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Capitalism and Democracy: The Liberal International Order

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Abstract

The sovereign nation-states form the basic units of the international system. The Treaty of Westphalia marked the triumph of the state where it was free to operate independently within its boundary and also enjoyed external sovereignty. Europe had been a dominant power since the onset of the modern economic growth in the eighteenth century. The changing technologies in transportation and communications ushered in an era of cross-border growth in trade, migration and flow of capital. The European International Order however came under stress by the turn of the twentieth century. The following decades saw two wars, the Great Depression and a consequent drop in international cooperation. The United States took the mantle in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War and created with the support of its Western allies the present-day Liberal International Order.

Keywords: International Order, Liberalism, Capitalism, Democracy, Liberal Internationalism, Europe, America

1. Introduction

The interaction of the nation-states in the international space is multifaceted. This interaction requires rules and norms to avoid bad behavior and also to ensure peace and stability in the international system. Without structured and rule-based interaction there can be no sustained economic progress and exchange among the nations. Orders are built around institutions – the *rules of the game* that facilitate transaction among the participating nations. There is nothing new about orders. They have always existed and reflected the values and beliefs of those who have shaped them. The regime of modern economic growth began in the eighteenth century with the acceleration of technological innovations that powered the economies of Western Europe. This brought in its train major social and political changes. Liberalism, a set of ideas centred around individual liberty, free trade, equality before law, right to private property and consent of the governed, emerged in the Enlightenment Europe and facilitated the onward march of global capitalism and liberal democracy. Liberal internationalism grew out of this movement. It championed a rule-based international order where sovereign states interacted with each other for mutual gain. By the turn of the twentieth century European colonial powers had succeeded in creating an international order encouraged by free trade, unrestricted capital movement and cross-border movement of people. This order fell apart during the interwar years. America invested a great deal of its political capital and economic power to create the postwar liberal international order.

2. International Order: What it is and Why it matters

The term ‘order’ is used differently by different scholars. The term is reflective of the nature of internation-

al relations at any moment in world history. It is a measure of the world geopolitical and economic condition. Richard Hass notes that the term order *'includes and reflects arrangements that promote peace and prosperity and freedom as well as developments that do not.'* The term order also implicitly includes the disorder that inevitably exists.[1]John Mearsheimer defines 'order' *as an organized set of international institutions that help govern the interactions among the member states.*[2] Elsewhere he describes institutions as *a set of rules that stipulate the ways in which states should cooperate and compete with each other.*[3] The nature of institutions matters for the growth and prosperity of nations in the international system. The economic historian Douglas North notes that institutions create order and reduce uncertainty in exchange and shape the direction of the economic change.[4] An order is an essential prerequisite for organizing international space.

There have been varieties of World Order in human history. The conception of the world varies in different civilizations and cultures. The Chinese have a different worldview than what has been envisioned in Islam or in the Christian civilization. The distinguished political scientist Samuel Huntington for instance wrote an important essay titled *The Clash of Civilizations* in Foreign Affairs in 1993 where he noted that '*the fault lines between the civilizations shall be the battle lines of the future.'*[5] Even though he recognizes the existence of an international liberal order based on the sovereign state system he does not fail to mention about the deep rooted civilizational identities of societies that could potentially destabilize the existing order. In another example, the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union symbolized a war oof ideologies between capitalism and communism. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War prompted noted political scientist Francis Fukuyama to claim that capitalism and democracy had triumphed in the historic battle of ideologies. He noted: '*The triumph of the West, of the Western idea, is evident first of all in the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to western liberalism… what we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War or the passing of particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy.'*[6] These distinct political imaginations articulated in the early 1990s were the outgrowth of contrasting world views. Fukuyama imagined a world in the liberal western tradition whereas Huntington's views were reflective of the traditional civilizational identities.

The state system is a basic feature of the modern political life. It is however only four hundred years old. It emerged in the seventeenth century with the *Treaty of Westphalia* that ended the Thirty Years' War in 1648. It laid the foundations of a more stable international system composed of independent states that were expected to respect each other's sovereignty. It was a system dominated by nation-states and not any other form of political organization like empires. It was major political innovation of the time. It had three major dimensions: (1) the countries should respect the integrity of the boundaries separating them (2) they should not interfere in the internal affairs of other countries (3) they are free to pursue their goals within their own borders. European nations often violated the sovereignty of their neighbors which was among

