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Liberal Internationalism - Historical Trajectory and Current Prospects

Beate Jahn

Abstract

Liberal internationalism has been in crisis for a while now. Yet, until recently its supporters have argued that its prospects are better than ever since the successful spread of liberal principles, practices and institutions in the international sphere provides the necessary basis for reform. Alas, recent political developments do not support these expectations. In fact, the Brexit vote, the Trump election, and the rise of populism more generally challenge liberalism in the domestic sphere and aim to unravel its international achievements. But the idea that these movements are therefore liberalism's nemesis does not quite follow. Providing a theoretical and historical analysis of liberalism, this article shows that the separation of domestic and international politics is constitutive of liberalism itself. The successful extension of liberal principles into the international sphere undermines this separation and thus liberalism itself. Ironically, therefore, the prospects of liberal internationalism are dependent on the reestablishment of a clear divide between domestic and international politics. And this, I argue, is precisely the goal of contemporary populist movements.

Keywords

liberalism, liberal internationalism, American foreign policy, Brexit, Trump, populism, power politics

Introduction

The end of the Cold War was widely seen as ushering in a liberal world order. Liberal states seemed to have triumphed over communism, liberal theories appeared vindicated while realism found itself in trouble, and liberal internationalist policies were expected to quickly realize liberal principles in all those parts of the world that had not yet fully embraced them.

It did not take long, though, for these expectations to be frustrated. Already in the course of the 1990s, many of the policies designed to realize this vision - from democracy promotion through humanitarian intervention to neoliberal economic policies - failed to achieve their aims. Under the Bush administration in the early

2000s, the United States (US) seemed to abandon liberal internationalism altogether. It replaced multilateralism with unilateralism, shunned its friends and allies, ignored international institutions, pursued an aggressive and illegal foreign policy, and prominently violated human rights.¹ In addition, neoliberal economic policies led in 2008 to a global financial crisis. Liberal internationalism, as observers widely agreed, was in crisis and some even argued that the liberal international 'experiment has failed'.²

The death of liberal internationalism, proponents argued however, had been greatly exaggerated. Though they concurred that liberal internationalism was in crisis, their analysis suggested that this was a crisis of success. The success of liberal internationalist policies had fed the hubris of the US as the leading power and architect of the liberal world order since 1945. Insensitive to the positions and interests of other states, it acted like a bully and thus generated resistance. Thus, Ikenberry argues, it is not liberal internationalism that is in crisis but rather America's authority as the hegemonic leader of the liberal world order; it is a crisis of 'American authority'.³

According to this analysis, the successful spread of liberal principles in the international sphere provided excellent conditions for a revival of liberal internationalism.⁴ In the absence of serious external enemies, the US was free to embark on internal reform, to address this crisis of 'American authority'. A liberal international environment, in other words, was seen as a precondition for, and conducive to, the realization of liberal principles per se. And these principles in turn would provide the basis for a reformed 'democratic internationalism' without the counterproductive features of American hubris and exceptionalism.⁵

And yet, recent political developments run counter to these expectations. The Brexit vote, the Trump election and the rise of populism in core liberal states more generally constitute an attack on, rather than the reform of, core liberal principles. What is more, instead of capitalizing on the successes of liberal internationalism, these movements explicitly set out to demolish its core principles and achievements. These developments suggest that liberalism's international success, far from providing the basis for domestic reform, plays a role in undermining its domestic constituency.

Assessing the prospects of liberal internationalism thus requires an analysis of its role in and for liberalism in general. I will begin by showing that the relationship between the domestic and international spheres plays a crucial - albeit radically different - role in liberal internationalism and in contemporary populism. In order to evaluate these two contradictory accounts, the second part of this article explores the relationship between the domestic and the international in liberal theory - and shows that their separation is a precondition for, and constitutive of, liberalism. The third section provides a brief historical sketch of the establishment and development of liberalism. It demonstrates that the divide between the domestic and international spheres allowed liberalism to manage its internal contradictions. Overcoming that divide through the successful constitution of a globalized liberal world order undermines this function and thus endangers the political, economic and ideological basis of liberalism as such.

This analysis suggests, I will conclude, that the successful spread of liberal principles abroad paradoxically undermines liberalism at home. While the advocates of liberal internationalism are correct, therefore, to identify the current crisis as one of success, they mistakenly reduce this crisis to one of American leadership and misjudge its implications. Rather, the prospects of liberalism - and by extension of liberal or a reformed democratic internationalism - are dependent on the emergence of serious external and/or internal threats, on the reerection of a clear domestic/international divide. And this, I argue, is paradoxically the goal of the Brexiteers, the Trumpists, and contemporary populist movements more generally.

The crisis of liberal internationalism

Liberal internationalism is today widely associated with the foreign policies of the US - particularly since WW II but often also traced back to Woodrow Wilson. Liberal internationalism and American foreign policy are, of course, not identical. American governments, such as the Bush or Trump administrations, do not always pursue liberal internationalist foreign policies; and the foreign policies of other, for example European, states may also fit into this framework. There is nevertheless significant overlap between the current debate on the crisis of liberal internationalism and

American foreign policy - largely because the US has indeed been the leading liberal power in world politics during the 20th century.⁶

In order to sketch the crisis of liberal internationalism, it is necessary to first outline its achievements. Thus, from 1945 to 1989 the US managed to establish a liberal order in the Western part of the world, a liberal international subsystem.⁷ This liberal subsystem had five distinguishing features: co-binding security arrangements, penetrated reciprocal hegemony, the integration of semi-sovereign and partial great powers, economic openness, and civic identity.⁸ Against this background, the end of the Cold War opened up the possibility to extend these features to the international order at large, to realize a liberal world order 'marked by openness, sovereign equality, respect for human rights, democratic accountability, widely shared economic opportunity, and the muting of great power rivalry, as well as collective efforts to keep the peace, promote the rule of law, and sustain an array of international institutions tailored to solving and managing ... common global problems'.⁹

