United States. This material structure is understood as flowing from, or at least being grounded in, a broader 'set of ideas, principles and political agendas for organizing and reforming international order',¹⁵ which is liberal institutionalism. G. John Ikenberry summarizes liberal institutionalism as consisting of five 'convictions':¹⁶ economic openness, rule-based international relations, security cooperation, openness to reform and change, and solidarity centred on a desirable model of liberal democracy. Together, the material, institutionalized reality and the underlying ideological rationale embody the LIO as it was developed in the postwar North Atlantic sphere and, after the Cold War, became the hegemonic governing principle of international relations. Not all of those factors are located on the same analytical level: the role of American leadership and hegemony is a macro-level phenomenon that can hardly be captured in a single material or ideational entity. Other factors, such as the embrace of a certain type of market-based economy or liberal democracy, are more state-level characteristics—part of the LIO, but not exclusively defined through it. Yet other characteristics are societal and cultural phenomena: for example, a western identity built around a 'civic culture'¹⁷ that bolsters the ideational core of the LIO. Accordingly, I heuristically distinguish three different levels of analysis entailed by the Gramscian framework: the global political economy captures the structural changes and long-term developments of the global economy and American hegemony in it; the state-level analysis focuses on the dynamics between national developments (especially national populism) and the international sphere; and the society-level analysis looks at the underlying societal changes that undermine ideational support for the LIO.

For each of those analytical levels, I highlight a particular characteristic of a Gramscian understanding of crisis, explained below. This lays the foundation for the framework presented in the third part of the article, which, I argue, opens up the possibility for empirically fruitful work on the crisis.

Processuality, organicity, morbidity

Gramsci's prison notebooks¹⁸ represent a 'running commentary'¹⁹ on the crisis of liberalism and the Italian state during the last grand transition of world order in the 1920s and 1930s. While Gramsci did not develop a crisis theory himself, his thinking can be described as *crisis-driven*, as it evolves through the many crises of the national and international spheres during these decades of social and political turmoil. This crisis-driven thinking can serve to equip our theoretical toolkit in analysing the current multidimensional crisis of the LIO.²⁰

¹⁵ Ikenberry, 'The end of liberal international order?', p. 9.

¹⁶ Ikenberry, 'The end of liberal international order?', p. 11.

¹⁷ Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, 'The nature and sources of liberal international order', *Review of International Studies* 25: 2, April 1999, pp. 179–96.

¹⁸ See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the prison notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

¹⁹ James Martin, 'Morbid symptoms: Gramsci and the crisis of liberalism', in Mark McNally, ed., *Antonio Gramsci* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 34–54 at p. 34.

²⁰ Owing to space constraints, I cannot elaborate here on the longstanding Gramscian tradition in IPE research

In this section, I describe three aspects of Gramsci's thinking that contribute to this toolkit. I locate each of those characteristics on a different analytical level: processuality at the global political economy level, organicity at the state level and morbidity at the societal level. This threefold division structures the subsequent analytical framework and helps us to identify empirically accessible moments in the crisis of the LIO. I also highlight the connection of each of the different levels to the relevant IPE and International Relations (IR) scholarship on crisis in order to emphasize that a Gramscian framework is compatible with existing work on the matter and hence pertinent for a broader audience beyond a Gramscian perspective.²¹

A first and most fundamental aspect of Gramsci's thinking on this subject is that he understood crises not as static 'events', but as processes.²² This means, first, that crises are not framed as external shocks or exogenous events that break into a social order. Crises have in this sense a 'history', since they originate in contradictions or tensions in the old, dying social order. For Gramsci, those were mainly contradictions that capitalism itself created. Second, if crises are not reducible to single, exogenous events, they represent more than just a single moment separating the old from the new order. They are, rather, long, multidimensional and transformative processes of economic and political insecurity that can last for decades,²³ and can develop a 'life' of their own. Both points emphasize the centrality of historical accounts in studying this 'life' of a crisis. In this article, processuality is understood as a feature of crisis on the macro level of the global political economy: it is here that the long-term, structural changes and crisis developments are analytically located.

In the existing literature, Stuart Hall was the first to emphasize such a Gramscian understanding of crisis. Hall understood crisis as the condensation of (multiple) underlying societal contradictions that move history from one conjuncture (historical phase) to the next.²⁴ Two aspects of Hall's interpretation are key here: first, a crisis is always 'overdetermined', given that a variety of long-term contradictions (economic, political, societal) culminate in a distinct crisis phase.²⁵ Second, the processuality of the crisis has a productive aspect that pushes the boundaries of the existing order, since 'every crisis is also a moment of reconstruction'.²⁶ In the case of the LIO, this means that there is more than one long-term process determining the current crisis (as explored below), and that the current crisis is producing new political realities that merit analysis in their own right (rather than solely in terms of their orientation to the past or the future). The understanding of processuality

that informs this article. See esp. Robert W. Cox, 'Social forces, states and world orders', *Millennium* 10: 2, 1981, pp. 126–55; Robert W. Cox, 'Gramsci, hegemony and international relations', *Millennium* 12: 2, 1983, pp. 162–75; Andreas Bieler and Adam D. Morton, 'A critical theory route to hegemony, world order and historical change', *Capital & Class* 28: 1, 2004, pp. 85–113; Henk Overbeek, 'Transnational historical materialism', in Ronan Palan, ed., *Global political economy: contemporary theories* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 168–83.

²¹ For a concise overview of the different strands of crisis theory, see Amin Samman, 'The idea of crisis', *Journal of Critical Globalisation Studies* 4: 1, 2011, pp. 4–9.

²² Michele Filippini, *Using Gramsci: a new approach* (London: Pluto, 2017), p. 88.

²³ Stuart Hall, *The hard road to renewal* (London: Verso, 1988), p. 167.

²⁴ Stuart Hall and Doreen Massey, 'Interpreting the crisis', *Soundings*, no. 44, Spring 2010, pp. 57–71.

²⁵ Hall and Massey, 'Interpreting the crisis', p. 59.

²⁶ Hall, *The hard road to renewal*, p. 164.

in this article builds on these insights from Hall while also extending them in some ways: Hall used Gramsci to describe the perpetual crisis of Thatcherite Britain in the 1980s, while the framework described here encompasses crisis processes on the scale of world order.

