



## Cooperation, anarchy and interdependence

*The Liberal model*

### William Brown

If I can turn to you now, Simon, what are the main elements of the liberal model in contrast to the realist picture Jef has just painted?

### Simon Bromley

The realist model works as it were from the state system to defining the state's interest. You look at the position of the state in the state system: that tells you where its interests come from. The liberal model really starts at least the other way round. It starts like the realist model in saying the system is anarchic but it argues that the interests that states seek to pursue in conditions of anarchy are shaped very much by the nature of the society, domestic and transnational over which they seek to rule and, particularly, liberals stress the role of dominant powerful groups within society in shaping the nature of the national interests and that's illustrated in a story about the development of India's national interest in Chapter 6 of *Making the International*. In order to move forward to a model of international order as a whole the liberal model says, well what we need to look at is the way in which the different national interests of states, that are shaped by the societies over which they rule, are configured together when put together at an international level. So what you have is a number of states all interacting with one another, all seeking to pursue their national interest, as defined by their dominant groups, and that those interests will configure in different ways and that, in particular, the ways in which interests configured amongst states might be conflictual, they might be situations where states are in conflict with one another but they might also be cooperative and mutually beneficial. Trade liberalisation is an obvious example where, arguably, the interests of states that are mutually engaging in trade liberalisation are not in conflict. They can both benefit from it. So that the liberal model argues that, if you want to analyse the behaviour of states in an anarchic system, what you first need to specify is the configuration of these interests. How are they socially shaped and then, when they come together at an international level, how actually are the interests configured. And the specific difference there from the realist model is really I think two-fold. It's first is the argument that in order to understand the system it's not just anarchy plus the distribution of power, it's anarchy and the distribution of power plus interdependence. That when states interact internationally what they can achieve depends on what other states do. So that states face an environment of what's called 'strategic inter-dependence', the strategies that they can pursue are conditioned by their anticipation of the strategies that others will pursue. The other important difference from realism is the assumption that when states' interests interact internationally, it's not always the case that states will focus on their relative position or be worried about dependence and the reason for that is that it's argued that security is only one value amongst others, that security will be balanced alongside considerations of economic welfare, or promotion of cultural values, or whatever. And formally one can say that states interact in ways which may be, and this is the way it's done in Chapter 9, that states interact sometimes in positive-sum ways, in other words, when they interact they both gain, sometimes they interact in ways that are zero-sum, what one state gains another state loses and sometimes it's a negative-sum interaction in which both lose. The realist model that Jef outlines tends to assume that all interactions, because they are about relative gains, are zero-sum; if I gain, you lose. The liberal model argues that's not necessarily the case, there are many kinds of interactions where I might gain and you might gain. The liberal model argues that there are many cases where mutual dependence does not imply vulnerability vis-à-vis security and that there are also many cases where states will not worry overly about their relative position vis-à-vis other states, they will be primarily concerned about their absolute gains vis-à-vis where they were before the interaction. So that that provides the basis in the liberal model for, at least, the possibility of extensive and durable cooperation. That, where the interaction takes the form of a positive sum interaction, that is, where both or many parties can benefit from it; and where states are interested in their absolute gains, rather than their relative gains; then

one would expect extensive and durable cooperation. And on the liberal account examples like the WTO or patterns of integration within the European Union over the last thirty or forty years or, as we will come on to, regional trade agreements like NAFTA, are all examples of cooperation that result from interdependence as well as anarchy. So I suppose, to put it in summary form, the core claim is that once you recognise the strategic nature of interdependence and once you recognise that the national interest is socially shaped by society and not just deriving from your position in the state system, then the possibilities of cooperation are much, much greater.

**William Brown**

So, if I've got you correctly there, the key differences from realism that the liberal model presents are that what states seek to do is not simply determined by their position in the international system but is affected internally as well as internationally and because states seek to do a variety of things, alongside the anarchic structure that realism focuses on alone, liberals would say there exist patterns of interdependence which will vary between different kinds of interactions amongst states.

**Simon Bromley**

Yes that's precisely it but once you recognise the importance of interdependence the pessimistic conclusions from anarchy that Jef drew earlier don't necessarily follow.

**William Brown**

Okay. And, if I understand your last point correctly, the consequences of the liberal model are that these patterns of interdependence can create the opportunity for quite wide-ranging cooperation between states in the international system. Can you just highlight the circumstances under which that cooperation can emerge?

**Simon Bromley**

Remember that one of the key differences is that for realism in a sense the national interest is fixed, it's given by the place of the state in the state system. For the liberal model the national interest is a variable, it's a variable that is an outcome of social processes within the state, it's about domestic groups struggling to get a particular definition of the national interest. So that one might have, for example, powerful business groups and economic lobbies and consumer groups and so on arguing that a pursuit of freer trade and higher growth is a core aspect of the national interest. So countries may come to define their national interest in terms, not of how are we doing vis-à-vis another country but how are we doing vis-à-vis last year, that we want our growth rate to be as high as it possibly can, never mind what other people's growth rate is. That's the first step of the argument. The second step of the argument is, if you've got several countries that come to define the national interest in that way, if you've got several countries that are pursuing absolute gains, not worrying so much about their relative position and if you've got a case like trade liberalisation where, in many circumstances, not all but in many circumstances, freer trade does bring economic gains to many parties, then if you put those two together, states pursuing absolute gains plus the possibility of positive-sum interactions where many can gain, then states will cooperate to do that and they might then even set up institutions like the WTO or the North American Free Trade Agreement to oversee those agreements and, to some extent, even to police them.