This vision, however, did not come to pass despite considerable efforts during the 1990s. While capitalism and neoliberal economic policies were successfully rolled out to societies in Eastern Europe and the Third World that had previously followed the Soviet model, they did not generate general prosperity but economically very painful transitions and rising inequality. Concerted efforts to promote democracy - through assistance, sanctions, and military interventions - led in most target societies to some form of 'illiberal' or 'authoritarian democracy'.¹⁰ Humanitarian interventions were selectively undertaken, quickly abandoned in the face of (human or financial) costs, and often destabilized polities and even triggered civil war.¹¹

Many of these failures, liberal internationalists argued, had their roots in American exceptionalism and hubris. Being 'born liberal' with little experience of violent class struggle, the US overlooked that capitalism generates 'maldistribution of wealth, income, and opportunity' and thus requires social democratic forms of redistribution. Instead, it imposed the 'fundamentalist capitalism' of the Reagan-Thatcher era with the result of increasing inequality - policies that split populations, undermined support for free trade, and highlighted the fact that the US does not accept responsibility to help the 'bottom billion'.¹²

The unique historical experience of the US also blinded it to the fact that the introduction of democracy in states characterized by different social and political conditions - both in Europe and in postcolonial states - had led to the development of different models of democracy. Yet, its leading role allowed the US to overlook that these models of democracy were, on many measures, more successful than the American one which it exported indiscriminately.¹³

The extraordinary power of the US in a unipolar liberal world order also facilitated insensitivity towards the interests and identities of other states, entailed frequent interventions in their internal affairs, led to power politics and even to aggressive war in Iraq. Despite its military might, moreover, the rise of terrorism indicated that US foreign policies failed to provide security.¹⁴ Thus, American authority declined on account of its high-handed policies - its willingness to reject treaties (Kyoto Protocol, ICC, ABM), its violation of international law (Guantanamo Bay), the rejection of help from NATO in the war against the Taliban, the war against Iraq without UN authorization - and led to resistance even amongst friends and allies.¹⁵

According to this account, the crisis of liberal internationalism is a crisis of success. Liberal internationalist policies were so successful in empowering the US that it was able to disregard the interests and achievements of other states, to ignore its own shortcomings, to apply international law and military power selectively, and to undermine commitment to free trade as well as paving the way for the development of competing democratic powers like the BRICS.¹⁶

Yet this success, liberal internationalists argued, also provided the resources for reform - for a new grand strategy of democratic internationalism. The 'realization of the worldwide triumph of the liberal vision is within reach' because now 'the obstacles are located primarily within the democratic world'.¹⁷ In other words, liberal internationalism, despite its shortcomings, successfully removed any major external threat or competitor and this paves the way for the necessary internal reforms. In order to realize these reforms, the US has to recognize that the times of exceptionalism and unchallenged leadership are over. Democratic internationalism entails the recognition that liberal internationalism has its 'roots in social democratic

ideals' that compensate the inevitable losers of a capitalist economy and cushion its divisive tendencies.¹⁸ It also requires a move towards more collaboration and burden sharing with other democracies and the readiness to pay attention to, and learn from, their experiences in order to revitalize democracy and citizen participation at home.¹⁹ And it has to develop foreign policy tools that work more by way of example and 'pull' rather than imposition and 'push'.²⁰ In short, the liberalization of the international sphere was seen as the precondition for a revival of liberalism at home and, in turn, democratic internationalism abroad - both as a result of the removal of external threats.

Alas, the Brexit vote, the Trump election, and the rise of populist movements more generally challenge this analysis in two core respects. First, they run counter to the claim that the current crisis is not one of liberal principles but of American authority. Current populist movements undermine core liberal principles in the domestic sphere. Though they generate more citizen participation, they do so through rallies and referenda rather than liberal democracy. They also challenge the rule of law by attacking judges or willfully subjecting them to political interests. They make nationalism, racism, misogyny and the attack on other minorities respectable again.²¹ Moreover, these policies cannot be attributed to a crisis of American authority alone. While American high-handedness may indeed have played a role in the current crisis, the distribution of these populist movements suggests a deeper problem. Much of the British population is unhappy with European, not American, policies. Germany has a populist movement despite the fact that it practices more social democratic policies of redistribution than the US and weathered the latest economic crisis rather well. Not only Donald Trump but also Marine le Pen is flirting with Russia and other authoritarian states. Populist practices, rather than liberal democracy, are spreading in countries with very different democratic traditions.

Second, rather than building on the achievements of liberal internationalism, populist movements systematically target and aim to dismantle these achievements. They attack multilateralism and put 'America (or Britain, or France) first'; they prioritize national over international law, citizenship over human rights; they cooperate with authoritarian regimes; they drop free trade agreements, exit free trade blocs and pursue protectionist policies; they attempt to block migration and travel and thus build

walls rather than bridges between states. Today's populist movements, in short, rebel against the globalized liberal world order - and thus liberal internationalism's greatest achievement.²²

We are thus confronted with two radically different takes on the current crisis and its solutions. While liberal internationalists trace its roots to arrogant American foreign policies and view a reformed democratic internationalism as the solution, populists identify liberal elites as the problem and aim to solve it by discarding liberal principles. Despite these fundamental differences, however, the relationship between the domestic and international spheres plays a crucial role in both narratives. In both cases, the nature of the international order determines the possibilities of domestic development. An assessment of the prospects of liberal internationalism thus has to come to grips with the relationship between domestic and international politics in and for liberalism.