[1] Richard Haas 2017
[2] John Mearsheimer 2019
[3] John Mearsheimer 1994
[4] Douglas North 1991
[5] Samuel Huntington 1993
[6] Francis Fukuyama 1989

the reasons why the continent has been so violent and destructive. Nevertheless, the *Westphalian Treaty* marked an important milestone in the evolution of the nation-state and the international order.[7]

3. Europe and the making of the International Order

The ascendence of Europe paved the way for the creation of a global international order. There was no *global order* based on defined rules and practices agreed upon by the participating countries prior to the advancement of the European powers. The slow and steady globalization of the western ideas and institutions over the ensuing decades gave rise to an order that was in the mutual interest of the nations. It took place in three phases: (1) between 1648 and 1815 – from the Treaty of Westphalia to the Concert of Europe (2) between 1815 and 1914 – the era of *Pax Britannica* that saw the expansion of European imperialism (3) the era of *Pax Americana* that began after the end of the World War II. It marked the consolidation of American power and the *rise of the rest*.[8]

The Oxford Imperial historian John Darwin asserts that '*without overseas trade, empire was a redundant, futile extravagance*.'[9] International trade was at the heart of Britains' imperial expansion in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. The extension of commerce was brought in its train power and influence. The leading role in expansion of global trade was unexpectedly played not by the government but by the *merchant houses* especially those located in the largest ports: London, Liverpool and Glasgow. The British government was however keen to advance the cause of free trade. The *Treaty System* and the *Naval presence* gave the merchants freedom to trade. The entrepreneurialism of the British merchants who moved out in search of new markets and commodities established them as the dominant power in the field of global trade. By 1815, London had replaced Amsterdam as *the* principal financial centre of the world. The rise of Britain as the preeminent power in the 19th century was the outcome of a few important factors that distinguished it from other nations on the continent: first, its commercial and technological advantages owing to the *Industrial Revolution*, and the drive of its merchants to explore *new markets* around the world; second, the acceptance of the *'idea'* of *migration* as a road to self-betterment; and finally, the spread of the *missionary societies* outside Britain. Commerce, however, was at the heart of the British enterprise and its global ambitions. A notable feature of the British commercial expansion was its shift from the Atlantic basin towards markets in Asia and the Near East, and in Africa and Australasia towards the late-nineteenth century. The supply of credit on easy terms in London encouraged trade and commerce, and the arrival of power-weaving provided the British merchants an advantage across a whole range of cotton manufactures. The expansion of trade encouraged developments in areas such as shipping, banking and finance, insurance, technical innovations in production as well as increased investments in canals, roads, railways and telegraph. The *colonization movement* advanced in parallel with the global expansion of British trade. If *'free'* trade drove British commercial interests, the demographic expansion induced a demand for *'free'* land. The idea of overseas settlement became deeply entrenched in the British social discourse. Mercantile, migrant and missionary interests enlarged the global presence of Britain and the most visible sign of its power was the extraordinary scale of its territorial possessions.[10] By the end of the 19th century European powers had colonized a great part of the global landmass and had also succeeded in fashioning a world order driven by free trade, international migration, capital movement, and

[7] Richard Haas 2020 pp. 5-7
[8] Charles Kupchan 2012 Ch. 3 pp. 65
[9] John Darwin 2009 pp. 36
[10] John Darwin 2009 pp. 23-63

encouragement of industrial capitalism and democracy. This success was however undone with the outbreak of the First World War.

The liberal economic and political order that had been evolving since the onset of the industrial revolution collapsed in the 1920s and the 1930s with the ascendence of anti-democratic, totalitarian and nationalistic ideologies. The rise of the collectivist ideologies – Nazism, Fascism and Communism – during the interwar years successfully challenged liberalism, capitalism and democracy. The onward march of global capitalism and democracy was halted. Samuel Huntington called it the *"reverse wave"*. The *Great Depression* struck at the core of international liberal order: to overcome the economic hardship and bring the economy back to normal countries imposed high tariff on imports shunning free trade; the success of state-directed *New Deal* policies in United States paved the way for the establishment of the primacy of the government in managing the economy by directly intervening in its operations. The New Deal *'erected the scaffolding of a federal welfare system'* in the United States.[11] The interwar years wiped out the gains made in the preceding decades. International liberal order lay in ruins. It required the leadership of a great power to resurrect it.

