

Liberalism and the National Interest

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Abstract: *This article has tried to explain the three main strands (liberal internationalism, idealism, neoliberal institutionalism) in the liberal thought and analyzed the national interest understandings of these schools. Liberalism is closely related to the Enlightenment and the rise of the capitalist relations. With the Enlightenment, the individual and reason gained prominence against the metaphysical thought.*

Liberal internationalism is the classical form of the liberal thought. It gives much importance to free trade and democracy, and claims that if all the states in the world are ruled by democracy and based on market economy, then the wars will be eliminated from the world. So, its aim is to create a community of the liberal democratic states with common interests.

The second liberal strand is the idealist school which is more state-centric than the liberal internationalism. With the eruption of the World War I in the first quarter of the XX century, the idealists saw it necessary to regulate the world politics at the state-level. The national self-determination and the foundation of the League of Nations were both evidences of the support given to the nation-state as a legitimate mode of governance in the XX century.

The third strand in the liberal thinking is neoliberal institutionalism, which, preoccupied with the international organizations, claims that the world has become interdependent. Thus, seeing the state as the only actor is no longer possible. For the neoliberals who think that anarchy can be mitigated by the creation of international regimes, have aimed to develop a theory of regimes to confirm that cooperation is not only possible under the supervision of hegemony but also in its absence because regimes create common interests for their members. So, the national interest understanding of neoliberal institutionalism depends on a cooperative understanding.

Despite of its division, liberalism has mounted a significant challenge to the claim that national interests have ongoing significance in international politics.

Liberalism

Liberalism is closely related to the Enlightenment and the rise of the capitalist relations. With the Enlightenment, the individual and reason gained prominence against the metaphysical thought. With the capitalist relations, the bourgeoisie became the dominant actor in the society. The liberal thought implies the emancipation of the human being from the transcendental authorities by means of reason and being rational economic units in the society. The first assumption (reason) concerns the philosophical side of the debate while the other assumption (economic) constitutes the economical dimension. Philosophically speaking, the individual has become the most important unit in the society with his/her capacity of determining what the best is for him/her²⁸. In accordance with the second assumption, the individual is regarded as a self-interested rational unit. Rationality, in this sense, implies the calculation of the optimum ballance between the means and aims and the maximization of the self-interest. The individuals, as atomic units, are supposed to be able to follow their economic and political interests. "By pursuing their own self-interest", individuals are supposed to be "inadvertently promoting the public good"²⁹. The mentality lying under this statement is that the self-interested character of individuals does not constitute a threat for the society; in contrast every individual following his/her interest contributes to the elevation of the public good.

In the next step there will be analyzed three main strands of the liberal thought (liberal internationalism, idealism, neoliberal institutionalism) and the national interest understandings of these schools

²⁸ Paul R. Viotti and Mark V. Kauppi, "Pluralism: Decision Making, Transnationalism and Interdependence", Paul R. Viotti and Mark V. Kauppi (ed.s), *International Relations Theory: Realism, Pluralism, Globalism, and Beyond*, 3rd edition, Boston, Allyn&Bacon, 1999, p. 201.

²⁹ Tim Dunne, "Liberalism", John Baylis and Steve Smith (ed.s), *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 166.

Liberal Internationalism

The Enlightenment period witnessed the rise of many ideas such as democracy, the supremacy of reason and the rule of law. What all these terms have in common is that there is individual at the core of the moral value. In the liberal thought, the individual is “the basic unit of analysis”³⁰. But the individual of liberalism is expected to be rational and conscious about his/her activities and decisions. Believing in “the perfectibility of the human condition”³¹, the liberal thought supposes that all individuals are enlightened and rational. Contrary to the realist argument, which regards war as an inherent nature of international politics, liberals think that peace can be achieved in the international domain by means of the liberal democratic principles and the decisions of rational individuals.