The second point concerns the distinction between what Gramsci described as ‘conjunctural’ and ‘organic’ crises.²⁷ Conjunctural crises are those that appear in daily political life; they are usually of a less fundamental nature and, on their own, not system-changing. Only organic crises challenge the very fundamentals on which social orders are built. They produce the ‘morbid symptoms’ that disrupt everyday political and economic life and, in the long run, destroy old societal orders and power relations. For Gramsci, organic crises are rooted in an alienation of the masses from their political representation, giving rise to a mismatch between ‘represented and representatives’.²⁸ The ‘mummified and anachronistic’ actors of the past are not able to solve the crisis within the framework of this dying order. This in turn leads to a ‘crisis of authority’ that leaves an ideological void and thus the possibility for different crisis solutions.²⁹ In the case of the LIO, this mismatch concerns the proponents of an international order and those it ought to represent, namely the states that are part of this order. This mismatch arises if states withdraw their support for core elements of the LIO, such as economic openness or security cooperation. The most unequivocal way to do this is at the ballot box, electing leaders and political representatives who programmatically reject and deprecate those elements. The crisis of authority arises because the withdrawal of states from the LIO leaves a void on the international stage that cannot be resolved within the old framework and by the old actors that represent the dying order. This national–international divide constitutes the organic crisis of the LIO: the old order loses its legitimacy (on the international level) and its supporting states do not offer a solution, but orientate themselves away from its core elements.

There is a considerable body of scholarship using the concept of organic crisis to describe long-running, deep crises of social orders such as states.³⁰ Recent contributions have applied the concept at the level of world order, describing the ‘global organic crisis’ of capitalism as a system and of human civilization itself.³¹ Andreas Bieler and Adam David Morton demonstrate how the ‘master themes’ of global capitalism, global war and the global (organic) crisis are shaped and driven by class struggle as well as spatial dynamics. This agency focus importantly shows that a global perspective does not necessarily imply a highly abstract approach, but can be empirically fruitful.³²

²⁷ J. J. Schwarzmantel, *The Routledge guidebook to Gramsci's prison notebooks* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 181.

²⁸ Gramsci, *Selections from the prison notebooks*, p. 210.

²⁹ Gramsci, *Selections from the prison notebooks*, pp. 210, 211.

³⁰ See e.g. most recently Bob Jessop, ‘The organic crisis of the British state: putting Brexit in its place’, *Globalizations* 14: 1, 2017, pp. 133–41.

³¹ Stephen Gill, ‘Critical political economy and the global organic crisis’, in Alan Cafruny, Leila Simona Talani and Gonzalo Pozo Martin, eds, *The Palgrave handbook of critical international political economy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 29–48; Andreas Bieler and Adam David Morton, *Global capitalism, global war, global crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

³² Bieler and Morton, *Global capitalism*, chs 7–9.

Existing scholarship also deals with more conjunctural crises, as the work of Colin Hay exemplifies.³³ A connection between conjunctural and more organic aspects in the crisis of world order can be found in a recent contribution by Salvador Regilme.³⁴ As he points out, American leadership and its conjunctural (military) crises since 9/11 are inevitably connected to the larger organic crisis of world order we are experiencing today. Regilme also addresses the important topic of the material and ideational foundations of American global power and its crisis, a theme also reflected in the framework outlined below.

The third point relates to what Gramsci describes as ‘morbid symptoms’. This term is part of his famous definition of crisis of authority: ‘The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.’³⁵ The morbidity of the ‘symptoms’ stems from their identification as outgrowths of the ‘dying’ order. The symptoms that Gramsci observed during his lifetime were, for example, open political violence; outbreaks and manifestations of mass discontent; the rise and acceptance of extreme political positions and their respective leaders; shifts in international relations of unprecedented dimensions; and the sudden depletion of once strong institutions. Those symptoms are morbid because they show that the existing order suffers from existential problems that are unlikely to be solved within the limits of the old framework. At the same time, a new, hegemonically stable order does not seem to be on the rise, ready to supplant the old one. This crisis period is thus shaped by morbidities that cannot be managed but at the same time do not represent a viable alternative for the future.

If we translate this pattern to the level of world order, we can see a number of phenomena—for example, the rise of political leaders who undermine existing institutions and rules; an open hostility towards principles such as multilateral cooperation; and an emptying of core values such as democratic solidarity—as moments of morbidity that cannot be captured by the logic of the LIO itself. They represent problematic developments that erode the LIO without offering a new stable equilibrium that could replace the old order. The framework presented in this article is set out not to describe those symptoms, but to systematically trace the *sources* of these morbidities within the changing cultural *and* socio-economic dynamics at work on the societal level. In order to make sense of morbid symptoms, analysis should aim above all at understanding their drivers. Those drivers manifest themselves in the gradual—passive or active—corrosion of the values and attitudes supporting the LIO that in turn feeds the morbidities undermining that order. The analysis of these sources of the present morbidities is a multidisciplinary undertaking: as emphasized by Gramsci, an organic crisis manifests itself across the range of

³³ Colin Hay, ‘Crisis and the structural transformation of the state: interrogating the process of change’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 1: 3, Oct. 1999, pp. 317–44. Hay employs the concept of crisis as a ‘moment of decisive intervention’ and thus focuses on its conjunctural aspects. In n. 9 he explicitly refers to and criticizes the Gramscian distinction between organic and conjunctural on the basis of his own conceptualization.

³⁴ Salvador Santino F. Regilme Jr, ‘The decline of American power and Donald Trump: reflections on human rights, neoliberalism, and the world order’, *Geoforum*, vol. 102, 2019, pp. 157–66.

³⁵ Gramsci, *Selections from the prison notebooks*, p. 276.

societal spheres, including politics, culture and the economy.³⁶ Its analysis hence needs to take into account different discursive, political and economic factors in order to trace the sources of these morbid symptoms.