4. Liberalism: A brief History

Liberalism as a political and economic movement emerged first in England and later spread to America and continental Europe. The following characteristics differentiates it from other doctrines and political system. In words of philosopher John Gray, common to all variants of liberal tradition is a definite conception of man and society. It is *individualist* in the sense that it asserts the moral primacy of the person against the claims of any social collectivity; it is *egalitarian* in as much as it confers on all men the same moral status; is *universalist* affirming the moral unity of the human species and *meliorist* in its affirmation of improvability of all social institutions and political arrangements.[12]

Liberalism offers a solution to manage political order. It rests on the belief that human beings aspire for a better life and equal treatment before the law. It does not concern itself with the interests of a particular section of the society; it aims to promote the material welfare of all. In Jeremy Bentham words *it seeks the greatest happiness of the greatest number.* The Austrian economists Ludwig von Mises notes that liberalism was the first political movement that aimed at promoting the welfare of all. Even socialism strives for the good of the all but both these political movements differ strongly in the manner that goal is to be achieved. A capitalist society is the one where liberal principle are put into practice, and such a condition is called Capitalism. Whereas freedom is sacred to liberalism it does not dispute the *necessity of the machinery of the state* rests upon which the assurance of peace that encourages development, and the protection of private property.[13]

The distinguished political scientist Francis Fukuyama notes that historically there have been three justifications for liberalism: (1) the first concerns the finding a solution for peaceful coexistence. The English philosopher Thomas Hobbes articulated in his masterpiece *Leviathan* (1651) the need for a sovereign (state) to ensure collective security. He introduces two concepts to establish his point: the '*Right of Nature'* – we have a right to do what we think is necessary for self -preservation, and the '*Laws of Nature'*- principles if they are followed shall conduce to self-preservation. In order to establish peace, we shall need to '*lay down our natural right, if it can be done in a coordinated way with others, and such that*

[11] Thomas Kessner
[12] Quoted by Francis Fukuyama pp 1 2022
[13] Ludwig Von Mises 1927

each can enjoy the same liberty as everyone else.'[14] (2) the second justification for liberalism is a moral argument that it protects human dignity *by granting citizens an equal right to autonomy.* The law of the land enforces citizens' right to freedom while at the same time also expecting from them certain basic fundamental duties towards the sovereign and the fellow citizens. It includes a share in the political power and self-government. In this way liberalism is tied to democracy. (3) there is a strong economic justification for liberalism. It is believed that liberal economic principles – economic freedom, free trade among nations, capitalistic economic system where property rights are guaranteed tend to promote economic growth and modernization. In liberal political regimes the *right to property* predated universal suffrage. The European nations - England and Netherlands – were the first nations to establish strong property rights that facilitated the development of an active entrepreneurial class and institutions of modern capitalism. In North America, property rights were protected by the English common law.[15] The Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto has argued forcefully argued in his book *The Mystery of Capital* on the importance of a strong regime of property rights in fostering economic growth and development, and pulling people out of poverty.[16]

5. Liberal Internationalism

Liberal Internationalism is a big elastic word.[17] In a liberal international order sovereign states cooperate with each other for mutual economic gain and to secure peace and stability in the global space. The United States and its Western partners played a crucial role in forging the postwar liberal international order. It was based on five convictions: (1) International trade is seen as essential for growth and stability of the international system. Constant wars among sovereign states bring economic hardships, and prolonged economic crises as witnessed during the *Great Depression* when high retaliatory tariffs reduced trade and output. International economic relations through trade and investment create interdependence that apparently prevent chances of war and ensure stability and peace. An open global order facilities economic growth through international division of labor. (2) the international order is based on rules and institutions that structure the economic and political relations among nations. These rules are made at multilateral bodies where nations with different opinions and goals come together to find solutions to common problems. The United Nations (UN), World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Trade Organization (WTO) are multilateral bodies tasked with specific functions to promote trade, investment, ensure peace and stability and promote development by brining nations on a common platform. Nonetheless the states are free to engage in bilateral and free trade agreements with each other (3) Liberal internationalism entails some form of security cooperation (4) It is based on the conviction that the power politics among nations can be tamed through greater multilateral engagement and universal quest for shared prosperity (5) There is finally a belief that nondemocratic participating sovereign states shall move towards some form of liberal democracy.[18]

6. Cold War, Marshall Plan and the Postwar Economic Recovery

In March 1946 the British war-time prime minister Winston Churchill, a hero of the Second World War