There are two notions of liberal internationalism: democracy (the political dimension) and free trade (the economic dimension). The most important values emerging with the rise of democracy are citizenship and constitutionalism. Citizens are supposed to have influence over the political process. Being the prerequisites of peace and harmony, democracy is seen by liberals as an important tool to prevent war. War being the product of the aggressive instincts of unrepresentative elites is a meaningless activity, which can be prevented by means of free trade and democracy. Because, when the citizens who bear the burden of war elect their governments, war becomes irrational. There is no benefit an ordinary citizen may get from the war. Free trade is another instrument of liberal internationalism to prevent war and to construct a peaceful world order. The individual who recognizes that war has many devastating effects begin trusting in the mitigating effects of free trade. This is because free trade binds together, by one common tie of interest and intercourse, the universal society of nations throughout the civilized world. Thus, the solution to the conflicts, for liberals, becomes “the free movement of commodities, capital and labor”. However, at this point the state problematic arises. How do the liberal internationalists see the state? For Adam Smith, “the economy functions optimally when it is allowed to operate free from state or political intervention”³². Therefore, the state must be minimal. According to Liberals suggest that the state must only protect the context in which free trade occurs but it should not interfere into the economic life. They believe that “state interventionism is bad because, by distorting prices, it prevents the price mechanism from optimally allocating resources”. The “spontaneity thesis”, the economy is an autonomous domain with its own rules. If the state intervenes into the economic life, “the self-regulating hand of the economy is cut off”³³. For that reason, the liberal conceptualization of the state is the opposite of the state conceptualization of the mercantilist school, according to which “the state plays a crucial role in protecting embryonic industries from external competition”³⁴.

The Community Interest

The liberal internationalists do not see the state as the only unit of analysis; rather, they are mostly inclined to see the world through the lenses of the rational individual. The rational individual being economically liberal and politically republican constitutes the structure of the state. The state consisting of such individuals is assumed to share the political environment with other liberal republican states, resulting in the notion of the community of the liberal republican states. That is the inside-out approach, which assumes that the exogenous behavior of states can be explained by examining their endogenous political and economical dispositions.

Community interest can be thought as the common interest among the liberal republican states. The liberal dimension of the latter refers to the mode of free trade. According to the free trade argument, states must be minimalist and must not be “envious of each other” although the gains of all states are not always equal. Like the neoliberal institutionalist emphasis on the absolute gain, the liberal internationalists claim that the liberal states, unmindful of who will gain more, must try to enhance their interests through cooperative trading arrangements by means of which one common tie of interest (i.e. the reciprocal benefit of free trade) emerges.

Republicanism, the political dimension, means the creation of a state based on the consent of its citizens. This state must have a constitution which must serve the interests of its citizens and must respect the individual autonomy. The republican state is based on representation which prevents the arbitrary decisions of the ruler/president. As there is the individual at the core of decision-making, s/he choosing his/her representatives participates in the political process by means of voting. For Kant, such a republic is the first condition of peace because he thinks that war does not occur between

³⁰ John M. Hobson, *The State and International Relations*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 66.

³¹ Scott Burchill, “Liberalism”, Scott Burchill, Andrew Linklater, Richard Devetak, Jack Donnelly, Matthew Paterson, Christian Reus-Smit and Jacqui True (ed.s.), *Theories of International Relations*, 3rd edition, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 58.

³² Hobson, (2003), p. 66.

³³ Hobson, (2003), p. 66.

³⁴ Burchill, (2005), p. 71.

the liberal republican states³⁵; the war is “found especially in autocratic states” in which “the masses have no say in foreign policy”. In addition, it is also these masses who endure the costs of the war. For that reason the solution, for Kant, is the restriction of the “high domestic agential power”³⁶ of the ruler and the expansion of the democratic rights and duties such as the rights to elect and to be elected.

Once the requirements for a liberal republican state are met and it comes into being, the assumption is that there will be not be any violence among those states because each will benefit from the continuity of the system. The liberal republican states as a community are supposed not to go war against each other. According to the thesis of pacific federation there exists a zone of peace among the liberal states. It is argued that if the number of liberal states increases in the world, the global peace becomes much more probable. Here comes the question of what differentiates Kant from the idealists. The answer may be that Kant did not develop any specific “systematic organizational embodiment” to maintain peace. Rather, he thought of “something like a less formally institutionalized League of Nations”³⁷.

