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Realist Internationalism and the Issue of Legitimacy

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"Weak government is a negation of liberty."

Francis Lieber.

After the experiences of the past generation, it should be apparent that all too much of liberal internationalist thinking in America is not "internationalist" in any real sense at all. Internationalism, if it is to have any meaning as a word, must mean peace and co-operation between different nations, which by nature will not merely have different interests that must be reconciled, but different political systems that must co-exist.

It is striking and symbolic in this regard the degree to which over the past generation references to the United Nations by liberal internationalists have declined or become hostile. The UN remains the only international organisation that retains a measure of global prestige, that through its

associated organisations and bodies like the WHO, the UNHCR and the IGPCC has done essential work for humanity, and that does give at least some representation to all the countries of the world; but for that reason the UN Security Council and General Assembly include non-democratic states, and large majorities of the General Assembly have repeatedly opposed U.S. interventions.

Similarly, as noted by Peter Beinart and others, too many liberal internationalists have abandoned belief in international law for the highly dubious concept of a "rules-based order", under which the rules are laid down and changed at will by Washington.[1] As Senator Kennedy said of the "Bush Doctrine", which included a commitment to America's mission to spread democracy through pressure and if necessary military force (and was therefore supported by most liberal internationalists), this is "a call for 21st Century American imperialism that no other nation can or should accept."[2]

This essay will argue that a fundamental element in any true internationalist project must be a full, and not just formal recognition (with only very rare and limited exceptions) of the legitimacy of other political systems.[3] This in turn should be underpinned by a deep understanding of history – something that is lacking not only among many liberal internationalists, but also to a surprising extent among International Relations theorists in general (surprisingly, because starting with Thucydides, the greatest past thinkers on IR all rooted their theories in a profound knowledge of history).

The form of "internationalism" currently being propagated by most American (and many European) liberal internationalists is a powerful obstacle to the creation of international coalitions to tackle these threats. It is also helping to

drive the growing tension between America and other states that threatens war that could end modern civilization.

The neo-conservative Max Boot (now a supporter of the Biden administration) has been publicly candid about what should be the real U.S. goals when it comes to denying legitimacy to the Chinese state in the name of promoting democracy:

"Beyond containment, deterrence, and economic integration [of China] lies a strategy that the British never employed against either Germany or Japan-- internal subversion. Sorry, the polite euphemisms are "democracy promotion" and "human rights protection," but these amount to the same thing: The freer China becomes, the less power the Communist oligarchy will enjoy."[4]

True internationalists should be highly sceptical of teleological statements like the following by President Obama (which however have been repeated in one way or another by every President since World War II) to the Australian parliament in 2011. This speech was made as part of his administration's "Pivot to Asia".

"Other models have been tried and they have failed, fascism and communism, rule by one man and rule by committee. And they fail for the same simple reason: They ignore the ultimate source of power and legitimacy – the will of the people…The currents of history may ebb and flow, but they move – decidedly, decisively – in a single direction. History is on the side of the free –

free societies, free governments, free economies, free people. And the future belongs to those who stand firm for those ideals."[5]

Acute dangers lurk in the U.S. refusal of such recognition to other states, and to the historical and moral arguments for such recognition. For in the end, in a tradition going back to Immanuel Kant and the French Revolution, only states that conform – or pretend to conform – to liberal ideas are regarded by many liberal internationalists as truly legitimate, and their interests worthy of respect by the United States.

This inevitably has come to mean in addition the agreement of other states to U.S. agendas. From this point of view, the only thing worse, diplomatically speaking, than the U.S. demand that other countries abandon their own interests is the patronizing and ridiculous assumption that America knows better than other countries what their own interests really are. It is hard to exaggerate the damage that this assumption has done to U.S. diplomacy.

For in their explicit dependence on the expansion of U.S. geopolitical power, all too many American liberal internationalists (and their European associates) are in reality – unwittingly - liberal imperialists, but with an added fervour derived from the tremendous emotional power and self-conviction of American civic nationalism (commonly known as "exceptionalism") and the "American Creed".[6]

Louis Hartz wrote of the Creed's "compulsive nationalism" and the "fixed, dogmatic liberalism of a liberal way of life".[7] Liberal internationalists have always claimed that their beliefs are contrary to those of nationalists; and it should be obvious that an "internationalism" intrinsically tied to American

nationalism and global power cannot by its very nature avoid implication in the specific national ambitions and hatreds of the United States (or at least the U.S. political establishment).