The focus on more discursive and cultural issues is very well developed in the crisis literature. As Colin Hay's work shows, structural transformations that follow from crises are in essence determined by the discursive construction of what the (overdetermined) crisis is actually about.³⁷ Another good example is the work of Amin Samman, who demonstrates the relevance of historical crisis sequences and argues that current narratives 'feed' on past experiences and discursive constructs.³⁸ From this perspective, morbid crisis symptoms can be understood as (partly) driven by profound changes in the discursive and ideational underpinnings that bolster a specific world order on the societal level.

Studying the crisis of the LIO: empirical entry points

The three elements of a crisis analysis sketched out above can serve as analytical tools to understand the crisis of the LIO from a *crisis-centred* perspective. The idea is not to give an account of the crisis itself, but to offer a coherent approach to studying it. After all, the current crisis of world order is too complex and too longstanding to be susceptible to a single explanation. To take the crisis with due seriousness, we need analytical tools and perspectives to enable us to assess it empirically, understand its morbidities and categorize them appropriately. We may therefore usefully think of the Gramscian framework sketched here as not an explanatory, but rather an exploratory one, in the sense of Stuart Hall's use of Gramscian thought: 'I do not claim that, in any simple way, Gramsci "has the answers" or "holds the key" to our present troubles. I do believe that we must "think" our problems in a Gramscian way—which is different.'³⁹

This article, then, is an attempt not to translate Gramsci into the terms of twenty-first-century world order discussions, but to show how thinking in a Gramscian way can offer us a framework and tools to understand the crisis of the LIO as a distinct, analytically idiosyncratic period, rather than as merely a transitional phase between two world orders. As the excellent contribution by Rune Møller Stahl has recently shown,⁴⁰ Gramscian thought is gaining traction in scholarly work at a time when the crisis-ridden decade since 2008 is slowly shifting into an interregnum that could last for decades. The present article is intended as a contribution to this emerging body of analysis that seeks to understand the interregnum better from an analytical perspective.

The following tripartite division of the framework moves from the global political economy level of analysis (the processuality of the crisis) to that of the

³⁶ Filippini, *Using Gramsci*, p. 88.

³⁷ Hay, 'Crisis and the structural transformation of the state'.

³⁸ Samman, 'Crisis theory and the historical imagination'.

³⁹ Hall, *The hard road to renewal*, p. 161.

⁴⁰ Rune Møller Stahl, 'Ruling the interregnum: politics and ideology in nonhegemonic times', *Politics and Society* 47: 3, 2019, pp. 333–60.

state (organicity) and finally the societal level (morbidity). I will offer an interpretation of each dimension of the crisis on the basis of the Gramscian crisis characteristics described above, and in addition propose important empirical entry points for studying each dimension.

The global political economy: studying processes

Describing the crisis of the LIO as a process might seem counter-intuitive in the light of a general tendency to frame certain events—the Brexit vote, the election of Donald Trump, the ‘trade war’ with China—as crucial crisis moments. As we can learn from Gramsci, however, crises of social formations usually have their origin in the deep layers of the well-functioning ‘old’ order and grow in depth over time until they culminate in specific events that represent only the famous tip of the iceberg rather than the crisis as such. Between two events most commonly cited as key moments in the crisis of the American-led world order—the financial crisis of 2008 and Trump’s election in 2016—were eight years of global change and turbulence that substantively changed the attractiveness and resilience of the LIO. Reducing the crisis to events does not capture this incremental buildup of a process that is about to make lasting change in the coordinates of the world order.

In this sense, the crisis of the LIO has its roots in the operating principles of postwar American hegemony. While it would exceed the scope of this article to delineate all of them, we may identify a few of the multiple contradictions and contestations that have accompanied American leadership of the LIO:⁴¹ the fickle monetary hegemony of the United States;⁴² the contestation of American military and security politics after 9/11;⁴³ the rise of the BRIC(S) and other emerging economies under the auspices of American hegemony, signalling the dawn of multipolarity;⁴⁴ the opening up of China and its subsequent steady growth within the LIO to the position, finally, of prime challenger for US hegemony.⁴⁵ These are just some of the core processes that originated in the ‘old’ order and developed into substantial challenges to the sustainability of the LIO over time.

A prime task for the process perspective, then, is to ‘connect the dots’ of crisis events and phases into a consistent narrative. Comparative work bringing together the financial and political crises since 2008 can be one way of integrating varying spatial, temporal and political dynamics into a broader analytical framework,⁴⁶ as Adam Tooze has recently and impressively shown.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Sam Gindin and Leo Panitch, *The making of global capitalism: the political economy of American empire* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 301.

⁴² Matthias Vermeiren, ‘The global imbalances and the contradictions of US monetary hegemony’, *Journal of International Relations and Development* 13: 2, 2010, pp. 105–35.

⁴³ James Anderson, ‘American hegemony after 11 September: allies, rivals and contradictions’, *Geopolitics* 8: 3, 2003, pp. 35–60.

⁴⁴ Oliver Stuenkel, *The BRICS and the future of global order* (London: Lexington, 2015).

⁴⁵ Giovanni Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing: lineages of the 21st century* (London: Verso, 2008).

⁴⁶ Brantly Womack, ‘International crises and China’s rise’, *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 10: 4, 2017, pp. 383–401.

⁴⁷ Tooze, *Crashed*.

A first good empirical entry point for studying the processuality of the crisis is the role of finance and financialization in general, and in particular the sequence of financial crises that have unsettled the global economy since 2008. The financial sector played a central role in the implementation of neo-liberal globalization,⁴⁸ and remains the key area of pervasive change in the global economy. The rise of finance was the driving force of the last grand paradigm change of world order in the 1970s. The first phase of an American-led LIO after the Second World War was shaped by the Bretton Woods framework, which restricted cross-border financial flows and allowed productive capital to develop within national economies as the working principle of the world economy. The internal contradictions and limitations of this model led to its crisis and gradual dissolution in the 1970s and 1980s, when the transnationalization of production and the unleashing of global finance marked the transition to fully fledged globalization and hence to a new chapter of the American-led LIO. The inherent tendency of financial markets to produce instabilities,⁴⁹ in combination with deregulatory efforts and loose credit policies,⁵⁰ led to a series of smaller and larger crises that culminated in the Great Recession of 2008. These instabilities can be seen, for example, in the rapid increase in the number of banking and associated sovereign debt crises since the 1980s,⁵¹ which saw whole regions such as south-east Asia thrown into turmoil. On a global scale, core aspects of financialization, such as the deregulation of financial markets, rising income inequalities and the global macroeconomic imbalances of the last three decades,⁵² contributed to an environment that was much more imbalanced and economically unstable than the Bretton Woods era.