Rather than trying to directly shape the politics by means of an international institution, the liberal internationalist view is much more inclined to the improvement of the internal structures of each state. It argues that liberal democracy is the best form of governance by which the individuals can develop themselves autonomously. With the spread of liberal democratic principles throughout the world, it is assumed that war can be eliminated from politics. Thus, this liberal interest (i.e. the elimination of war) is the ultimate reference point, which must be the objective or interest of all the nations.

Idealism

The liberal internationalists do not treat the state as their primary unit of analysis; but they are mostly individual-centric. Idealism is different from liberal internationalism in that the idealists are much more state-centric than the liberal internationalists. They are more inclined to the state level than the individual level. Like the internationalists, the idealists also believe in the goodness of human nature and the Enlightenment’s faith in the possibility of improving civilization. For that reason, it can be seen as the progressivist doctrine of the 1920s and 1930s. The idealists, like the liberal internationalists, also see the causes of war in the “evil institutions and structural arrangements that motivate people to act selfishly and to harm others”, not in the innate selfishness of the human beings. However, the point which differentiates the idealists from the liberal internationalists, is the idealist argument that “international society must reorganize itself institutionally to eliminate the anarchy that makes problems such as war likely”³⁸. Thus, the idealists can be regarded as more state-centric than the liberal internationalists.

Emphasizing the role of reason to mitigate the international conflicts and seeing the human being as rational, the idealists assume that the international conflicts can be resolved without having to resort to force. Democracy is regarded as the precondition of peace whereas the dictatorships are deemed as the real causes of war. For that reason, the transformation of the dictatorships into the democratic form of governances was of high priority for the idealists. The aim of the politics was declared, by the idealists, “to educate people of all nationalities to a higher notion of internationalism”. The crucial point here to emphasize is that idealism is opposed to “the futile pursuit of narrow national interests” and it proposes “the abandonment of the self-destructive policy of the balance of power”³⁹. It tried to establish a new world order mainly based on the principles of the collective security and self-determination, each of which will be explained in the next section as the national interest objectives of the idealist school.

The National Interest

Idealism arose after the World War I with the aim of preventing the emergence of another world war. Towards that end the idealists prescribed and promoted certain policies such as the national self-determination and the collective security, both of which were presented as being in the direct interests of all nations. Their overall alleged objective was to construct a peaceful world order. Unlike the liberal internationalists, the idealists generally treated the state as the primary unit and level of analysis. As Wallerstein states, what Wilson (as an idealist) was doing was only the extension of the liberal principles to the state level rather than restricting these rights only to individuals. So, in the idealist agenda, the state was becoming an individual endowed with some rights like the national self-determination. Therefore, the national self-determination can be regarded as nothing more than the transposition of freedom from the individual to the state level.

For Wilson, peace in international relations required the striving and consent of all nations. Force was not looked upon favorably as an instrument to deal with the international conflicts. Instead, in the aftermath of the World War I,

³⁵ Mark F. N. Franke, *Global Limits: Immanuel Kant, International Relations and Critique of World Politics*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2001, p. 32.

³⁶ Hobson, (2003), p. 70.

³⁷ Michael W. Doyle, “Liberalism and World Politics”, Paul R. Viotti and Mark V. Kauppi (ed.s) *International Relations Theory: Realism, Pluralism, Globalism*, 3rd edition, Boston, Allyn&Bacon, 1999, p. 245.

³⁸ Cynthia Weber, *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction*, London, Routledge, 2005, p. 41.

³⁹ Peter Wilson, *The International Theory of Leonard Woolf*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, p. 13.

Wilson promoted the principle of national self-determination, which means the right of all nations to determine their own future.

Wilson's policy of the national self-determination can be criticized on many grounds. For example, Cox argues that it was only a strategy to gain the appreciation of the subordinated groups about the liberal democracy. In addition, it is also a possibility that Wilson used the policy of the national self-determination as an "antidote to Bolshevism". The evaluation of these criticisms is beyond this paper.