The international in liberal theory

Liberalism is generally taken to denote a particular form of government characterized by individual rights, the rule of law, private property and the political participation of the population - it is a form of domestic politics. These domestic liberal principles may then be extended into the international sphere. Yet, both liberal internationalists as well as contemporary populist movements turn this sequence onto its head when they treat a liberal international sphere either as a precondition for the reform and further development of domestic liberalism or as a crucial barrier to domestic (national) development. Turning to the work of John Locke, I will show that the separation of, and dynamic relationship between, the domestic and the international sphere is, in fact, a constitutive element of liberalism.

Liberalism is a complex cultural phenomenon, 'a complex of elements associated in historical reality which we unite into a conceptual whole from the standpoint of their cultural significance'.²³ Though liberalism, therefore, does not have a founder, and its individual elements have their own histories, Locke is widely regarded as (one of) the first who put its different elements together into a coherent whole that subsequently inspired a powerful political movement.²⁴ The work of Locke thus provides an entrypoint into the study of liberalism. Moreover, Locke wrote before the existence of

liberal polities and thus explicitly formulates the policies necessary to establish liberalism - including, I will show, the crucial role of the international.

In response to the general crisis of the 17th century that had undermined the political, religious, intellectual and economic order in Europe in general and England in particular, Locke set out to develop a new conception of politics. He began by positing a self-evident principle, namely that the state of nature of all men is 'a *State of perfect Freedom* to order their Actions, and dispose of their Possessions, and Persons as they think fit'.²⁵ Yet, in order to uphold this freedom human beings needed to preserve themselves.²⁶ This requirement could be fulfilled, Locke argued, if 'every Man has a *Property* in his own *Person*' and 'the *Labour* of his *Body* and the *Work* of his *Hands*'.²⁷ Self-possession, property in one's person and the fruit of one's labor, thus allows individuals 'the taking any part of what is common, and removing it out of the state Nature leaves it in, which *begins the Property*'.²⁸ According to Locke, this natural right to private property underpins and upholds not just the life of the individual who would otherwise perish;²⁹ it also makes the individual independent of others for its survival and thus establishes its freedom. This natural freedom of the individual then militates against absolute government. 'Men are naturally free, and the Examples of History shewing, that the Governments of the World... had their beginning laid on that foundation, and were made by the Consent of the people'.³⁰ And since this freedom is based on property, the 'great and *chief end* therefore (of government) is *the Preservation of their Property*'.³¹

According to Locke's theory, then, the three core principles of liberal thought are private property, individual freedom, and government by consent. These principles still lie at the core of most conceptions of liberalism. Today they are embodied in market economy, human rights, and democracy. Crucially, however, in Locke's theory these principles are mutually constitutive: Private property constitutes individual freedom and individual freedom requires government by consent whose main task in turn is the protection of private property which completes the circle by upholding individual freedom.

This theoretical core indeed suggests that liberalism is first and foremost concerned with domestic politics. And yet, it turned out that this vision of domestic politics

could not be realized in practice because it did not reflect the social and political conditions in Locke's time. Most people simply had no private property and most governments were not based on consent. Instead of an analysis of reality, therefore, this was a normative theory - offering a political model to be realized. To this end, Locke had to develop a political strategy for the realization of liberalism in a nonliberal environment. And in this strategy, the international sphere played a crucial role.

If private property was the basis of individual freedom, Locke argued, property owners would demand that government protect private property and hence their freedom. He thus advocated the extension of full political rights to property owners - and their denial to those who did not own property. '*Paternal Power* is ... where Minority makes the Child incapable to manage his property; *Political* where Men have Property in their own disposal; and *Despotic* over such as have no property at all'.³²

Yet limiting political rights to property owners contradicted his claim that, in principle, all people were born free and equal and thus had a right to consent to government. Hence, Locke was interested in extending the franchise and he argued that this could be achieved by providing private property, ideally, to all members of society who would thus be constituted as free individuals in the liberal sense and in turn support liberal political and economic institutions. This solution, however, raised the question where all this additional property was to come from. Private property was, after all, protected and could therefore not be redistributed. So, Locke argued that because private property was more productive than common property and thus of greater benefit to all of humankind,³³ common property could be turned into private property: God gave the land 'to the use of the Industrious and Rational'.³⁴ People could simply attain property by mixing their individual labor with the original common property. The privatization of common property was thus the solution to the problem.

Yet, land - at the time the most important additional source of wealth - in England was too scarce to provide the vast and rising number of poor with property. Hence Locke looked abroad: 'Yet there are still *great Tracts of Ground* to be found, which

(...), *lie waste*, and are more than the People who dwell on it, do, or can make use of, and so still lie in common'.³⁵ It was this common land in America which could be used, at least in principle, to furnish all individuals with property and thus make them eligible to full political rights. The establishment of liberalism thus required policies of colonialism which Locke's writings - political and theoretical - consistently advocate and defend.³⁶

The solution to Locke's conundrum - that the constitution of liberalism required the spread of private property even while private property could not be redistributed because it had to be protected as the basis of individual freedom - thus lay in the international sphere. It lay in the possibility to appropriate other peoples' property and this in turn required power politics. In other words, the constitution of domestic liberalism required a sharp distinction between two different political spheres: the domestic sphere governed by the rule of law and liberal principles and the international sphere characterized by power politics.