As Reinhold Niebuhr wrote (and he was a passionate defender of liberal democracy against Nazi and communist totalitarianism), modern Western liberalism thinks that it has

"an easy solution for the problems of anarchy and chaos on both the international and national levels of community, because of its fatuous and superficial view of man. It does not know that the same man who is ostensibly devoted to the "common good" may have desires and ambitions, hopes and fears, which set him at variance with his neighbors."[8]

Legitimacy and State-Building

A recognition of the legitimacy of other states is critical to any true internationalism, because legitimacy is the most important foundation of state strength and stability, and to its capacity for economic and social development. It is even foundational to the state's ability to resist outside threats, not just because a population has to be willing to support its state in war, but because in the words of Cicero, *pecunia nervus belli*: "money is the sinew of war". Money depends chiefly on the ability to raise taxes; and since the very beginning of states, the willingness of enough of a population to pay taxes in the absence of immediate armed coercion has the single most important and above all permanent index of a given state's legitimacy – and without adequate taxes, no state can fulfil its essential tasks.

Legitimacy ensures that enough of the population enough of the time will obey the state's laws and commands automatically, and without resistance. Legitimacy is therefore closely related to "procedural justice", whereby people will accept an unfavourable judgement or decision because they accept the judicial, political, administrative or religious processes that have generated it.

Without legitimacy, a state will either decay and eventually fail, or be compelled to become what has been called (in a Middle Eastern context), a "fierce state", ensuring obedience through permanent terror.[9] As demonstrated in the Middle East during the "Arab Spring" of 2011, fierce states are inherently fragile. If popular belief in their ability to employ coercion crumbles even briefly, they are likely to collapse in the face of revolt by all the people they have injured and humiliated, and whose kinfolk they have murdered and tortured. Or as Thomas Friedman asked in a rare flash of insight, "Is Iraq the way it is today because Saddam Hussein is the way he is? Or is Saddam Hussein the way he is because Iraq is the way it is?"[10]

The example of modern Middle Eastern States also raises a crucial historical point that the greater part of contemporary political science has totally ignored. This is that virtually without exception, the early stages of state formation have been very violent, nasty affairs, usually lasting centuries, and requiring the defeat, conquest and sometimes extermination of rivals for power and tribal and ethno-religious groups. In Scotland, this process was only completed in 1746 CE, by "Butcher" Cumberland. United Germany and Italy benefited from centuries of orderly and even semi-constitutional government in their constituent parts – but actual unification in the mid-19th Century was accomplished by wars of conquest, and the regional states that were incorporated in the new nations had themselves been created largely by war.

Liberal progress has been described as "Getting to Denmark"; but getting to Denmark did not begin with the Enlightenment or even the Protestant Reformation. It began with the unification of the territories now making up Denmark by Kings Gorm the Old and Harald Bluetooth in the 10th Century CE – and I don't believe that they were ever called liberal humanitarians.[11] A great many states round the world today are (in historical terms) in the early stages of state formation, either because they were created by and emerged from colonial rule, or because (like Afghanistan), they only recently began to develop a state. As to the modern state in its Western, "Westphalian" form, its development was also critically interwoven with the development of state military power. In Charles Tilly's famous words, "war made the state, and the state made war".[12]

By the same token, the development in a population of state legitimacy and even a sense of "stateness", as Francis Fukuyama has called it, is an extremely complex process frequently lasting hundreds or even thousands of years and involving – and perhaps requiring – episodes of extreme violence and repression.[13] The "religion of human rights", as espoused by liberal internationalism, can therefore become an unconscious recipe for keeping states permanently weak and divided – and in certain cases, this can also accord very well with U.S. geopolitical aims.[14]

Democratic Peace Theory as a Threat to Peace

For liberal internationalists, only democracy and the defence of "liberty" bestow such legitimacy. The founding document of liberal internationalism, and of Democratic Peace Theory which helps underpin it, is Immanuel Kant's *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Essay*, published in 1795 CE in the period of

the French Revolution.[15] This document also embodies a fatal contradiction, with lasting consequences. Kant's "First Definitive Article of Perpetual Peace" is that "The civil constitution of each state shall be republican" – or, as we would say today, democratic:

"The only constitution which has its origin in the idea of the original contract, upon which the lawful legislation of every nation must be based, is the republican. It is a constitution, in the first place, founded in accordance with the principle of the freedom of the members of society as human beings: secondly, in accordance with the principle of the dependence of all, as subjects, on a common legislation: and, thirdly, in accordance with the law of the equality of the members as citizens. It is then, looking at the question of right, the only constitution whose fundamental principles lie at the basis of every form of civil constitution..."