The distinction between the balance of power and the collective security lies in their approaches to the states-system. For example, balance of power is decentralized. According to Claude, "it was essentially a euphemism for anarchy". Within a situation of balance of power, states are isolated autonomous individuals, which try to "affect the general power situation". On the contrary, the collective security is much more community-centric than the balance of power theory in that the collective security "treats the states of the world as a single community, laced together by unbreakable ties of interdependence"⁴⁰. According to the collective security, every state has a benefit to gain from the continuity of the "common order". This is because the collective security does not see the world composed of isolated power-seeking states; rather, it perceives states chained to one another with a common interest, which is preponderant over the separate national interests of all the countries.

The mutual benefit understanding of the idealist national interest is explained by Cook and Moos who argue that "a concept of national interest which denies the right of other nations to exist naturally promotes hostility to a point where others are prepared to seek and pursue not only the destruction of the existing government, but even the elimination of the nation's people". For these two thinkers, the state must define its national interest "on the presumption of collective permanence" which means that the real interest of a nation is both for its own people (as a particular) and the humanity (as the general). We here see the affinity between the national and the international as a Wilsonian principle. The national interest, for the idealists such as Cook and Moos, must "rest on a larger common appeal directed to universal interests"⁴¹. Every state trying to uplift its own national interest as such, will also contribute to the general well-being of the humanity.

Here a correlation between Adam Smith and the idealists can be made. Smith argues that every individual pursuing his/her own interests will inevitably contribute to the general interest of the society by means of the spirit of commerce. Such an assumption must be accepted a priori, which depends on the usefulness of free trade and the virtues of the invisible hand. In short, such an understanding must be inherent in the minds of the individuals as their common sense. When looked at the idealists, it is possible to observe that, for them, every society has an interest which must satisfy "both the people of the particular nation and others simultaneously"⁴². If states agree on the context in which they will pursue their own self-interests, then there will be no problem. For example, if every state takes the idea of the collective security as a priori, the problem of hypocrisy can be dealt effectively and the natural contradiction between the national and the international can be circumvented.

This section analyzed two major policy recommendations of the idealist school and presented them as the national interest objectives of the idealist policy. According to the self-determination principle, every state has the right to determine its own future. This is a democratic discourse taking its roots from the Enlightenment philosophy. The other course of policy is the collective security, which is the other side of the debate. Beneath the idea of the collective security lies the aspiration of creating a voluntary organization to defend the rights of the nations engaged in this organization. In the ideas of the national self-determination and the collective security, there is the desire of creating a world federation composed of secure/free and democratic states. Freedom and democracy are related to the self-determination. By determining their own futures, the nations become free and by respecting the right of other nations they become democratic. Only then, the idea of a pacific federation consisting of free and democratic states becomes a real possibility.

Neoliberal Institutionalism

The third liberal strand called as neoliberal institutionalism is different from the other two liberal strands in that it places emphasis on the rise of (formal or informal) organizations in the world politics. According to the institutionalist perspective, the emergence and the proliferation of the international organizations as the new actors in world politics make it impossible to conceive the international politics in terms of the relations between states only. For that reason, the institutionalist strand is more inclined to define the world politics as "cobweb or complex interdependence" rather than see it as the politics among only states or in the billiard ball image. The (neo)liberal institutionalists do not, however, believe that "commerce breeds peace"; rather, they tend to argue that "cooperation is not automatic, but requires planning and negotiation"⁴³.

⁴⁰ Inis L. Claude, Jr., *Power and International Relations*, 8th edition, New York, Random House, 1967, p. 112.

⁴¹ Thomas I. Cook and Malcolm Moos, "Foreign Policy: The Realism of Idealism", *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 46, No. 2, 1952, p. 349.

⁴² Cook and Moos, (1952), p. 347.

