

International Relations

Liberal Theory

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Liberalism is a theory of international politics that believes the fundamental force in world politics is globalisation. And globalisation is interdependence between the interests of groups in different societies. Those groups then go to their governments and ask them to regulate globalisation in different ways. And those varied demands that come from groups in different societies lead those governments to act in different ways.

So that leads to a world system that has states with quite varied state preferences about what they want the ultimate outcome of international politics to be. So you can think of liberalism as a bottom-up theory, where globalisation drives different state preferences, and those different state preferences drive what states do.

Liberal theories of international relations start with individuals in groups in society as the basic actors. They represent their interest to states. Now, you could think of those states as cities, even tribes, empires, and any kind of political actors. Although in the modern world, most such political actors are states.

If you believe as liberals do that the fundamental force in international politics is the distribution of social and state preferences, then that leads you to look in a particular place for the basic forces that drive state behaviour. And there are three kinds of liberal theory that help you do that.

The first is commercial liberal theory. And it directs you to look at the material interest of states, particularly their economic interest in managing interdependence in a way that's profitable to the dominant groups in a society at a given time.

The second is ideational liberalism. That focuses you on the ideals and beliefs of groups in society and their effort to realise those ideals in international relations.

And the third is Republican liberalism. That focuses you on domestic institutions, and domestic institutions help select which groups it is in society whose interests and ideals are represented by the state at any point in time. You put these three things together - interests, ideas and institutions - and you get a comprehensive view of the different factors that influence what the preferences of states are. And therefore in the liberal view, what they want. And therefore, what they do.

Some people think that liberal theory is unparsimonious. They say you're trying to explain preferences. Then you've got these three types of preferences: commercial, Republican and ideational liberalism, and then sub-theories within it. Isn't that very complicated? I'm sure my

friend John Mearsheimer who talks about realism will say, I've just got five principals, I could do it much more simply.

I think a theory needs to be as simple or complicated as the material it's trying to study. The world is a diverse place, we need a theory that can handle that. The test of a good theory is whether or not it generates particular mid-range claims at the level of things like the democratic peace hypothesis, or theories of trade, or explanations of how countries comply with international organisations, that are relatively simple and relatively powerful.

Based on that criterion, the liberal theory is a powerful and relatively simple theory. And that's the criterion I think is most pragmatic, most useful, and it's the one I use.

The distinctive aspect of liberal theory is its ability to explain a wide variation in outcomes that we actually see in the international system. So liberal theories are extremely powerful at explaining cooperative outcomes in the international system, because it can predict the conditions under which countries have convergent interests. For example, in the post-war international economic system where countries had expanding interests in mutually beneficial trade, we've seen the growth of international organisations to manage international trade such as the WTO, the World Trade Organisation, and the European Union to do that job.

It's also able to explain as I mentioned before, the democratic peace phenomena that democracies tend to cooperate amongst each other and not go to war with each other. At the same time, it's capable of explaining in a much differentiated way when states go to war, to predict circumstances under which they do. For example, liberals would predict that democratic and non-democratic states, or states with opposed ideologies, say communist and non-communist states, or states with different competing visions of religious future for the world, would be more likely to go to war than other sorts of states.

This is in contrast to a realist theory. If you compare realism to liberalism, realism argues that the causes of war and peace can be seen in the distribution of power. Realists such as Hans Morgenthau and John Mearsheimer argue that the causes of war and peace can be explained by the distribution of coercive power. Notice that liberals are quite different, they argue that the causes of state behaviour lie in the distribution of state preferences.

This is something that realists affirmatively deny. They argue that it really doesn't matter what motivation states have, what intentions they have, what domestic regimes they have, what ideologies they have. States will act the same on the basis of what distribution of power exists in the international system. That's quite a radical hypothesis, that Stalin's Russia, Hitler's Germany and Franklin Roosevelt's United States and Churchill's Britain will all act the same given the same amount of power. Liberals find this absurd. We believe that in fact those domestic differences really matter and history does bare us out.

It's often thought that realist theories are systemic theories. And liberal theories are domestic theories. This is a distinction that Kenneth Waltz introduced into the literature. I disagree with this distinction. Both liberal theories and realist theories are systemic theories in the sense that Waltz used the term.

What is a systemic theory? It's a theory that says that the causes of state behaviour lie in the configuration of characteristics of states. The only difference between realist theories and liberal theories in this regard is the particular characteristic that these theories choose to emphasise.

For realist theories that characteristic is coercive power. And the distribution of coercive power across the international system is what determines what each state does. For liberals, the critical characteristic is the distribution of social preferences and state preferences across the international system. The critical difference is that one is about coercive power and the other one is about social preferences.

One might think that US-China relations, great power, superpower relations, is the last place we should look for liberal theory to be effective. But in fact, I think it works very well in this case. If we look at Western policy toward China, the first thing to note about it is that the main line of Western policy, the major emphasis of it is engagement.

Our bet with regard to China in the United States and in the Western world, is that by trading with China, by opening China up, we will make China a more Pacific country. A country that's easier to deal with because it will become richer, more educated and more agreeable in every regard. That's the main line of Western policy.

Now it's true that Western policy also has certain elements that might be better explained by other theories. For example, we do balance China to a certain extent and a realist might point that out. We do try to integrate China into international organisations. And an institutionalist might point that out. We do even try to socialise Chinese officials into thinking a different way about international relations. And a constructivist might try to point that out.

But the main wager that we're placing with regard to China is that economic development, domestic regime change, and changes in ideas, fundamental ideas about legitimacy in China, will make it a country that we can deal with over the long term. In fact, that's how the whole process got started. We didn't really start dealing with China as a partner that we could deal with across the full range of policies until Mao was replaced by Deng Xiaoping. And that was a domestic change in China, a fundamental change in the purposes of that regime which led to a change in our relationship with it.

I don't think realists or institutionalists or constructivists can really give a coherent account of that. But it follows directly from liberal theory, which tells you that when regimes fundamentally change their purposes, foreign policy changes follow.