In the quest to establish the absolute and permanent hegemony of their ideology, many liberal internationalists (or at least the politicians among them) now not only insist on the sole legitimacy of democracy as a political order today, but project the insistence on democratic legitimacy into the distant past, thereby also (in very Marxist fashion) helping to claim that it is the inevitable and eternal way of the future. Hence Tony Blair's statement that "Ours are not Western values, they are universal values of the human spirit; and anywhere, anytime that ordinary people are given the chance to choose, the choice is the same: freedom, not tyranny."[16] This spirit also permeates the National Security Strategies of both the Bush and Biden administrations. It therefore has serious consequences in the "real world".[17]

In actual fact, however, as Bernard Williams wrote,

"[L]iberalism has a poor account, or in many cases no account, of the cognitive status of its own history. Political morality has no answer in its own terms to the question of why what it takes to be the true moral solution to the question of politics, liberalism, should for the first time (roughly) become evident in European culture from the late 17th Century onwards, and why these truths have been concealed from other people."[18]

The most famous intellectual (as opposed to moral or political) definition of different types of legitimacy is that of Max Weber.[19] He divided legitimacy into three types, none of them democratic – though democracy can embody elements of all of them: traditional, charismatic and legal/bureaucratic.

Legitimacy based on tradition relies on the tendency of societies to accept rules and forms of government that have been around for a long time, and have been accepted by their parents and grandparents. This form of legitimacy is often heavily bound up with inherited religion; something that applied to certain ancient and medieval republics as well as to hereditary monarchies (new, messianic religion can also be a source of legitimacy, but of a charismatic and revolutionary kind).

 The U.S. political system today has strong aspects of legitimacy based on tradition rather than democracy.[20] Thus key aspects of the U.S. Constitution are undemocratic (and intentionally so, given the deep distrust of democracy on the part of its wealthy patrician authors) and regularly produce results that are directly contrary to the wishes of a majority of voters: notably the Electoral

College in presidential elections and the distribution of constituencies in the House of Representatives. The U.S. Supreme Court is an explicitly anti-democratic institution. As Samuel Huntington wrote, key parts of the Constitution have medieval English origins, linked to a belief in immutable laws inherited from ancestors: "This old idea of a fundamental law beyond human control was given new authority by identifying it with a written constitution."[21]

Today, it is indeed in practice impossible to amend the Constitution, whatever a majority of Americans might wish. Nonetheless, Americans continue to respect these results and obey these institutions because the Constitution is virtually coterminous with the existence of the United States, and time, and the influence of civic nationalism, have given it an almost sacral character in the eyes of most Americans. Indeed, for sections of the religious Right, the men who drew it up were indeed directly inspired by God.[22]

Charismatic legitimacy usually resides in particular individuals, who traditionally have established dynasties, as Napoleon tried to do, and Julius Caesar succeeded in doing. In South Asia today, a number of dynastic political parties continue to survive largely on the basis of the charisma of their original founder. Western democracies have also generated charismatic leaders, usually as a result of inspiring leadership in war: Washington, Lincoln, Churchill, Roosevelt and de Gaulle; and long after their deaths, their names retain a certain magical charisma; they are "to be conjured with". Charismatic religious leaders can found regimes on the renewal of religion (as in many Muslim kingdoms and to some degree early Protestantism).

In Weber's view, legal/bureaucratic legitimacy by contrast depended on the state observing a fixed, predictable and written set of rules and laws, followed by its officials (who would be mainly appointed in a regular fashion on the

basis of merit, not through patronage or the personal whim of the ruler) and accepted by its population; the kind of state described in German by the term *Rechtstaat*. This for Weber was the essential aspect of the successful modern state. Such a state could be democratic, but it did not have to be. It could also be the kind of constitutional and generally law-abiding but semi-authoritarian state under which Weber himself lived in the German Empire, or the constitutional and elective but largely oligarchical and authoritarian Italian liberal state from 1860 to 1918.

Since he was looking at the permanent foundations of state legitimacy rather than circumstantial grounds for it, Weber did not include in his three types an obvious and key source of state legitimacy (or the lack of it) which is performance. It might be said that a central role of the basic sources of legitimacy named by Weber is to buy time for the state; to allow it to survive – for a while – failures of performance that would crumple up less legitimate systems. Examples are the dynastic legitimacy that allowed Valois France and Habsburg Austria to survive repeated military defeats, and the democratic legitimacy which allowed American, British and French democracy (but not German) to survive the Great Depression.