⁴³ Dunne, (2001), p. 176

The assumptions the institutionalists share with the neo realists are that the international environment is anarchic and the states are the most significant actors. The point differentiating these two schools is their approach to the possibility of cooperation under the conditions of anarchy. The institutionalists insist that cooperation is possible by means of creating regimes whereas the neo realists claim that anarchy is the essential structure of the international politics, rendering cooperation between states difficult, if not impossible. For the latter, “states are self-interest oriented, and an anarchic and competitive system pushes them to favour self-help over co-operative behavior”⁴⁴. The institutionalists also agree with the (neo)realists that states are egoistic; but their departure point is that being egoistic does not necessarily prevent cooperation as all sides engaged in cooperation stand to gain. The concept of gain from a cooperation is understood differently by the neo realists and the institutionalists. The neo realists are interested in who will gain more from a cooperative venture (relative gain) as they are always suspicious of the future intentions of the party who gets the largest share. This ever-lasting suspicion translates into hesitation in cooperating with the other parties. On the other hand, what matters most for the institutionalists is the absolute gain each party will get from cooperation regardless of its size. If all parties are better off with cooperation, then so be it is the motto of the institutionalists. The gains of each party may be unequal but it is not important because the liberal states are assumed not to be envious of each other. Unmindful of who will gain more, they must try to enhance their interests through cooperative trading arrangements. This is because of the neoliberal assumption that cooperation is “fundamental to the long-term utility-maximizing interests of states”⁴⁵.

Having indicated the main features of the neoliberal institutionalism, in the next section the institutionalist emphasis on cooperation will be investigated and an interest conception (under the conditions of anarchy) will be constructed. In this regard, the concept of regime gets due emphasis as for the neoliberal institutionalists, the creation of international regimes is very significant because of the critical role they play in the regulation of relations between states in a world of diffused power and authority.

The Cooperative Interest

The vision of neoliberal institutionalism of the international politics is such that the world is interdependent and composed of complex relations. Since one of its main arguments is that power has become multi-dimensional in the era of complex interdependence, it is impossible for neoliberal institutionalism to define the national interest only in terms of hard power capabilities of the state. The increasing need to manage complex interdependence and the various processes of globalization imply the inevitable and necessary multi-dimensional feature of power in the globalized era. As the world has become smaller because of the information technologies and the internationalization of the localities, the management of the politics has begun to entail cooperation between states on an increasing number of issues. For example, atmospheric pollution, terrorism, the drug trade, currency crises and AIDS necessarily demand cooperation as they are trans-boundary issues with international implications. Thus, cooperation can be regarded as the fundamental interest of the neoliberal institutionalists.

Rosenau argues that in the XVI and XVII centuries there was not a concept like the national interest; instead, there was “the will of the prince” or “the dynastic interests”⁴⁶. With the rise of the nation-state, such old loyalties were replaced “by new ones that reflected the new loyalties”. With this paradigm shift, there arose concepts related to the latter such as the “national honor, the public interest and the general will”⁴⁷. This, according to the neoliberals, renders the national interest a historically specific concept, which is devoid of any exact or constant definition. It can be understood differently in different times. Accordingly, its realpolitik usage is criticized. Rosenau argues that “the ever greater interdependence of nations and the emergence of increasing numbers of supranational actors diminish reliance on the concept”⁴⁸, at least on its traditional usage. In this section, the traditional definition of the concept is refuted for the sake of developing the notion of the cooperative interest. From the point of view of a cobweb understanding, the politics is no longer a game between the billiard balls.

In the neoliberal understanding, the interests of all states can be combined together in a cooperative manner. But cooperation is not a spontaneous activity; rather it must be constructed by means of regimes. Neoliberal institutionalism’s emphasis on the non-state actors inevitably makes us to consider its paradigm of regime. Regime means a set of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures around which actors’ expectations converge in a given area of international relations. Regimes are founded in order to facilitate cooperation between states in an interdependent

⁴⁴ Steven L. Lamy, “Contemporary mainstream approaches: neo-realism and neo-liberalism”, John Baylis and Steve Smith (ed.s), *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 190.

⁴⁵ Hobson, (2003), p. 70

⁴⁶ James N. Rosenau, *The Study of World Politics Volume 1: Theoretical and Methodological Challenges*, London, Routledge, 2006, p. 246.

⁴⁷ Rosenau, (1992), p. 247.