According to this Lockean theory, in sum, the core principles of liberalism are individual freedom, private property, and government by consent. And the core policies necessary to establish a society based on these principles are, first, the privatization of common property - and hence the expropriation of communities whose livelihood depends on that common property. And since the latter cannot be supposed to have any interest in their own expropriation, the establishment of liberalism, second, requires the extension of political rights to property owners only - and their denial to those who do not own property.

These policies of appropriation and expropriation, emancipation and oppression, however, clearly lead to tensions within society - between those who benefit from privatization and those who lose, between those who gain political rights and those who don't. These tensions and the lack of sufficient common land for privatization in the domestic sphere put limits on the pursuit of liberal policies. The solution to this problem lay in the international sphere - where land held in common was plentiful and its appropriation/colonization did not exacerbate the tensions within domestic society but helped relieve them. In theory, therefore, the relationship between the domestic and the international functions like a safety valve that allows the import of

economic benefits from the international sphere and the export of political tensions from the domestic sphere. The question for the next section therefore is whether and how this theoretical logic played itself out historically.

The international in liberal history

This section provides a, necessarily brief, historical account of the establishment and development of liberalism - with particular attention to the relationship between the domestic and the international. It shows that the policies outlined in Locke's theory do, indeed, lie at the core of liberalism. The historical development of liberalism confirms the liberal internationalists' injunction that the current crisis is a crisis of success. But it also shows that this paradoxical dynamic is a constitutive part of liberalism and not just a problem of American authority.

Protoliberal developments followed the crisis of the 17th century that had loosened many of the rigid rules of society. While the lower classes were widely interested in keeping and institutionalizing these freedoms,³⁷ men like Locke's own employer, the Earl of Shaftesbury, who had made fortunes (often through overseas trade) demanded political rights with direct reference to their property - which led to a huge increase of members in the House of Commons.³⁸ Their political representation resulted in the establishment of a liberal state characterized by the transference of *de jure* political power into the hands of commercial and capitalistic interests and the stabilization of property rights in 17th century Britain.³⁹ Hence, just as Locke had argued, private property constituted individual freedom which in turn provided the basis for government by consent.

Once in power this ruling elite systematically pursued the privatization of common property and justified it with reference to its productivity. Locke's work was frequently cited in Parliament in support of private enclosure acts which, between 1710 and 1815, transferred 20% of the total land from common into private property.⁴⁰ This large-scale privatization of common land led, within the domestic sphere, to the impoverishment of wide sections of society and thus to upheavals, rebellions and the threat of revolution.⁴¹ These protoliberal policies hence did not just constitute free liberal individuals - they simultaneously constituted nonliberal forces who could not be expected to uphold private property rights and therefore had to be

denied political rights.⁴² In short, the realization of liberal principles produced an economically and politically deeply divided society.

These tensions were right from the start relieved, to some extent, through colonialism. Locke's justification of colonialism was widely used by 'preachers, legal theorists, and politicians' to base first the land claims of the British colonists and then those of the American citizens on the enclosure and cultivation of indigenous land.⁴³ The same argument was also influential in Australia, New Zealand, Canada well into the 19th century.⁴⁴ Colonialism allowed the European elites to appropriate 'foreign' land - thus easing the economic burden on the domestic poor. It also provided an opportunity for the poor to emigrate; and it allowed the government to export its poor, its criminals, its orphans as well as to offer employment for the middle and higher classes in the administration of the colonies - and thus eased political pressure on domestic government.⁴⁵ Most importantly for the subsequent political development of settler states like the US, however, colonialism provided common political ground - namely the interest in expropriating foreign land and hence a commitment to the principle of private property which justified this expropriation - for rich and poor alike and thus bridged the gap between their otherwise mutually exclusive interests.

Yet, while these colonial enterprises served to relieve some of the tensions in the domestic sphere, they added pressures in their own right. Competition between empires during the 18th century - often generated by local interests and private pressures - led to extremely expensive wars that were fought out all over the globe. And it was the attempt to pay for these wars by increasing taxes that exacerbated the already existing tensions between rich and poor in domestic society and played a major role in triggering the revolutions of the end of the 18th century. In France the Revolution forced the ruling elites to widen the franchise.⁴⁶ In the American colonies, the settlers often had private property but did not enjoy the same political rights (such as consenting to taxes) as their peers in the mother country. Hence they fought for political independence - the right to sovereignty.⁴⁷ At the turn of the 19th century, in short, the domestic and international tensions created by liberal policies came home to roost - in the form of domestic revolutions and the fragmentation of empires, not only in the British colonies in North America but also in much of Latin America.⁴⁸

This age of revolution gave rise to new forms of thinking about politics⁴⁹ that found expression in the 'rights of man'⁵⁰ - the right to life, liberty and property or the pursuit of happiness - and provided the foundation for the formulation of human rights that today play such a crucial role in liberal thought and practice. Both in America and France these rights were codified in the new constitutions and provided the basis for individual liberty in the form of rights to political participation in the domestic sphere as well as for 'national' liberty or the right to 'sovereignty' in the international sphere. Though universal in their formulation and aspiration, these rights were quite particular in their application. While the French Revolution led to an extension of the franchise, women, the non-propertied sections of society, the colonial population in St Domingue and European populations that came under French rule in the course of the Napoleonic wars were excluded from equal political rights. It also led to the crowning of Napoleon as emperor and the pursuit of empire building both within, and less successfully, outside Europe.⁵¹ Independent Brazil, too, set itself up as an empire and excluded vast sections of the population from political rights.⁵² Threatened by the military and ideological challenge of the French Revolution and fearful of social upheaval, Britain entered a new phase of imperial expansion.⁵³ And American independence led to an 'empire of liberty' that included slavery and rightless indigenous populations as well as the pursuit of westward expansion.⁵⁴ Moreover, when westward expansion was completed towards the end of the 19th century, the USA joined other imperial powers - at the time engaged in the scramble for Africa - in the construction of its own overseas empire.⁵⁵ These policies were largely motivated by and 'operated as a massive scheme of economic redistribution ... that lined the pockets of a privileged class of traders and investors'.⁵⁶ There was, then, nothing exceptional about American foreign policy.