Legitimacy and Order

Performance at what? At whatever a given population (or the dominant sections of it) at a given time regard as the vital tasks of the state. These tasks may obviously differ greatly from society to society and over time, and be greatly influenced by local culture – though for our purposes we can probably ignore outliers like the need for the Aztec state to provide a sufficient number of human sacrifices per day to persuade the Sun to rise next morning.

Some performance demands have been permanent for some societies – but not others – throughout their recorded history; for example, the requirement that Chinese states should be able to control their river systems so as to limit floods and droughts. This is a performance that has not been required of most Western states (with the obvious exception of Holland), as they are not blessed and cursed with such huge and unpredictable river systems – though due to climate change, it may be a key condition of legitimacy for a great many states in future.[23] Prevention of famine has been a requirement of the performance legitimacy of many or most states through history. Only very recently however have populations come to demand that their states provide pensions, social services and health services.

Equally, there is no reason at all to take the performance requirements of democracies– including in the "West" – either as having existed in the more distant past, or as certain in future. Rather the starting point should be the principle laid down by St Vincent de Lerins in the 5th Century CE: *Quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus*: What has been believed always, everywhere, by everyone.[24]

Of these permanent requirements of state performance by populations as grounds for their recognition of state legitimacy, the most ancient, permanent and universal is that of physical security for inhabitants and their families. Indeed, without minimal standards of this there is no point in having a state at all, and bowing to its painful demands for obedience, service and taxes. Desire for physical security has also always been extended to security from uncontrolled plunder, which can abruptly transform a family or community from abundance to immiseration or outright starvation.

Human threats to personal, familial and communal security have always come from five different but often overlapping sources: external invaders; criminals, and especially organised bandit gangs; "overmighty subjects" – local feudal lords, warlords and political bosses; predatory state forces acting as bandits; and state repression directed by governments. Much of what Liberal internationalism includes under "democracy" and its elements of "liberty" and "human rights" in fact correspond to the demands of human security. However, liberal internationalism only seriously and consistently addresses the threats to human security from states, local bosses and predatory state forces (not from "private" criminals); discrete factors which in addition they mix up in ways which badly confuse thinking about the nature of states and state legitimacy.

The most fundamental point about these threats should be obvious: it is that from the personal point of view of the victim or potential victim of murder, rape, robbery or extortion by force, the most important thing is not who is committing the crime, but to prevent it happening to them; and depending on circumstances, achieving this may itself require the employment of large amounts of force, legal or otherwise. A second point is that for most societies in the past and a good many in the present day, the threat of violence and robbery by the state has often been somewhat limited, because the state has been distant and weak; whereas the threat of banditry has been historically and geographically widespread and enduring.

Even an oppressive state or social system also depends for its survival on maintaining some sort of basic peace and order. In the words of Bernard Williams,

"The categories of an ordered as opposed to a disordered social situation, disorder which is at the limit anarchy, apply everywhere; correspondingly, so do the ideas of a legitimate political order, where that means, not necessarily what we would count now as an acceptable political order, but what counted then as one."[25]

It is necessary however to add that it is not just a question of what "we" would count "now" as acceptable, but also what we would count as acceptable *here* and now: in early 21st Century prosperous, respectable, peaceful and well-governed Oxford, rather than early 21st Century Filipino slum or decaying post-industrial Russian city. At bottom, the distinction that Williams is drawing – a permanent one in history, I would argue – is between violent chaos and what in the 18th Century would have been called "duly constituted authority".

The Everlasting Bandit Threat

Concerning depredations by local bosses and state forces, while these may be enabled by an authoritarian state, they have been and remain more likely to stem from state weakness. Thus the horrible crimes frequently committed by Indian police under Indian democracy (including the liberal pluralist government of Jawaharlal Nehru) were in no sense the decision of the Indian government. They resulted from its inability to prevent its own servants from following their ancient predatory instincts (leading in turn to being compelled to help cover up their crimes). The same is true of local bosses and dominant local kinship groups, including ones that exert their dominance through

ostensibly "democratic" and elected institutions, which they use their power to influence and manipulate.[26]

The confusion about this in human rights circles can run very deep. Thus Nicholas Kristof of the *New York Times* wrote a whole series of articles accusing President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan of sharing responsibility for the organised gang-rape of a woman, Mukhtaran Bibi, by members of a different and "higher" local kinship group, in retaliation for her brother's alleged relationship with one of their womenfolk. [27] Kristof attributed this to Musharraf's "dictatorship" – completely ignoring the fact that in neighbouring "democratic" India, such rapes of lower caste women by members of local upper castes – very often also as a punishment for alleged miscegenation by their menfolk - are also tragically common, and once again, certainly not the will of the central government.[28]

It is very strange that this syndrome is not more widely recognised by liberal internationalists (and political scientists) in the United States, for after all it prevails in a large number of electoral democracies in America's own neighbourhood, starting with Mexico. The drugs gangs that terrorize the populations may well have colonized large parts of the state police and army, but nobody could seriously claim that this is the result of these states being strong.