It is in this environment that the American sub-prime crisis from 2007 was able to develop and spread its effects throughout the world economy. After the fall of Lehman Brothers in late 2008 and the subsequent looming collapse of the inter-bank lending market, only a huge federal intervention prevented a major catastrophe. The eurozone crisis, a 'massive aftershock of the earthquake in the North Atlantic financial system of 2008, working its way out with a time lag through the labyrinthine political framework of the EU',⁵³ haunts European politics to this day. The post-2012 inertia of American and European policy-makers in dealing with both the sources and the fallout of the crisis—rising inequality, the shift of the crisis burden to regular taxpayers, gloomy economic forecasts, China's rise, and geopolitical shifts in Ukraine and elsewhere, among others—led to a deep crisis of political trust in the political establishment supporting the LIO.⁵⁴ This had

⁴⁸ Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy, *Capital resurgent: roots of the neoliberal revolution* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2004).

⁴⁹ Hyman P. Minsky, *Stabilizing an unstable economy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008).

⁵⁰ Greta R. Krippner, *Capitalizing on crisis: the political origins of the rise of finance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 52.

⁵¹ Carmen M. Reinhart and Kenneth S. Rogoff, *This time is different: eight centuries of financial folly* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 74.

⁵² Eckhard Hein and Matthias Mundt, 'Financialization, the financial and economic crisis and the requirements and potentials for wage-led recovery', in Marc Lavoie and Engelbert Stockhammer, eds, *Wage-led growth: an equitable strategy for economic recovery* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 153–86.

⁵³ Tooze, *Crashed*, 'Introduction', Part II.

⁵⁴ Tooze, *Crashed*.

particularly profound effects for American hegemony, which was strongly tied to the development of neo-liberal globalization through the vanguarding part played by the US state in strengthening the role of highly mobile financial capital.⁵⁵ The 1990s in particular, with the commitment of the Clinton administration to the full unleashing of financial markets, marked the heyday of the neo-liberal globalization that crashed in 2008. The hollowing out of American hegemony since then is a result of this long-term crisis process.⁵⁶ This has led in turn to the present situation of marked economic and political uncertainty, political disorder and a new alienation of the masses from politics.

The declining manageability of global capitalism,⁵⁷ then, has had profound effects for the single post-Cold War superpower that has hitherto sustained the current order. The second proposed empirical entry point is accordingly the long-term challenge to the role of the United States as the linchpin of the LIO. Two related elements are crucial here. First, there is an ongoing discussion about the possible decline of American power and leadership in the global political economy.⁵⁸ This decline has a longer history than the current administration (as noted above), but is most sharply focused by that administration's 'abdication' of its global leadership role.⁵⁹ The increasing inability of the United States to sustain an LIO centred on its own power has become visible in a number of dimensions, for example: the persistent problems associated with the Afghanistan and Iraq interventions since 2003; the largely failed attempt to incorporate Russia and China into the LIO since the end of the Cold War;⁶⁰ and the domestic backlashes against the leadership role of the United States and the resulting paralysis of parts of its foreign policy, already visible during the Obama years, including in the strategically crucial Middle East.⁶¹ All of these developments indicate that, even though American leadership and centrality have not vanished, they are at least threatened.

Second, the rise of China poses a direct challenge for the American-led LIO in the twenty-first century.⁶² China offers a version of managed or state-directed capitalism that stands in contrast to the version of neo-liberal globalization that the US has long championed.⁶³ Furthermore, Chinese leaders seem to embrace

⁵⁵ Gindin and Panitch, *The making of global capitalism*, pp. 172ff.

⁵⁶ Herman Mark Schwartz, *States versus markets. understanding the global economy* (London: Red Globe Press, 2018), p. 323.

⁵⁷ Streeck, 'The post-capitalist interregnum', p. 70.

⁵⁸ See Jan Fichtner, 'Perpetual decline or persistent dominance? Uncovering Anglo-America's true structural power in global finance', *Review of International Studies* 43: 1, 2017, pp. 3–28; Sean Starrs, 'American economic power hasn't declined—it globalized!', *International Studies Quarterly* 57: 4, 2013, pp. 817–30. For an opposite view, see Fareed Zakaria, *The post-American world*, 2nd edn (New York and London: Norton, 2011).

⁵⁹ Ivo Daalder and James M. Lindsay, *The empty throne: America's abdication of global leadership* (New York: Public Affairs/Hachette, 2018).

⁶⁰ Michael Mastanduno, 'Partner politics: Russia, China, and the challenge of extending US hegemony after the Cold War', *Security Studies* 28: 3, 2019, pp. 479–504.

⁶¹ Andreas Krieg, 'Externalizing the burden of war: the Obama Doctrine and US foreign policy in the Middle East', *International Affairs* 92: 1, Jan. 2016, pp. 97–113.

⁶² Thomas J. Christensen, *The China challenge* (New York and London: Norton, 2016); Jacques Martin, *When China rules the world* (London: Penguin, 2009). For a more sceptical view, see Allan et al., 'The distribution of identity'.

⁶³ Christopher McNally, 'The challenge of refurbished state capitalism', *Der moderne Staat* 6: 1, 2013, pp. 33–48.

a clearer, though not absolute, vision of global leadership than the current US administration.⁶⁴ The rise of a flexible, but at the same time party-controlled, model of ‘Sino-capitalism’,⁶⁵ in combination with a more assertive foreign policy under Xi Jinping, makes the Chinese challenge a long-term process that undermines core pillars of the LIO. As Giovanni Arrighi argues, this challenge should not be understood only in a narrow foreign policy dimension: the ‘new Asian age’ represents a long-term development that has its roots in the fact that a world market, created under US hegemony, is the perfect stepping stone for a Chinese economy that enjoys the unique competitive advantage conferred by large volumes of cheap labour.⁶⁶ In combination with a party-controlled ‘relative gradualism’ of economic reform that shields China’s incremental ascent to world power from short-term disruptions,⁶⁷ this poses a fundamental challenge to American hegemony.