The 19th century, in sum, was characterized by the contradictory political principles of political freedom and its denial, of sovereignty and imperialism.⁵⁷ Empire-building was a liberal enterprise systematically supported by liberal international lawyers⁵⁸ and political thinkers alike.⁵⁹ Indeed, the principle of layered sovereignty so characteristic of empire was confirmed by the Berlin Conference as late as the end of the 19th century.⁶⁰ And the idea of an international order based on nation states was only codified in 1948 in the UN Charter, and largely realized in the 1970s after decolonization.⁶¹

In the course of the 19th century, however, liberal elites were forced into a variety of political and economic compromises. In Europe, the industrial revolution led to heightened exploitation of workers as well as the wide spread constitution of workers' movements.⁶² But it also generated economic growth and the development of a sizable middle class.⁶³ The combined political pressure from workers' movements and 'liberal' middle classes led to widespread if short-lived revolutions in the middle of the 19th century and forced the ruling elites to make a number of concessions. These included the lowering of the property threshold for voting rights and thus a gradual extension of political rights to the middle class. Workers, meanwhile, were provided with economic concessions in the form of welfare legislation (Germany) or factory regulation (Britain). These social democratic forms of redistribution thus do not constitute 'roots' of liberalism;⁶⁴ they are, rather, the result of considerable political pressure.

And it is the absence of this pressure that explains the divergent development in settler states like America. The necessary manpower to conquer and settle such territory was provided through large scale immigration and motivated by promises of land ownership. Consequently, settler societies were characterized by a relatively wide distribution of property, by alternatives to industrial work, and by the common political interest in the expropriation of the indigenous population and thus a commitment to the protection of private property underpinning these policies. Hence, the political pressure to introduce social democratic forms of redistribution was largely missing in settler states.⁶⁵

Despite these political and economic compromises, however, by the end of the 19th century liberal states had managed to create the first liberal world order: consisting of a highly integrated world economy based on liberal interests and the extension of formal or informal rule of liberal states to virtually all parts of the globe and enforced by the most powerful liberal state of the time - Britain. Yet it was precisely this success that quickly turned into a major crisis and the fragmentation of this liberal world order. With no space left for external expansion - for the import of economic benefits and the export of political problems - the tensions and contradictions of liberalism played themselves out within that liberal world order. They produced three

major fault lines. First, they intensified competition between liberal states for colonies which played an important role in the runup to World War I (WW I). Second, the contradictions between political freedom for some populations and the political oppression of others were now embodied within liberal empires and led to independence movements in the colonies. Third, the war and its aftermath led to heightened protectionism, a major economic crisis and rising economic inequality. The liberal economic dynamic of appropriation through expropriation thus played itself out in the domestic sphere where it fed fascism and communism - antiliberal forces on the right and on the left - and led to revolution in Russia as well as the introduction of universal suffrage in most European states. The first liberal world order, in short, succumbed to the internal contradictions of liberalism in the course of World War II (WW II) - giving way to a bipolar system and the Cold War.

This comprehensive crisis, however, catapulted the US into the leading role. WW I severely weakened European powers and it generated serious anxiety about the future of race relations, particularly in the US.⁶⁶ Woodrow Wilson, often seen as the author of American liberal internationalism, combined the latter with a systematic 'liberal imperialism' in theory and practice.⁶⁷ Again, however, it was the fear of external threats, the spectre of the Soviet Union and the rise of communism and fascism in Europe, and internal revolution, the global economic crisis and increasing poverty, that finally led to the implementation of the New Deal and hence the adoption of social democratic forms of redistribution also in America.⁶⁸

On the basis of this experience, the US began to develop and implement what we now call liberal internationalism after WW II. These policies were driven by US interest in the consolidation and spread of capitalism in general and stable markets in Europe in particular. This required the containment of the Soviet Union and the communist alternative it offered - both to newly independent states in the Third World and to dissatisfied populations in core liberal states.⁶⁹ These dangers created bipartisan support for economic aid in the form of the Marshall Plan for Europe, for the institutionalization of liberal economic principles through the Bretton Woods institutions, for the United Nations as a means to check aggression, for development aid integrating newly independent states into the liberal capitalist camp, and for the promotion of democracy and human rights.⁷⁰ The 'embedded liberalism' of the post-

War period ensured and expanded free trade while providing individual states with the opportunity to develop a welfare state and to regulate employment.⁷¹ This post-WW II liberal internationalism thus consisted in extending liberal principles, practices and institutions into the international sphere as a means to consolidate, strengthen and expand the liberal camp.