Gang power is clearly both a cause and a consequence of state weakness. Indeed, so weak are some of these states that they have reportedly been forced to reach de facto treaties with the most powerful gangs so as to restore some modicum of public safety and order.[29] Nor is this a temporary and contingent situation. In one form or another, the dominance of predatory local

forces has lasted for a very long time (it was indeed inherent in the very nature of the Spanish colonies), and there is at present no end in sight to it.

The reasons for this intellectual neglect of neighbouring Central America among liberal internationalists – who pay obsessive attention to state crimes thousands of miles from America's shores - appear to me twofold. Firstly, it is another sign of the entanglement of liberal internationalism with American geopolitical power and ambition. Since the collapse of Soviet communism, there has been no outside threat to U.S. hegemony over this region, and it can therefore be safely ignored. More important though – or so I believe – is that too much attention to America's southern neighbours would betray the magic of the universalist claims of American civic nationalism. It would cast doubt on some of the fundamental premises both of liberal internationalism and of America's claim to rest the legitimacy of its geopolitical power on its mission to spread democracy and liberty in the world.

For that matter, the United States itself contains elements of predatory and uncontrolled state forces. Murder and brutality against citizens by American policemen is certainly not ordered by American federal or state governments, even if some can be accused of indifference to these crimes. American police however feel such bonds of collective solidarity, and police unions have (perfectly legally) established such legal and administrative protections for their members that except in the most extreme and well-publicised cases, it is very difficult indeed to punish or even expel them.

 Without an understanding of the differing sources of threats to the actual security of real people, it is however impossible to form an accurate and realistic understanding of the sources of state legitimacy in many populations, both historically and today. Popular attitudes in early modern Spain are well

summed up in a passage by Gerald Brenan about the works of playwright Lope de Vega (1562-1635):

"This theme of the tyrannous feudal lord is a favourite one of Lope's, and usually it is the king himself who punishes him. But far from expressing a revolutionary feeling, as has sometimes been suggested, it springs from Lope's gratitude to the Monarchy for having put down the extortions of those local tyrants who had flourished in such numbers towards the end of the Middle Ages. Under the stern rule of the Catholic kings and their successors a new class of petty gentry, farmers and artisans, had come to the front and found, if not prosperity, at least *liberty* [my italics] and dignity. For such men the Hapsburg kings were what Augustus had been to the Italians of his day, and Lope, who was himself a man of the people, followed Vergil and Horace in celebrating them."[30]

I have emphasised the word "liberty" in this passage, because it goes clear against liberal understanding of a strong autocratic state as an inevitable and inherent threat to liberty. This of course can very easily the case. But so too are the local forces which a strong state seeks to control. A broader and more complex reality is exposed by a different reading of a passage by Rousseau, in which he draws the distinction between being trapped in your house by a snowstorm (a natural force) and locked in it by someone else. What however if you were trapped in your house by a fear of attack by criminals if you stepped outside?[31] The famous essay by liberal thinker Judith Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear", is undermined as a picture of historical and contemporary reality by the fact that the fear she expressed is exclusively of state forces, and moreover,

oppressions by those forces are attributed solely to the strength, not the weakness of the state.[32]

The Cultural Revolution too, though initiated by Mao in order to crush his opponents within the party, was largely driven on the ground by forces of violent and anarchic mass resentment from below (in certain areas mixed up with outright banditry), and the memory of its crimes is deeply seared into Chinese elite and mass consciousness. Chinese people today may fear and dislike Communist Party oppression, but there is also an awareness that it does not begin to compare with the anarchic horrors of the past. In the old Arab saying, "Better sixty years of tyranny than one night of anarchy."

Too many liberal internationalists have a chronic impulse to see every revolt or resistance against an authoritarian regime as motivated by a desire for "freedom" and "democracy" – and of course local figures like Ahmed Chalabi of Iraq, desirous of U.S. support to bring them to power, have become adept at speaking this language in Washington. The reality is often far otherwise, and this is often far better understood by people in the countries concerned.