Both of these developments—the decline of American leadership and the rise of China—are contributing directly to the crisis of the LIO.⁶⁸ Just like the rise of financialization described above, this second empirical entry point illustrates the role of long-term processes in better understanding the crisis of the LIO. The superiority and indeed manageability of global capitalism as the economic basis of the LIO, and the role of the United States as the *primus inter pares* of this order, have both been challenged through the crisis of the LIO and need therefore to be studied from a process-orientated, long-term perspective.

The state level: differentiating the organic from the conjunctural

The second Gramscian crisis dimension—organicity—can be located within the growing national–international divide that corrodes the LIO from within. An organic crisis is different from ‘everyday’ political crises that do not imperil the operating principles of world order. As argued above, what sets an organic crisis apart from a conjunctural crisis in the case of the LIO is the simultaneous crisis of the international (or transnational) and national levels of world politics.

A conjunctural crisis would affect only one of those two levels—as, for example, the oil crises of the 1970s or US military failures did: they challenged the international role of the United States or some parts of the international security architecture, but never posed an existential threat to the American state and its commitment to the LIO.

The current crisis of the LIO can on the contrary be very well understood as organic. I described in the previous section some of the crisis circumstances of the international sphere. On the national level, we have in recent years witnessed the alienation of state leaderships from their electorates along several fault-lines,

⁶⁴ Jacob Mardell, ‘The “community of common destiny” in Xi Jinping’s new era’, *The Diplomat*, Oct. 2017.

⁶⁵ Christopher McNally, ‘Sino-capitalism: China’s reemergence and the international political economy’, *World Politics* 64: 4, 2012, pp. 741–76.

⁶⁶ Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing*, pp. 277ff., 365.

⁶⁷ Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing*, p. 358.

⁶⁸ Nordin and Weissmann, ‘Will Trump make China great again?’.

including most importantly the massive state interventions in saving quasi-bankrupt banks or whole economies; the controversial ways in which the politics of a 'new constitutionalism' were reinforced,⁶⁹ especially in EU governance; the global spread of practices of 'neo-liberal authoritarianism' or 'neo-illiberalism', and the rise of 'post-truth politics' in the decade since the Great Recession.⁷⁰ The effect of these crisis processes is a growing divide between electorates and elected on a world scale that results in the rise of anti-systemic, mostly right-wing populist parties that question core principles of the LIO. In some instances, those anti-systemic forces have even come into government; all of them represent to some degree a major threat to pillars of the LIO, such as the idea of international solidarity (especially in the case of migration and refugee politics) and the rejection of a role model of liberal democracy. By openly and often aggressively redefining national interest and putting it first, these social forces are undermining the foundational principles of the LIO on the national level. The deep divisions in electorates all around the world, extreme levels of polarization and a sharp turn to far-right parties are comparable to observed effects of earlier severe crises in political systems after major financial crises.⁷¹ The crisis on the national level is hence one of the rise of national populism and the concomitant alienation of represented from representatives. On both levels, then, national and international, I argue that the present crisis is more than just a conjunctural adjustment. The organicity of the crisis lies in its disruptive force in relation to the principles, institutions, practices and legitimacy of the LIO beyond everyday political disputes. This organicity can be assessed by making an empirically sound connection between the multidimensional developments at both national and international levels. I propose three elements as central to a comprehensive analysis of this link.

The first one may be called a political economy of global populism. As recent studies suggest, the character of national political economy arrangements⁷² as an independent variable influences the 'type' of populism that is likely to emerge.⁷³ The type of (populist) backlash states are experiencing hence differ markedly from one national context to another; and these have different effects on the LIO. For example, a right-wing/chauvinistic backlash might question principles such as international (liberal democratic) solidarity or security cooperation, while a left-wing/populist backlash might instead challenge economic openness. The link between political and economic models, type of populist backlash and the challenges for the LIO constitutes an important factor in understanding the link

⁶⁹ Stephen Gill and A. Claire Cutler, eds, *New constitutionalism and world order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁷⁰ Ian Bruff and Cemal Burak Tansel, 'Authoritarian neoliberalism: trajectories of knowledge production and praxis', *Globalizations* 16: 3, 2019, pp. 233–44; Reijer Hendrikse, 'Neo-illiberalism', *Geoforum*, vol. 95, 2018, pp. 169–72; Jane Suiter, 'Post-truth politics', *Political Insight*, Dec. 2016, pp. 25–7.

⁷¹ Manuel Funke, Moritz Schularick and Christoph Trebesch, 'Going to extremes: politics after financial crises 1870–2014', *European Economic Review*, vol. 88, 2016, pp. 227–60.

⁷² Or growth models: see Lucio Baccaro and Jonas Pontusson, 'Rethinking comparative political economy: the growth model perspective', *Politics and Society* 44: 2, 2016, pp. 175–207.

⁷³ Dustin Voss, *The political economy of European populism: labour market dualisation and protest voting in Germany and Spain*, Europe in Question discussion paper series no. 132 (London: London School of Economics and Political Science, March 2018); Philip Manow, *Die politische Ökonomie des Populismus* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2018).

between national and international developments. In addition, recent research suggests that a political economy of ‘domestic challenges’ to the LIO has explanatory power for the crisis of world order.⁷⁴

The second central element is the ideational factor that underlies the politics of a new nationalism in times of globalization. The discourses and narratives on which the resurgence of this nationalism are founded are not restricted to Trump’s ‘America First’, but can be observed across the globe, from the rhetorical revival of past national glory and strength that can be observed in Putin’s use of tsarist rhetorics to Erdogan’s regular recourse to Ottoman history and Xi Jinping’s notion of a ‘rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’.⁷⁵ These and other discourses strengthen not only inward-looking (national) politics and programmes, but also outward-looking (international) critiques of an LIO that is fundamentally rooted in the concept of American pre-eminence. The crisis of a hegemonic constellation can then, in a Gramscian manner, also be understood and analysed as the crisis of the supporting narratives of this constellation. The double nature of nationalist discourse as legitimizing both national renaissance and international re-ordering makes it particularly interesting when analysing the organicity of the current crisis, which incorporates both relevant levels. The nationalist discourse is, then, the glue that connects national and international aspects of this crisis, and can be empirically assessed.