Yet, this extension of liberal principles was again accompanied by political oppression and expropriation. While the US promoted democracy in principle, it equally systematically suppressed the political rights of populations with (supposedly) nonliberal leanings through interventions and propped up dictators that implemented and guaranteed liberal economic principles and/or provided support for the 'liberal' side in the Cold War.⁷² Redistributive economic policies were abandoned in response to the economic downturn of the 1970s, and replaced with a remarkable revival of laissez-faire liberalism in the form of market economics, the privatization of state-owned industries, and the trimming of welfare benefits by liberal democracies.⁷³ Such neoliberal economic policies were also extended into the international sphere. Liberalization, deregulation and privatization - that is, the expropriation of common property and the removal of protections for vulnerable populations - provided the core of the 'Washington consensus' imposed by financial institutions like the IMF, the World Bank and the US Treasury on developing countries. The results of these policies were often disastrous - increasing poverty and inequality feeding political unrest.⁷⁴

But it was the emergence of a second liberal world order after the end of the Cold War that undermined the domestic/international divide which allows liberalism to manage these tensions - and thus undermined liberalism itself, above all in core liberal states. The end of the Soviet Union and with it the absence of a serious external (political, economic, ideological) threat eroded the bipartisan consensus in liberal polities and led to the fragmentation of the political landscape with extreme parties on the right and on the left gaining power.⁷⁵ With liberal capitalism the only game in town, the need for political or economic compromise in the domestic sphere was gone. The much despised 'cosmopolitan establishment'⁷⁶ could now pursue its economic interests unimpeded across the globe. Welfare states were further dismantled, followed by austerity policies after the financial crisis of 2008, and

economic inequality took on obscene dimensions. Instead of protecting domestic populations in core liberal states from the inevitable downside of capitalism by importing and redistributing economic benefits from the international sphere, these populations now experienced the exact opposite: the export of investment and jobs into the international sphere.

Economic globalization and the rise of inequality as well as civil wars and military interventions that often exacerbated these conflicts⁷⁷ increased refugee flows and migration. Thus, instead of being able to export political conflicts, populations in core liberal states saw themselves confronted with the import of political tensions in the form of refugees and migrants. And the 'globalization' of human rights law and policies challenged the hitherto privileged citizenship rights and identities of majority populations in core liberal states. The erosion of the domestic/international divide thus undermined the economic, political and ideological basis of domestic liberalism and generated resistance: the anti-globalization movement, the occupy movement, populist movements and parties.

The establishment of a liberal world order also undermined the crucial distinction between a liberal and a nonliberal camp that had informed, and was used to justify, liberal foreign policies. In the absence of a serious nonliberal camp, policies of liberal cooperation and integration fell apart. The Iraq war was not backed by a liberal alliance, such as NATO, but by a 'coalition of the willing' - states motivated by a variety of interests (ranging from aid to American support in other matters). Multilateralism lost support in many liberal states. Humanitarian intervention and democracy promotion were selectively undertaken and openly justified with reference to the interests of powerful states⁷⁸, undermining liberal principles like the commitment to stop genocide⁷⁹ - and generating resistance within target populations.⁸⁰ The selective adherence to human rights (Guantanamo Bay) and international law in general (Iraq) and accusations of bias (ICC) undermine the standing of international law. In the absence of an alternative to capitalism, protectionism and hence competition between liberal states is on the rise. Increasing economic inequality within and between states belies the liberal promise of general prosperity and generates increasing resistance to further liberalization on the part of developing states (Doha Round).

The current crisis, in sum, follows the logic of liberalism's constitution and historical development. In order to manage the tensions and fragmentary dynamics between its winners and losers, liberalism established a clear distinction between the domestic and the international political spheres - projecting the dark side of its policies into the international sphere as a precondition for realizing its promises in the domestic sphere. Ironically, however, the successful spread of liberal principles and practices into the international sphere undermines this divide and with it the basis of liberalism itself.

Conclusion: the prospects of democratic internationalism

Advocates of liberal internationalism are highly perceptive when they note that the current crisis is rooted in the overwhelming success - rather than failure - of liberal internationalism. It was indeed the 'triumph' of liberalism over its Cold War competitor and the resultant liberal world order that engendered this crisis. But they underestimate the nature and significance of this success and thus also misjudge the prospects of a reformed democratic internationalism.

The success of post-WW II American foreign policy, they argue, fed American hubris, arrogance, and exceptionalism which in turn found expression in insensitive and high-handed policies that ultimately undermined the community of liberal states and contributed to a shift of power relations away from the US and its European allies.⁸¹ It also lay behind the aggressive spread of 'fundamentalist capitalism' which created the very inequalities that now feed resistance against globalization, free trade, banks, and common markets.⁸² The logic of this analysis, however, suggests that the current crisis can be resolved with no more than a dose of humble pie. The US has to recognize and accept that there exist different models of democracy, that liberalism can only thrive if it practices a social democratic and thus more equitable form of capitalism, that it must respect the sovereignty of other states, and that it has to abide by international law and respect human rights at home if it wants to spread them abroad. Today, the prospects of this democratic internationalism, proponents argue, are 'unprecedented' because liberalism does not face a serious external threat and is therefore free to pursue the necessary 'internal reforms'.⁸³

This analysis overlooks that the success of liberal internationalism depends on this very distinction between inside and outside, domestic and international, liberal and nonliberal spheres. The establishment of liberalism requires, and historically systematically entailed, both appropriation and expropriation, political emancipation and political oppression. Indeed, as Ikenberry notes, the US rejected treaties, violated rules, ignored allies and used military force 'in every historical period' - just as it also respected some rules and allies. Such contradictory behavior is therefore neither the result of 'an occasional ad hoc policy decision' nor the expression of an 'illiberal' foreign policy.⁸⁴ It is, rather, an integral feature of liberalism - and hence also part of a reformed democratic internationalism⁸⁵ - which creates tensions and conflict in society. The separation of the domestic and international spheres enabled liberal actors to manage these fragmentary tendencies: it allowed them to pursue expropriation abroad and redistribution at home, to practice power politics abroad and political emancipation at home. And these differential principles governing domestic and international politics were justified through nationalist, racist, developmentalist ideologies that asserted the superiority of domestic over foreign populations.⁸⁶

Yet, in a liberal world order, populations in core liberal states no longer experience the import of economic benefits from abroad but their export in the form of investment and jobs. And instead of the export of political conflicts, these now find their way into the domestic sphere, in the form of refugees, migrants or terrorists. And traditional identities based on the superiority of particular nations, races, genders, religions or sexualities are delegitimated by the globalization of human rights.