In China, there is resentment at oppression by the central authoritarian state, but there is also resentment at private oppressions and predations by local officials, and belief that if central power were gravely weakened, these would be free to create local tyrannies of their own. It is not enough to say that in the Western democracies, both public order *and* individual freedom are protected better than in China. This is doubtless mostly true; but the question is how you move from the existing China to an idealized West without running the serious risk that in the process you will actually end up like Nigeria. The image of the Soviet Union's catastrophic attempt to do this is very present indeed in the

minds of many Chinese, and has of course been played upon assiduously by state propaganda.

Different Ages Cheek by Jowl

An understanding of this pattern in history is critical to an understanding of state legitimacy in the modern world, a world which since the industrial revolutions and the globalization of Western capitalist power in the 19th Century has been characterised by what Ernst Bloch called *Die Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen* ("the contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous"), in this context, the simultaneous existence of hyper-modern and pre-modern forms of society, including political society (albeit often given modern names and disguised behind the facades of modern institutions).

Not merely does this passage by Brenan illuminate why many people in the world today feel not only safer but freer living under effective authoritarian states than risk a chaos of competing local petty tyrannies; it also illustrates the idiocy of the assumption that every society can form the basis of a successful democracy. If some outside force or influence had introduced the forms of democracy to the Spain (or the England) of the 16th Century, the inevitable result would have been a return of the rule of the local feudal tyrants attacked by Lope de Vega – even if they would now have called themselves leaders of the Spanish Democratic Front or Andalusian People's Party, and used their bravos to dragoon the local population into voting for them.

Had democratic institutions been introduced in the Scotland of the 16th Century, Campbells and MacDonalds would have formed rival tribal parties with names like the Scottish Popular Front and the Scottish People's Liberation Party, and fought with a mixture of votes and claymores to seize power so as to crush their hereditary rivals. Is this not the picture in many countries calling themselves democracies today? Judith Shklar wrote that "negative freedom" and a "relatively free regime" mean "a dispersion of power among a plurality of politically empowered groups"; but what if these groups are also heavily armed, bitterly mutually antagonistic, and possess old traditions of raiding each other for cattle and women?[33]

Liberalism has always had a serious problem in addressing the problem of the "over-mighty subject". Or rather, it has had no problem with destroying the power of feudal lords and tribal chieftains, partly through legal and political change and partly through capitalist development. But what of new over-mighty subjects who emerge precisely through the laws, institutions and capitalist development that liberalism itself has generated? This was how new and highly exploitative liberal landed elites emerged through seizing control of confiscated Church and communal lands in Italy, Spain and Mexico in the 19th Century; and how gentry landowners in England vastly increased their land and wealth through the dissolution of the monasteries and the (legal, but deeply unjust) enclosure of village common land.

It is impossible to understand the legitimacy of the Putin regime in Russia among most ordinary Russians, or the popularity of illiberal populist governments in Poland and Hungary without reference to the contemporary version of this seizure of the common lands: the way in which in the 1990s, a mixture of the former communist elites and new entrepreneurs linked to them

seized for rock-bottom prices huge quantities of state property that the peoples of these countries had been told by the Communist rulers belonged to them; all in the name of "free market reform" inspired, backed and often insisted on by the West.

 In Russia and Ukraine, this was also characterised by outright armed banditry, with criminal bosses shooting their way into control of lucrative enterprises, killing rivals, and bribing, intimidating or murdering the police and judges. To this, Western liberalism had no answer except to claim that these were temporary problems or "growing pains" of the "transition to free market democracy", and that once the new "oligarchs" had stolen enough they would settle down to become "normal" law abiding capitalists.[34]

 Many Russians however feared with good reason that Russia was on the road to the immiserated and kleptocratic condition of Nigeria, that has lasted for the sixty years of Nigerian independence and shows no sign whatsoever of improvement. One reason was that the thieving example set by the economic ruling elite would undoubtedly – and not unreasonably – be followed by officials, policemen, regulators and medical staff at every level, leading to the irremediable corruption of the whole of state and society.

Russians also felt – also with good reason – that under its show of complaints about Russian corruption, the West welcomed a process that both weakened Russia as a state and transferred enormous amounts of stolen money from Russia to Western banks, real estate, investments, football teams and luxury goods; another illustration of the way in which liberal internationalism is compromised by its current embroilment with Western capitalism and U.S. geopolitical ambition.