⁴⁸ Rosenau, (1992), p. 253

world. To Keohane, “international regimes are governmental arrangements which were intended to regulate and control transnational and interstate relations”. Rather than denying the relevance of the nation-state, Keohane argues that regimes rests “upon sovereignty and self-help”. In that sense, Keohane “subscribes to the most fundamental premise of the Waltzian realism”⁴⁹. He does not ignore the characteristics of states such as being egoistic and rational; rather, the only thing he tries to do is to develop a functional theory of international regimes in order to investigate the possibility of cooperation under anarchy.

Neoliberal institutionalism accepts some concepts of neorealism such as anarchy and self-help while not rejecting at the same time the possibility of creating common institutions to regulate the inter-state affairs in a post-hegemonic world. Against the hegemonic stability theory which claims that there must be a hegemon to regulate cooperation among states, the neoliberal institutionalists indicate that cooperation can be constructed in the absence of a hegemon as well by means of regimes as the instruments of cooperation. At this point, it is useful to enumerate some characteristics and benefits of the regimes.

Consequently, for the neoliberal institutionalists, the international regimes facilitate cooperation among states by providing them with the means to enhance their power under the conditions of anarchy. Regimes are the instruments by which states can maximize their interests. If states come to believe by participating within a regime that reciprocity will provide them with much more benefits than defection, then regimes can be said to have fulfilled their main function and can survive.

As a result, it can be claimed that the national interest understanding of neoliberal institutionalism depends on a cooperative understanding. The reciprocity principle emphasized by the neoliberal institutionalists signifies the cooperative feature of the national interest. According to this approach, each party will gain from cooperation (absolute gain) even though the portion of gain of each may be of different size. The ultimate reference point is to survive under anarchy by cooperating under the umbrella of the international regimes by benefiting from the anarchy-mitigating benefits they provide rather than by submitting to the competitive logic of anarchy and becoming introvert and suspicious of the others’ intentions.

In conclusion, this article has tried to explain the three main strands in the liberal thought and analyzed the national interest understandings of these three schools. Liberal internationalism is the classical form of the liberal thought. It gives much importance to free trade and democracy, and claims that if all the states in the world are ruled by democracy and based on market economy, then the wars will be eliminated from the world. So, its aim is to create a community of the liberal democratic states with common interests. It does not give the state a crucial role vis-à-vis the society. It believes in the spirit of the invisible hand of the economy to regulate the society.

The second liberal strand is the idealist school which is more state-centric than the liberal internationalism. With the eruption of the World War I in the first quarter of the XX century, the idealists saw it necessary to regulate the world politics at the state-level. The national self-determination and the foundation of the League of Nations were both evidences of the support given to the nation-state as a legitimate mode of governance in the XX century. The solutions the idealists were proposing were similar to the liberal internationalists’. However, the difference of the idealists was their extension of the liberal discourse from the individual to the state level.

The third strand in the liberal thinking is neoliberal institutionalism, which, preoccupied with the international organizations, claims that the world has become interdependent. Thus, seeing the state as the only actor is no longer possible. In Rosenau’s words, there is turbulence in the world politics, meaning complex interdependency among state, inter-state, sub-state, trans-state and non-state actors, and the disappearance of the assumed hierarchy of issues. In such a turbulent world, the national interest is inevitably related to cooperation problematic in an anarchical international environment. For the neoliberals who think that anarchy can be mitigated by the creation of international regimes, have aimed to develop a theory of regimes to confirm that cooperation is not only possible under the supervision of hegemony but also in its absence because regimes create common interests for their members. The possibility of cheating by the regime members (states) is prevented by means of the flux of the information. As each state, thanks to the information, becomes confident about the others’ intentions, it then becomes possible for all of them to trust each others. If a state tries to cheat the others with the expectation of secretly gaining more, it is subjected to punishment. If it does not, then the reciprocity that develops as a way of rewarding makes states begin to feel bound by the same kind of interests.

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⁴⁹ Michael Suhr, “Robert O.Keohane: a contemporary classic”, Iver B. Neumann and Ole Waever (ed.s), *The Future of International Relations*, London, Routledge, 1997, p. 123.

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