The erosion of the domestic/international divide thus destroys the liberal consensus within society. Socioeconomic cleavages are increasing;⁸⁷ extreme parties on the right and the left are getting stronger;⁸⁸ nationalism, racism and sexism are becoming respectable again; and the very idea of reason, truth, science, expertise upon which liberal claims were traditionally based is under attack.⁸⁹

Most importantly, however, today's populist movements explicitly identify liberal internationalism as the cause of the problem. They despise multilateralism, refuse to cooperate with international organizations, and (try to) exit the EU; they drop free trade agreements and pursue protectionist policies; they prioritize domestic over

international law, citizenship over human rights; they pursue travel bans and try to stop migration; they put 'America first' or 'take back control'.⁹⁰ All these policies serve but one goal: to reestablish a clear distinction between the domestic and the international sphere by building (ideological, legal or real) walls between nations. They aim to return to a time when this distinction ensured political consensus, economic prosperity, and a privileged identity through the exercise of power politics in the international sphere.

If this analysis is correct, then the survival of liberalism - and by extension the prospects of a democratic internationalism - depends on the emergence or construction of a serious external and/or internal threat. The core characteristics that we associate with liberalism today - democracy, prosperity, and equality before the law - are historically the result of 'significant social conflict and possible threat of revolution' that forced liberal elites to give up a wider share of political rights and economic benefits.⁹¹ In the absence of such political pressure, the spread of democracy does not provide the basis for cooperation and burden sharing, as democratic internationalists argue.⁹² On the contrary, democratic states have to provide economic benefits to the majority of their populations.⁹³ Democratization thus entails increasing pressure to secure a larger share of material benefits on the world market which leads to competition rather than cooperation between democratic states.⁹⁴ Similarly, in the absence of political pressure, liberal elites have no reason to engage in social democratic forms of redistribution. Even the few reforms triggered by the recent financial crisis are already being targeted for 'rollback'.⁹⁵ Moreover, without the political pressure to integrate a 'liberal' camp, the diversity of immigrant societies like the US does not provide opportunities to build bridges between states, as democratic internationalists argue.⁹⁶ Instead, it is widely perceived as a source of economic competition and cultural conflict. Finally, the lack of a serious military threat does not pave the way for bipartisan cooperation in the domestic sphere or security cooperation in the international sphere: instead, it removes the reasons for such cooperation. Hence, in facing contemporary terrorism - itself a product of the global liberal order and thus traversing the domestic/international divide - the US did not require the same kind of cooperation from its allies as the stand-off between the superpowers during the Cold War demanded.⁹⁷

Liberalism, this study suggests, requires a nonliberal environment to thrive - and the successful 'liberalization' of that environment thus ironically undermines liberalism itself. The future of democratic internationalism then depends on the reestablishment of some equivalent of the domestic/international divide - which is precisely what current populist movements aim for. Yet, while there are clear (and frightening) parallels between the demise of the liberal world order in the first part of the 20th century and its crisis today, there are also considerable differences. Both the Trump administration and the Brexiteers quickly found that 'taking back control', building walls and stopping migration, was easier said than done in a highly integrated world order. Their less than inspiring example also seems to have undermined support for similar populist movements in other states. And the generational division in the Brexit referendum suggests that younger people feel much less threatened by cultural pluralism - or maybe simply lack the experience of a thriving, relatively equitable and prosperous liberal polity to return to. As Moshik Temkin has recently observed, although history displays instructive parallels, it rarely repeats itself. We can thus not predict the future of democratic internationalism on the basis of historical precedent. 'But we can provide a critical, uncomfortable account of how we arrived at our seemingly incomprehensible current moment'.⁹⁸ And this is what a critical theory of liberal internationalism enables us to do.

¹ G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan. The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), especially chapter 6.

² Itamar Rabinovich, 'The Case of Restraint', *The American Interest*, 1 November 2007; G. John Ikenberry, 'Introduction: Woodrow Wilson, the Bush Administration, and the Future of Liberal Internationalism', in G. John Ikenberry, Thomas J. Knock, Anne-Marie Slaughter and Tony Smith, *The Crisis of American Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 4; see also Rebekka Friedman, Kevork Oskanian, and Ramon Pacheco Pardo (eds.) *After Liberalism? The Future of Liberalism in International Relations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013).

³ G. John Ikenberry, 'The Future of Liberal World Order', *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, 16(3), September 2015, p. 451.

⁴ Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, 'Democratic Internationalism. An American Grand Strategy for a Post-exceptionalist Era', *Council on Foreign Relations*, November 2012, p. 6.

⁵ Deudney and Ikenberry, 'Democratic Internationalism'.

⁶ My analysis focuses largely on the work of John Ikenberry and his collaborators as the most prolific and dedicated - or 'acute', in Samuel Moyn's terms ('Soft Sells: On Liberal Internationalism', *Foreign Policy* 14 September 2011) - of the American

advocates of liberal internationalism today. See, for example, G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Order and Imperial Ambition* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006); G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); G. John Ikenberry and Anne-Marie Slaughter (eds.), *Forging a World of Liberty under Law. U.S. National Security in the 21st Century*, <<http://www.princeton.edu/~ppns/report/FinalReport.pdf>> (22 September 2016). Because of the association of liberal internationalism with American foreign policies, I will focus on the latter and on developments in Europe in the historical section of this article.