The third element is closely related to the second one and concerns the *material* aspect of the national–international nexus. While the discursive aspect relates to the construction and impact of narratives about the dissolution of the LIO, the material aspects are related to the behaviour of actors. This concerns on the one hand the behaviour that undermines the sound functioning of LIO institutions, such as the WTO and the current US administration, and, on the other hand, the proactive construction of alternative pathways of international policy-making, for example the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As Andreas Møller Mulvad argues, the BRI is itself the material side (‘accumulation strategy’) of a broader Chinese hegemonic renewal that he dubs ‘Xiism’:⁷⁶ in order to challenge the LIO, the discursive imaginary of a ‘Chinese Dream’ needs to be complemented by (material) strategies like the BRI or the internationalization of the renminbi.⁷⁷ Those strategies are crucially affecting and altering the national–international nexus that is important for analysing the organicity of the crisis. Other examples

⁷⁴ James Bisbee, Layna Mosley, Thomas B. Pepinsky and B. Peter Rosendorff, ‘Decompensating domestically: the political economy of anti-globalism’, *Journal of European Public Policy*, published online 17 Oct. 2019.

⁷⁵ Sean Cannady and Paul Kubicek, ‘Nationalism and legitimation for authoritarianism: a comparison of Nicholas I and Vladimir Putin’, *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 5: 1, 2014, pp. 1–9; Hakan Ovunc Ongur, ‘Identifying Ottomanisms: the discursive evolution of Ottoman pasts in the Turkish presents’, *Middle Eastern Studies* 51: 3, 2015, pp. 416–32; William A. Callahan, ‘China’s “Asia Dream”: the Belt Road Initiative and the new regional order’, *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 1: 3, 2016, pp. 226–43; Maximilian Mayer, ‘China’s historical statecraft and the return of history’, *International Affairs* 94: 6, Nov. 2018, pp. 1217–36.

⁷⁶ Andreas Møller Mulvad, ‘Xiism as a hegemonic project in the making: Sino-communist ideology and the political economy of China’s rise’, *Review of International Studies* 45: 3, July 2019, pp. 449–70.

⁷⁷ Shahar Hameiri and Lee Jones, ‘China challenges global governance? Chinese international development finance and the AIIB’, *International Affairs* 94: 3, May 2018, pp. 573–93; Masanori Hasegawa, ‘The geography and geopolitics of the renminbi: a regional key currency in Asia’, *International Affairs* 94: 3, May 2018, pp. 535–52.; Maximilian Mayer, ‘China’s historical statecraft and the return of history’.

of material changes could include a retreat from global institutions like the WTO and a re-orientation towards bilateral trade agreements in the light of American isolationism.⁷⁸ Both examples, the BRI and the American degradation of the WTO, have domestic sources that penetrate the international sphere: in the case of the BRI, it is the outsourcing of domestic overcapacities that has increased the pressure on the state to create international openings for stressed state-owned enterprises; in the case of the WTO, it is Trump's promise of 'America First' that is driving a fundamental opposition to any trade agreements that might disadvantage (if only superficially) American interests.

Taken together, the three areas of possible empirical investigation—the political economy of global populism, and the discursive and material foundations of the erosion of the LIO—open the way to a better understanding of the national-international nexus as the basis for the organicity of the crisis. They illustrate that this current crisis of the LIO is a systemic, multidimensional phenomenon that is not likely to be resolved as a conjunctural crisis could be.

The societal level: studying the sources of morbidities

As noted above, the analytical task for this level of the crisis is to identify the drivers and sources of the morbid symptoms we observe. The morbidities arise in what scholars have called the 'common civic identity' of the LIO,⁷⁹ which evolves around shared 'norms and principles, most importantly political democracy, constitutional government, individual rights, private property-based economic systems, and toleration of diversity in non-civic areas of ethnicity and religion'.⁸⁰ These principles are closely tied to the embrace of capitalism as the core principle of societal exchange that 'has produced a culture of market rationality that permeates all aspects of life',⁸¹ and that is at the heart of a common civic identity of the LIO. But, as has already been argued for some time, this distinct type of 'market civilization'⁸² also creates contradictory dynamics in cultural and political life that undermine the affirmation of a common civic identity. Arlie Russell Hochschild describes the underlying sources of the deep cultural and political divides that threaten to tear apart the social fabric of the United States;⁸³ Oliver Nachtwey shows how neo-liberal marketization has created a politically incoherent and diffuse revolt against liberal society in Germany;⁸⁴ Imogen Tyler describes various forms of resistance to the logic of 'neo-liberal governmentality' in post-crisis Britain;⁸⁵

⁷⁸ Jeffrey Frieden, 'The backlash against globalization and the future of the international economic order', in Patrick Diamond, ed., *The crisis of globalization: democracy, capitalism and inequality in the twenty-first century* (London: Tauris, 2019), pp. 43–52 at p. 48.

⁷⁹ Deudney and Ikenberry, 'The nature and sources of liberal international order'.

⁸⁰ Deudney and Ikenberry, 'The nature and sources of liberal international order', p. 193.

⁸¹ Deudney and Ikenberry, 'The nature and sources of liberal international order', p. 193.

⁸² Stephen Gill, 'Globalisation, market civilisation, and disciplinary neoliberalism', *Millennium* 24: 3, 1995, pp. 399–423.

⁸³ Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in their own land: anger and mourning on the American right* (New York and London: New Press, 2016).

⁸⁴ Oliver Nachtwey, *Die Abstiegs-gesellschaft: über das Aufbegehren in der regressiven Moderne* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2016).

⁸⁵ Imogen Tyler, *Revolting subjects: social abjection and resistance in neoliberal Britain* (London: Zed, 2013).

and Wendy Brown argues that '[m]ore than merely saturating the meaning or content of democracy with market values, neoliberalism assaults the principles, practices, cultures, subjects, and institutions of democracy understood as rule by the people' in the Euro-Atlantic sphere.⁸⁶ Together, these accounts capture some of the crucial moments in a transformation of western societies that undermines the allurements of a common civic culture and identity.

