

Restraining the Excesses of Liberalism

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After the Cold War, the “end of history” thesis was largely internalized and expressed with the assumption that the entire world would unify under liberal principles, which would be enforced under U.S. benign leadership. As the international distribution of power shifts and the relative power of the West steadily declines, the role of liberalism in domestic and international politics recedes. Western states have increasingly expressed their concern about the decline of the so-called “liberal international order.”

This article argues that restraining the excesses of liberalism is a positive factor and a necessary correction. Unfettered, not self-corrected liberal ideology has blinded the West by the belief in its own righteousness. We have now reached the point where the current state of affairs no longer works.

LIBERALISM IN DOMESTIC SOCIETY

By placing the individual at the center, liberalism has advanced profound ideas like democracy and human rights that all healthy societies require. Yet liberalism flourished under the nation-state as it is most successful when restrained and balanced by conservative principles. The excesses of liberalism have resulted in liberalism decoupling from the nation-state, which predictably leads to fragmentation and revolutions.

Plato and Socrates were critical about the durability of democracy as unfettered liberalism eventually unravels the social fabric that it relied upon. They opined that democracies become freer the longer they exist, and the individual eventually liberates himself from the social group he depends on by increasingly rejecting the external authority from the family, faith, society, and the state. This observation remains relevant today as the individual liberates himself from being defined by the nation, culture, the Church, the family, traditions, and even the real biological gender.

Liberalism fails when it functions too well as the atomized individual is liberated from all authority and group influence, which causes narcissism, nihilism and the breakdown of the social capital required for the functioning of civic society.

In 2013, President Putin recognized this trend as many Euro-Atlantic states had begun to shed their Christian roots as the foundation of Western civilization. Putin cautioned that “the moral basis and any traditional identity are being denied—national, religious, cultural, and even gender identities are being denied or relativized.” Samuel Huntington identified this development in 2004 in an article titled “Dead Souls,” in which he argued that “the denationalization of the American elite” would result in polarization and populism as the public would resist the excesses of liberalism. Huntington concluded that society and politics were fragmenting into a struggle of “nationalism versus cosmopolitanism.”

Economic liberalism has also become unrestrained by abandoning the “embedded liberalism” that characterized the

capitalist system from 1945 to 1980, and transitioning towards the neoliberal economic one. Under embedded liberalism, the political Left redistributed wealth to avoid the concentration of capital, and the political Right intervened in the market to defend traditional values and communities. President Reagan recognized the danger of subordinating culture, traditional values, and Christianity to market forces and cautioned against becoming “mired in the material” which would result in “coarsening of the society” and “a nation gone under.” Yet American conservatism underwent a revolution as market efficiency became the guiding virtue, while simultaneously complaining about the decay of traditional values.

Under the neoliberal consensus committed to the sanctity of unfettered market forces, the political Left and Right are both unable to pursue their ideological commitments and instead get caught up in culture wars in which everyone loses. While neoliberal economics maximized efficiency, the subsequent intolerable social and economic costs predictably result in both the political Right and Left trying to fill the vacuum with radical populism.

LIBERALISM IN INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY

In the international system, liberalism has a tradition of both pacification and imperialism. Placing the individual at the center can promote more humane concepts of security, although this can also erode state sovereignty as the fundamental principle of international law. This contradiction can be mitigated by balancing liberalism with the principle of sovereign equality.

Efforts to introduce democracy and human rights into international relations have largely failed as they become an instrument to assert hegemony through sovereign inequality. Moscow abstained from signing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 due to the fear that Western powers would use human rights as a tool to interfere in Russia's domestic affairs.

Nevertheless Moscow signed the Helsinki Accords in 1975 as the founding document for pan-European cooperation. The Helsinki

Accords were unique as they introduced “respect for human rights” as a topic of international security discussion. However, the first article of the agreement was the principle of “sovereign equality,” which suggests that human rights would not be used to organize relations between a political subject and a political object. The Helsinki Accords subsequently inspired Mikhail Gorbachev’s concept of a “Common European Home” and deep reforms within the Soviet Union.

When the Cold War was declared over at the Malta Summit in 1989, there was an opportunity to further deepen the Helsinki Accords. Subsequently, the Charter of Paris for a New Europe in 1990 extended the Helsinki Accords, calling for a European security system with the objective of “ending the division of Europe” based on the principle that “security of every participating state is inseparably linked to that of all the others.” In 1994, the Helsinki Accords were converted into the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), an inclusive security institution based on the principle of sovereign equality.

The role of democracy and human rights in international security began its decay when an inclusive security architecture was abandoned. Hegemonic ambitions were translated into the creation of a new Europe without Russia, which was to be organized by an expanding NATO and EU. Liberalism subsequently became a hegemonic norm. Liberalism decoupled legitimacy from legality as NATO launched an illegal “humanitarian intervention” and unilaterally changed the borders of Serbia.

After the illegal invasion of Iraq, it was argued that the U.S. should establish an “alliance of democracies” as an alternative source of legitimacy to that of the UN. This idea was reconceptualized as a “Concert of Democracies” that would authorize the West to use military force when such a mandate could not be achieved at the UN. The Republican presidential candidate in 2008, Senator John McCain, similarly promised to establish a “League of Democracies” if he would win the presidential election to ensure that authoritarian states would not be able to constrain Western democracies under U.S. leadership (Geis 2013).

More recently, these ideas have been included in the concept of a “rules-based international order” as a substitute for international law. Western powers increasingly refer to the rules-based international order instead of international law, which is part of a wider initiative of dividing the entire world along a binary divide of “democracy” versus “authoritarianism” that provides little if any heuristic value to understand the complexities of international politics. The rules-based international order does not present any specific rules, as strategic ambiguity enables a hegemon to act selectively and inconsistently. A case in point, whether the rules-based international order prioritizes the principle of territorial integrity or self-determination in Kosovo and Crimea depends on the interests of the West. Sovereign equality comes to an end as invasions are rebranded as “humanitarian interventions” and coups become “democratic revolutions.” By relying on legitimacy rather than law, all international disputes become a tribunal of public opinion in which states fight to control the narrative with propaganda.

RESTRAINING LIBERALISM

The failure to restrain the excesses of liberalism with conservative principles domestically and with sovereign equality internationally results in the degeneration of liberal ideals. John Herz cautioned in 1950 that the tragedy of political idealism is that it “paradoxically, has its time of greatness when its ideals are unfulfilled, when it is in opposition to outdated political systems and the tide of the times swells it towards victory. It degenerates as soon as it attains its final goal; and in victory it dies.”

The current global shake-up of values and ideology will unavoidably fuel instability and conflict. Antonio Gramsci wrote in the late 1920s or early 1930s about the quandaries of a world in transition: “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.”