[14] Thomas Hobbes 2017 pp xvii
[15] Francis Fukuyama 2022 Ch. 1 pp 5-12
[16] Hernando De Soto 2000
[17] Michael McFaul 2025
[18] G. John Ikenberry 2018

and who had lost election in the previous year delivered a speech at the Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri on the invitation of the American President Harry Truman. In this historic speech he warned against the rising *Soviet Sphere of influence* in Eastern Europe where an *iron curtain* had descended that threatened the peace and stability of the Christian civilization.[19] In 1946 two other seminal events happened that symbolize the ushering of the Cold War. In February 1946 Joseph Stalin delivered a speech at the Moscow electoral district where he highlighted the unstable nature of the world capitalist system. He noted that the uneven development of the capitalist economies pushed periodically the world system of capitalism into a state of disequilibrium and crises that inevitably led to military conflict. In contrast, the *Soviet social system* was a stable form of social organization and a genuine *people's system* that enjoyed their support.[20]

George Keenan, an American diplomat, now famous for his advocacy of the *containment policy* sent a Long Telegram to the Secretary of State in United States in February 1946 where he cautioned about the post-war Soviet antagonism about capitalism. The Russians feared that there could be no permanent peace with the capitalist world. They saw capitalism as an existential threat. In 1927 Stalin stated to a delegation of American workers that there shall be two centres of power in the world economy and politics in the future: a socialist centre that shall draw to itself countries that tended towards socialism; and a capitalist centre drawing to itself those countries that were inclined towards capitalism. The instability inherent in the capitalist system shall generate wars between the capitalist states and the wars of intervention against the socialist world. Keenan further noted that it was the vitality of the American society and its people, and its leadership and guidance alone that could stop the onward march of communism. In his words, *world communism was a malignant parasite that fed only on diseased tissues.*[21] It was the poor economic conditions that was observed to be the suitable breeding ground for the expansion of communism. The message therefore was clear: to beat communism and stop its further advancement the shattered economies of Europe should be rehabilitated through American economic assistance. The prevailing geopolitical situation encouraged further President Harry Truman to reorient American foreign policy and commit economic and political assistance to the free peoples of the world. This became popular as the *Truman Doctrine*.

Considering the economically precarious situation of the war-weary European nations the Soviet expansionism in the East heightened the sense of a crisis in the United States after the war. The United States came to view the recovery of the European economy and its political unity as the only viable alternative to another American military engagement in Europe. The threat to American security lay in the economic collapse of western Europe and therefore something very important needed to be done to reverse the decline. The Economic Recovery Program or the *Marshall Plan* was an economic assistance plan to help Europe rebuild its economy. It was the outcome of clever economic thinking of American diplomats and a response to the growing political situation of the midcentury world. The Marshall Plan *'provided market for American goods, created reliable trading partners and supported the development of stable democracies in western Europe.'*[22]

[19] Winston Churchill 1946
[20]
[21] George Keenan 1946
[22] National Archives, USA

7. America and the Postwar Liberal International Order

The American Columnist Robert Kagan published a short and incisive book in 2013 with a provocative title *'The World America Made.'* [23]The book is a major defense of the liberal international order that the United States created with the support of its western allies in the immediate aftermath of the World War II. The United Nations (UN), International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) known popularly as World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and countless other bodies and conventions established at the end of the Second World War were major milestones in international cooperation. The previous attempts at creating such multilateral organizations most notably the League of Nations after World War I had met with failure. The success of theses bodies in creating a *rules-based international order* is by any measure momentous. The previous seven decades have witnessed unprecedented growth in world output and international trade and a consequent historic decline in global poverty and deprivation unseen since the dawn of the modern economic growth in the eighteenth century. Kagan asserts that 'there's plenty wrong with our world, of course, but from the perspective of thousands of years of recorded history, in which war, despotism, and poverty have been the norm, and peace, democracy, and prosperity the rare exceptions, our own era has been a *golden age*.'[24] The first global international order that collapsed in the interwar years was the handiwork of the European colonial powers. It had evolved in the previous three centuries particularly with the onset of the industrial revolution when technological changes in transportation and communication had engendered growth in cross border exchange of goods, people and capital. That 'order' was far from perfect as beside planting the seeds of liberal economic order it also produced colonization and imperialism.