Within this environment, morbid symptoms appear, fed by the phenomena described above. These symptoms manifest themselves in, for example, 'illiberal backlashes' as seen in central and eastern European countries that were previously hailed as experimental spaces for neo-liberal policy scripts;⁸⁷ in Germany, where in 2017, for the first time since the Second World War, a far-right populist party gained seats in parliament; in Britain, where the unexpected departure from the EU was spearheaded by political forces around the UK Independence Party that were considered marginal at best in British politics; in France, where an openly xenophobic candidate from the Front National made it to the presidential run-off in 2017; and in other countries from Brazil to the United States and Italy, where political outsiders and polarizing anti-establishment figures enter public office with agendas often directly opposed to the values and norms of the LIO. These phenomena can be deemed 'morbid' as they express some of the underlying cultural and identity-related contradictions that evolved under the umbrella of a liberal world order, but do not fit the idea of a common civic identity. The growing scepticism about the benefits of neo-liberal globalization, opposition to migration and sometimes democratic decision-making undermine the ideational support for the LIO both directly and indirectly.

There are broadly two perspectives that can be employed to empirically assess these fissures in a common civic identity and the resulting morbid symptoms. The first is focused on 'everyday narratives' that bolster or oppose existing orders in world politics;⁸⁸ the second deals with the underlying class dimension of the observed ruptures.

The first aspect departs from the elite focus dominating critical research in (I)PE and focuses on everyday narratives in order to understand 'how political orders are justified and contested in everyday sites'⁸⁹ and in the public sphere. This qualitative and discourse-orientated perspective on 'grand' topics of world politics—like the crisis of the LIO—allows us to understand how people make sense of a crisis of world order and how such times of change are perceived. Over time, everyday narratives can serve as an instrument for detecting changes in attitudes, experiences and discourses about themes that are directly related to a common civic culture. Important themes that have already been researched in this respect include, for example, the legitimization of austerity in different countries

⁸⁶ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the demos: neoliberalism's stealth revolution* (New York: Zone, 2015), p. 9.

⁸⁷ Aron Buzogány and Mihai Varga, 'The ideational foundations of the illiberal backlash in central and eastern Europe: the case of Hungary', *Review of International Political Economy* 25: 6, 2018, pp. 811–28.

⁸⁸ Liam Stanley and Richard Jackson, 'Introduction: everyday narratives in world politics', *Politics* 36: 3, 2016, pp. 223–35.

⁸⁹ Stanley and Jackson, 'Introduction', p. 231.

through everyday narratives;⁹⁰ changing discourses about migration;⁹¹ and more macro-societal narratives contesting the power of global financial centres (and hence partly also global finance).⁹² Narratives on all of these themes— austerity, migration, global corporate power—are discursively eroding the cultural and societal base of the LIO. The empirical entry point of an ‘everyday IPE’ is very useful in trying to assess these effects, as it bridges the abstract and concrete dimensions of the crisis of the LIO.

The second empirical entry point relates to the changing class and subaltern group relations within the major industrial nations under the LIO. As the contributions by Nachtwey and Hochschild mentioned above make clear,⁹³ the corrosion of a common civic identity is inextricably tied to the erosion of the last traces of a weak ‘class compromise’ that had characterized the neo-liberal era since the 1980s.⁹⁴ This weak form of class compromise entailed a promise from neo-liberally minded elites that the economic risks and hardships of neo-liberal globalization would be compensated by the notorious ‘trickle-down effect’ of economic growth.⁹⁵ The failure of neo-liberal globalization to deliver on those promises (for example through financial globalization⁹⁶) alienated the working classes of major western countries from those same elites who supported a world of open and free markets under the LIO.⁹⁷ The instabilities and uncertainties of neo-liberal globalization produced ‘experiences of injustice and disregard’ which ‘in turn generate[d] indignation and feelings of rage’ among subaltern classes.⁹⁸ As a consequence, large numbers of blue-collar working-class voters (and other marginalized groups) are increasingly rejecting core tenets of the common civic identity, such as an embrace of economic openness⁹⁹ or international cooperation through institutions.¹⁰⁰ The morbid symptoms of this disenchantment include

⁹⁰ Liam Stanley, “‘We’re reaping what we sowed’”: everyday crisis narratives and acquiescence to the age of austerity’, *New Political Economy* 19: 6, 2014, pp. 895–917; Leonard Seabrooke and Rune Riisbjerg Thomsen, ‘Making sense of austerity: everyday narratives in Denmark and the United Kingdom’, *Politics* 36: 3, 2016, pp. 250–61.

⁹¹ Katherine Tonkiss, ‘Experiencing transnationalism at home: open borders and the everyday narratives of non-migrants’, *Politics* 36: 3, 2016, pp. 324–37; Georg Löfflmann and Nick Vaughan-Williams, ‘Narrating identity, border security and migration: critical focus groups and the everyday as problematic’, *Critical Studies on Security* 5: 2, 2017, pp. 207–11.

⁹² Andrew Baker and Duncan Wigan, ‘Constructing and contesting City of London power: NGOs and the emergence of noisier financial politics’, *Economy and Society* 46: 2, 2017, pp. 185–210.

⁹³ Nachtwey, *Die Abstiegs-gesellschaft*; Hochschild, *Strangers in their own land*.

⁹⁴ For the original, postwar, ‘Fordist’ version of class compromise, see William I. Robinson, *A theory of global capitalism: production, class, and state in a transnational world* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), p. 42.

⁹⁵ Another common discursive figure was the ‘tide that lifts all boats’: see e.g. James R. Hines Jr, Hilary W. Hoynes and Alan B. Krueger, ‘Another look at whether a rising tide lifts all boats’, in Alan B. Krueger and Robert Solow, eds, *The roaring nineties: can full employment be sustained?* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2001), pp. 493–537.

⁹⁶ Dani Rodrik and Arvind Subramanian, ‘Why did financial globalization disappoint?’, *IMF Staff Papers* 56: 1, 2009, pp. 112–38.