Physical security was also critical to the legitimacy of Putin's state. This emerges very clearly from conversations with small Russian businesspeople. As the female owner of a chain of cafes told me,

"Of course, people like me don't like the corruption of the top elites, and having to pay bribes to state officials. But it's not like the 90s, when different gangs would compete with each other to take and take, and if you couldn't pay any more they would kill you or burn down your business. That has been stopped, and for that, we are grateful to Putin."[35]

When I asked her about the role of the former KGB, and state illegality in the crackdown on the criminal oligarchs, she laughed derisively: "Do you really think those people could have been defeated by the law? They controlled the courts, and the lawyers." By the same token, the basic security of life and property is also critical to economic growth – which is one reason why this has been achieved in China, but not in insecure and chaotic "democracies".

I have received similar, but even harsher answers from working-class and lower-middle class Filipinos (and still more, Filipinas) whom I asked why they supported President Duterte's orchestration of police killings of suspected drug-dealers and gang members. For them, the acute threat posed by these groups to their families outweighed any considerations of legality; and since I do not live in a Manila slum, it seemed bad taste on my part to reproach them for this.

In America, President Theodore Roosevelt attempted to reduce the power of capitalist "over-mighty subjects" and "malefactors of great wealth" in early 20th

Century America. This effort was carried further under Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal in the 1930s and 40s. With the hegemony of ultra-free market deregulation from the 1980s on, this problem has returned with a vengeance. It can be seen most clearly in the most ancient and fundamental index of state weakness, the inability of states to force powerful elements in society to pay taxes.[36]

Traditionally, and in many other countries today, this is done through the illegal bribery or intimidation of tax collectors. In the United States, it is done perfectly legally, through the deregulated funding by the rich of elected Senators who then pass laws reducing or abolishing taxes on the rich.[37] Similarly, there was nothing illegal in the way in which good lawyers enabled the Sackler family to evade any criminal penalty for having consciously and for massive profit helped to create the deadly opioid crisis in America that has killed hundreds of thousands of Americans – while hundreds of thousands of petty drug dealers are imprisoned in U.S. jails.[38]

Denial of Legitimacy as an Attack on Vital State Interests

So far, I have addressed the reasons why authoritarian states may enjoy legitimacy in their own populations, and therefore deserve recognition of their legitimacy by the United States and the West (though this should not preclude us from condemning particular abuses, just as they have the right to condemn aspects of our systems). What however are the implications of a denial of legitimacy for international peace and order?

The liberal (and later communist) reservation of legitimacy to certain kinds of states began intellectually with Rousseau and Kant, and politically with the

French Revolution. In Kant's case, it was bound up with what has become Democratic Peace Theory: the belief (disproved as soon as it appeared) that "republican" or "democratic" states are inherently less bellicose:

"Now the republican constitution apart from the soundness of its origin, since it arose from the pure source of the concept of right, has also the prospect of attaining the desired result, namely, perpetual peace. And the reason is this. If, as must be so under this constitution, the consent of the subjects is required to determine whether there shall be war or not, nothing is more natural than that they should weigh the matter well, before undertaking such a bad business."[39]

In actual fact, even as these words were being written, republican France was seeking to mobilize its entire population for total war. The tremendous, quasi-religious legitimacy that the French revolutionary authorities drew from a combination of democracy and nationalism allowed them to pass the following law on mass mobilization (the "*Levee en masse*") – something that no traditional monarchy could possibly have demanded of its subjects, and that consciously harked back rather to the days of republican Athens and Rome, or even to the tribal Franks:

"From this moment until such time as its enemies shall have been driven from the soil of the Republic, all Frenchmen are in permanent requisition for the services of the armies. The young men shall fight; the married men shall forge arms and transport provisions; the women shall make tents and clothes and shall serve in the hospitals; the children shall turn old linen into lint; the old

men shall betake themselves to the public squares in order to arouse the courage of the warriors and preach hatred of kings and the unity of the Republic."[40]

Soon after this decree was issued, French revolutionary armies were pouring over France's borders to spread a combination of revolution and French national power – something that Kant himself opposed, but to which his ideas contributed.

Elie Kedourie highlighted the consequences of such beliefs for international peace and stability in words that are all too applicable to recent U.S. attitudes and actions:

"[O]n the principle advocated by the revolutionaries, the title of all governments then existing was put into question; since they did not derive their sovereignty from the nation, they were usurpers with whom no agreement need be binding, and to whom subjects owed no allegiance. It is clear that such a doctrine would envenom international quarrels and render them quite recalcitrant to the methods of traditional statecraft; it would indeed subvert all international relations as hitherto known...The ambitions of a state or the designs of a faction took on the purity of principle, compromise was treason, and a tone of exasperated intransigence became common between rivals and opponents."[41]

A glance at current attitudes to China in the U.S. political and security elites recalls these words of Kedourie's vividly to mind.