⁷ Deudney and Ikenberry, 'Nature and Sources', p. 196.

⁸ Deudney and Ikenberry, 'Nature and Sources', pp. 180-1.

⁹ Deudney and Ikenberry, 'Democratic Internationalism', p. 7-8.

¹⁰ Thomas Carothers, 'Taking Stock of US Democracy Assistance', in Michael Cox, G. John Ikenberry and Takashi Inoguchi (eds.) *American Democracy Promotion: Impulses, Strategies, and Impacts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹¹ See, for example, Alan J. Kuperman, 'A Model Humanitarian Intervention? Reassessing NATO's Libya Campaign', *International Security* 38(1), 2013, pp. 105-136.

¹² Deudney and Ikenberry, 'Democratic Internationalism', pp. 17, 8, 4; Kupchan and Trubowitz, 'Dead Center', pp. 35-6; Dunne and MacDonald, 'Politics', pp. 11, 13.

¹³ Deudney and Ikenberry, 'Democratic Internationalism', pp. 5, 6, 17.

¹⁴ Beate Jahn, *Liberal Internationalism. Theory, History, Practice* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), p. 193; Tim Dunne and Matt McDonald, 'The politics of liberal internationalism', *International Politics* 50(1), 2013, pp. 11, 13; Rabinovich, 'Restraint'.

¹⁵ Charles A. Kupchan and Peter L. Trubowitz, 'Dead Center. The Demise of Liberal Internationalism in the United States', *International Security* 32(2), Fall 2007, pp. 25, 44; Rabinovich, 'Restraint'; Deudney and Ikenberry, 'Democratic Internationalism', p. 1.

¹⁶ Deudney and Ikenberry, 'Democratic Internationalism', pp. 3, 5.

¹⁷ Deudney and Ikenberry, 'Democratic Internationalism', p. 8.

¹⁸ Deudney and Ikenberry, 'Democratic Internationalism', pp. 1, 8; Ikenberry, 'Introduction', p. 16; Kupchan and Trubowitz, 'Dead Center'; Nick Bromell and John Tirman, *Recovering the Liberal Foreign Policy Tradition*, (MIT Center for International Studies, 2008).

¹⁹ Deudney and Ikenberry, 'Democratic Internationalism', pp. 6, 8.

²⁰ Deudney and Ikenberry, 'Democratic Internationalism', p. 7.

²¹ Derek Sayer, 'White riot - Brexit, Trump, and post-factual politics', *Journal of Historical Sociology* 30, 2007, p. 102.

²² Craig Calhoun, 'Brexit Is a Mutiny Against the Cosmopolitan Elite', *New Perspectives Quarterly*, 33(3), July 2016, pp. 50-58.

²³ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Unwin, 1984), p. 47.

²⁴ John Gray, *Liberalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 11; Andrzej Rapaczynski, *Nature and Politics. Liberalism in the Philosophies of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 6, 14; C. B. MacPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 262. This does not mean that Locke's work provides the

starting point for a 'linear history of the unfolding of liberal thought' but rather that it entails core elements and dynamics of liberalism that are subsequently developed and adjusted to particular circumstances in space and time (see Andreas Kalyvas and Ira Katznelson, *Liberal Beginnings. Making a Republic for the Moderns* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 117).

²⁵ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. by Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 269.

²⁶ Locke, *Two Treatises*, p. 271.

²⁷ Locke, *Two Treatises*, pp. 287-8.

²⁸ Locke, *Two Treatises*, p. 289.

²⁹ Locke, *Two Treatises*, pp. 289, 294.

³⁰ Locke, *Two Treatises*, p. 336.

³¹ Locke, *Two Treatises*, p. 351.

³² Locke, *Two Treatises*, p. 384.

³³ Locke, *Two Treatises*, pp. 296-8.

³⁴ Locke, *Two Treatises*, p. 291.

³⁵ Locke, *Two Treatises*, p. 299.

³⁶ James Tully, *An Approach to Political Philosophy: Locke in Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 140-1; Richard Tuck, *The Rights of War and Peace. Political Thought and the International Order from Grotius to Kant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 167; Barbara Arneil, *John Locke and America. The Defense of English Colonialism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); David Armitage, 'John Locke, Carolina, and the Two Treatises of Government', *Political Theory* 32(5), 2004, pp. 602-27; David Boucher, 'Property and Propriety in International Relations: the Case of John Locke', in Beate Jahn (ed.) *Classical Theory in International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 156-77.

³⁷ Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990), pp. 120-1; Tim Di Muzio, 'The Liberal Renaissance and the Ends of History', *Journal of International Relations and Development* 15(2), 2012.

³⁸ Michael Perelman, *The Invention of Capitalism. Classical Political Economy and the Secret History of Primitive Accumulation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 175; Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 350.

³⁹ Acemoglu and Robinson, *Economic Origins*, pp. 349-50.

⁴⁰ David McNally, *Political Economy and the Rise of Capitalism. A Reinterpretation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 62, 8-9; Perelman, *Invention*, p. 175. McNally reports that in 1710 the first private enclosure act was presented in Parliament, followed by 100 between 1720-1750, 139 between 1750-1760, 900 between 1760-1779, and 2000 between 1793-1815 (p. 11).

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⁴³ Arneil, *John Locke*, p. 169.

⁴⁴ Duncan Ivison, *Postcolonial Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 93.

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