⁹⁷ For the elitist foundation of the LIO, see Inderjeet Parmar, ‘The US-led liberal order: imperialism by another name?’, *International Affairs* 94: 1, 2018, pp. 151–72.

⁹⁸ Hans-Jürgen Bieling, ‘Rise of right-wing populism in the Europe of today: outlines of a sociotheoretical exploration’, *Culture, Practice and Europeanization* 4: 1, 2019, pp. 78–91, at p. 87.

⁹⁹ Bisbee et al., ‘Decompensating domestically’.

¹⁰⁰ Sarah B. Hobolt, ‘The Brexit vote: a divided nation, a divided continent’, *Journal of European Public Policy* 23: 9, 2016, pp. 1259–77.

the turn of the disappointed to right-wing populist alternatives that often run counter to their objective class interest, for example where those alternatives embrace socially conservative policies. An empirical approach to the study of this class dimension can disentangle the different socio-economic drivers and causes of these morbid symptoms. This 'material' erosion of a common civic identity is, from a Gramscian perspective, at least as important as the discursive changes of everyday narratives described above. Beyond its analytical value, a class focus allows us to understand the emancipatory potential of new identities forged out of the crisis of the LIO and the relevance of this potential for other subaltern groups that are being marginalized in the current far-right populist version of a new (civic) identity.

Taken together, the corrosion of the common civic identity of the West and its potential (emancipatory) transformation has to be researched more on the ground, where societal change is driving the appearance of (morbid) shifts we can observe on the level of international politics. A political economy of everyday narratives and subaltern politics offers empirical entry points for this undertaking.

Conclusion and prospects

Preoccupation with the current crisis of the LIO is not only keeping academics busy. The RAND Corporation speaks in a current report on the state of the LIO of a 'liberal overreach' that endangers the future of world order;¹⁰¹ and the report of the yearly Munich Security Conference even cites Gramsci in seeking words to express the state of things.¹⁰² The interregnum that signifies the slow end of the LIO as we knew it is fuelling both analytical enthusiasm and fears of possible global chaos and disarray. The framework sketched in this article starts from the notion that this interregnum is the new reality of world order, and that this reality needs analytical tools to steer research efforts and enable empirical research into its different characteristics. Speaking to a broader audience in IR and IPE, the article represents the first attempt to bring together the different spheres of the crisis of the LIO, and offers an empirical tutorial on how to approach this crisis analytically.

I have used three characteristics of crisis, drawn from Gramsci, to delineate different dimensions of the crisis of the LIO; and I have shown how those characteristics are opening up different empirical pathways into understanding the interregnum constituted by the current crisis. The results are summarized in table 1.

The core contribution of this article, then, is a parsimonious but comprehensive framework presented in the hope of inspiring more research that will go beyond 'managing the deterioration' of the LIO,¹⁰³ and will open up discussion about the

¹⁰¹ Michael J. Mazarr, Astrid Stuth Cevallos, Miranda Priebe, Andrew Radin, Kathleen Reedy, Alexander D. Rothenberg, Julia A. Thompson and Jordan Willcox, *Measuring the health of the liberal international order* (Santa Barbara, CA: RAND, 2017), p. xviii.

¹⁰² Munich Security Conference, *The great puzzle: who will pick up the pieces?* (Munich: Munich Security Report, 2019), p. 16.

¹⁰³ Richard Haass, 'How a world order ends, and what comes in its wake', *Foreign Affairs* 98: 1, Jan.–Feb. 2019, pp. 22–30.

Table 1: Overview of the analytical framework

Level of analysis	Gramscian crisis dimension	LIO crisis dimension	Empirical entry points	Example references
Global political economy	Processuality	Contradictions of American hegemony	Financialization	Adam Tooze, <i>Crashed: how a decade of financial crises changed the world</i> (New York: Viking, 2018)
			Long-term challenge by contenders (China)	Thomas J. Christensen, <i>The China challenge</i> (New York and London: Norton, 2016)
State	Organicity	National–international divide	Political economy of global populism	James Bisbee, Layna Mosley, Thomas B. Pepinsky and B. Peter Rosendorff, ‘Decompensating domestically: the political economy of anti-globalism’, <i>Journal of European Public Policy</i> , 2019
			Discursive factors of renationalization	William A. Callahan, ‘China’s “Asia Dream”: the Belt Road Initiative and the new regional order’, <i>Asian Journal of Comparative Politics</i> 1: 3, 2016, pp. 226–43
			Material factors of renationalization	Andreas Møller Mulvad, ‘Xiism as a hegemonic project in the making: Sino-communist ideology and the political economy of China’s rise’, <i>Review of International Studies</i> 45: 3, July 2019, pp. 449–70
Society	Morbidity	Foundations of western ‘civic identity’	Everyday narratives of crisis	Liam Stanley and Richard Jackson, ‘Introduction: everyday narratives in world politics’, <i>Politics</i> 36: 3, 2016, pp. 223–35
			Changing class and subaltern relations	Hans-Jürgen Bieling, ‘Rise of right-wing populism in the Europe of today: outlines of a sociotheoretical exploration’, <i>Culture, Practice and Europeanization</i> 4: 1, 2019, pp. 78–91

possibilities and limits of global change for academics and policy-makers alike. It is important to stress that the framework set out here, constrained by the limits on space in the article format, should not be understood as a complete account of the crisis of the LIO, which is a long-term, multidisciplinary and complex undertaking requiring consideration of a range of additional factors. One good example of a topic that needs more attention beyond this article is the role of war and military spending in the hegemonic decline of the United States.¹⁰⁴ This and many other topics need to be part and parcel of future research efforts. This article

¹⁰⁴ Thomas Oatley, *A political economy of American hegemony: buildups, booms, and busts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

seeks merely to kick-start the development of empirically useful analytical tools with which to address in detail these various aspects of the crisis of the LIO.

The stance taken here also implies a more rigorous and analytically restrained approach to questions of a future world order: a redirection of research efforts into understanding the present rather than predicting the future is a promising strategy to produce better insights into the social dynamics that are drastically changing the face of world order and societies around the globe. Thinking along these lines with Gramsci can help us to make sense of what might otherwise at times present an incoherent and morbid picture.