Against this backdrop the international liberal order shaped by American power in the chaos and destruction of the 1940s has been far more benign considering the benefits countries have reaped by being a stakeholder in global capitalist system. Historically, *Isolationism- the belief that America needed to mind its own business without being drawn into global entanglements* - had been the cornerstone of the American foreign policy before World War II. Ambrose and Brinkley note that in 1938 the American defense budget was small, the country had no entangling alliances, no American troops were stationed in any foreign country. *The dominant mood was isolationism.* A half century later America entered into military alliances with many nations, its troops were stationed in foreign countries, it had military bases across the globe and it also had a huge standing Army, Navy and Air Force.[25] In 2024 its defense expenditure was more than the next seven countries put together! (SIPRI Factsheet, 2025) America's *rise to globalism* came about due to a handful of factors: the first was the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 that changed the American perception regarding its own security; second, the United States and the Soviet Union were suspicious of each other due the ideological differences. There was a sense of urgency resulting from the growing international communist movement and Soviet expansion in eastern Europe; and third, as Victor Sebestyen notes that *'America was the only country to emerge from the conflict better off than when it entered it in 1941…American economy boomed as never before…America was the granary of the world, and its industrial workshop…A confident America had saved the world from Hitler and the Japanese imperialism, with wartime exports of arms and food. Now it would export its ideals of democracy, free trade, open markets and liberty in order to ensure the peace.'*[26]

[23] Robert Kagan 2013
[24] Robert Kagan pp. 4
[25] Stephen Amrose and Douglas Brinkley 2011
[26] Victor Sebestyen 2014 pp.

A few decades earlier Woodrow Wilson who won the 2016 presidency on the slogan *'he kept us out of war'* indicating America's neutrality in World War I would be forced to reconsider his position in 1917. The series of unsettling events between 1915 and 1917 most notably the German submarine warfare and the *Zimmerman Telegram* compelled president Wilson to deliver a speech to the joint session of the Congress where he declared that the *'world must be made safe for democracy.'* A few months later he would enumerate his *'Fourteen Points'* for lasting peace in the world in another speech to the Congress.[27] Although Woodrow Wilson was the driving force behind the creation of the *League of Nations* after the First World War, America never became its member because the Senate refused to ratify the Treaty of Versailles. The isolationists in the Republican-controlled Senate led by Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, and many others, feared that permanent American engagement in the world would violate its sovereignty and the principle of no *entangling alliances* that formed the basis of its peace, strength and security.[28] This however earned Wilson a Nobel Peace Prize in 1919. Wilson who was struggling with poor health warned of a coming crisis in a generation in absence of an international body tasked with the purpose of resolving conflicts through international cooperation. Without American involvement that had now emerged as a major centre of global finance and was an industrial powerhouse, the League of Nations would be lifeless. Many nations withdrew from the League by mid-1920s. It was finally dissolved.

Such an American isolationism was nowhere to be seen after the World War II. The circumstances had forced it to work with its allies and create an international liberal order that was in the interest of its people and those who valued democracy and global free market capitalism, and preferred individual freedom over totalitarian ideologies. Robert Kagan notes that *'every international order in history reflected the beliefs and interests of its strongest powers…. America's unique geographical circumstances, its capitalist economic system, its democratic form of government, and its enormous military power have together shaped a particular kind of international order that would have looked very different had another nation with different characteristics wielded a similar amount of influence.'*[29] The United States perhaps lake any other Great Power was driven by 'selfishness and generosity.' Or perhaps something more. American had a sense of power, of bigness, of destiny to launch a crusade for freedom…. crusade against Communism that would take the form of *containment* rather than attack.[30] It was fortuitously also blessed to have few *'wise men'* around who would shape an American world order, create international institutions and forge lasting peace in perilous times.[31] Ben Steil notes that '*by the time General C. Marshall became the secretary of state in January 1947, men of a very different political and intellectual disposition – such as Dean Acheson, Will Clayton, General Lucius Clay, and the Republican senator Authur Vandenburg – were in position to reshape policy on many fronts, to enormous consequence.'*[32]

8. Conclusion

In a nutshell, international orders are transient. There is nothing guaranteed about an order; they rise and fall. Second, international order shapes the interaction among states and they are organized around multilateral treaties, international bodies and reflect the values and beliefs of the dominant power. Third, the European international order was centred on free trade, unrestricted capital movement and cross border

[27] National Archives
[28] Andrew Glass 2018
[29] Kagan pp. 7, 9
[30] Ambrose and Brinkley pp. xiv
[31] Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas 2013
[32] Ben Steil 2018 pp. 9

flow of people. Four, colonization and imperialism were the disquieting aspects of the European order. Five, liberalism has its roots in the enlightenment philosophy and is structured around individual freedom, rule of law, equality before law, political freedom and right to private property. Six, liberal internationalism is a way of organizing the world based on a rule-based order and it emerged from the ascendency of western liberal democracies. Seven, in a liberal international order sovereign states cooperate with each other for mutual gain and to ensure peace and stability in the international space. Eight, in the immediate aftermath of the World War II the United States and its Western allies created the present day international liberal order centred principally around global capitalism and liberal democracy.

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