From a Realist perspective, the denial by one state of the legitimacy of another's state system constitutes a threat to the latter's most vital interest – for what can be a more vital interest than the very survival of the state – and on vital, as opposed to secondary interests, there can by definition be no compromise. A state that continually threatens another state's vital interests will inevitably be seen as an enemy. Hugh White comments on Obama's speech on democratic legitimacy, quoted above, that:

"China is not mentioned, but it is clear that it is the principal target of the speech. The first paragraph casts doubt on the legitimacy of the Chinese political system, and foreshadows its collapse. The second commits the U.S. government to helping the process along. The third clearly welcomes this outcome…Governments can criticise each other and still work together as equals. Governments that contest each other's legitimacy and seek each other's overthrow cannot."[42]

Liberal internationalists seek to deny this threat to the legitimacy of other systems by claiming that it applies not to states, but only to particular regimes. This however ignores two crucial factors. The first once again is the American geopolitical ambition to maintain its global primacy and weaken or destroy rivals. On the one hand, as has frequently been remarked, the association with American power involves liberal internationalists in endless contradictions and hypocrisies when it comes to U.S. support for repressive allies. Liberal internationalists try to claim that these alliances are somehow contingent and can be abandoned. They can't. They play an essential role in American hegemony in Central America, the Middle East, and parts of Asia. The United

States is no more likely to jettison Egypt than Russia is to jettison Belarus, and for essentially the same reasons.

On the other hand, not only rival regimes but the populations of rival states have good reason to believe that U.S. attempts to change their regimes are not intended to bring about democracy, but to weaken or destroy the states themselves, or reduce them to American vassals. Where local nationalism and national interests are opposed to U.S. domination, this liberal internationalist strengthens, not weakens, the identification between authoritarian state and population.

Secondly, in many cases it is believed with good reason that the destruction of a given regime may lead to the disintegration of the state itself. This has been true both as a result of Western interventions in Iraq and Libya, and in certain cases (like Somalia), where a regime has been overthrown by revolt from within. In the Soviet Union, the collapse of Communist legitimacy led to the break-up of the union itself, and the legitimacy of the Putin regime rests partly on a longstanding popular belief that if it fell it would take the Russian Federation with it; and that the United States would rejoice in this outcome and be totally indifferent to the monstrous human suffering that would result.

In China, the legitimacy of Communist rule rests largely on its tremendous economic progress over the past four decades, which has produced the greatest improvement in human wellbeing of any country or period in history; and great economic success as a source of legitimacy has also been crucial to the United States.

 The legitimacy of the rule of the Chinese Communist Party also however derives from a belief that it is critical to Chinese national unity and strength. Chinese popular attitudes are profoundly influenced by the association of the

"Century of Humiliation" at the hands of the West and Japan with the internal disintegration of China into competing warlord domains, together with an explosion of banditry; not just local brigandage, but bandit armies storming small cities and massacring or raping their populations.[43]

This has been a central element in Xi Jinping's popular appeal, and it has roots in Chinese history that go back thousands of years. Traditionally, local Chinese elites seeking emancipation from central state control would use the language of Confucian ethics to justify their power and depredations (with of course little relationship to what Confucius actually taught). It is very easy to imagine that in future they may use the language of free market democracy, just like the kleptocratic Russian oligarchs of the 1990s.

When it comes to the dangers posed by threats to legitimacy to international peace and order, the clearest and most interesting example is the Middle East, where for many decades relations between the states of the region have been perennially hostile and unstable. A central reason for this is that every state in the region has good reason to fear both internal lack of legitimacy, and that internal revolt will be encouraged and exploited by other states. All of them have been threatened both by local ethnic, ethno-religious and tribal separatism, and by movements of Pan-Arabism and Pan-Islamism backed by other states.

Israel of course rules over millions of bitterly discontented Palestinians, who may now once again form a majority between the Jordan and the sea, and have until recently received a measure of support from most local Muslim states. Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates (formerly the Trucial Oman, after the truce imposed on the feuding local sheikhdoms by the British) are the artificial creations of the British and French empires. Saudi

Arabia is a congeries of disparate tribes and territories conquered by the house of Saud. Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran contain huge national minorities that overlap with neighbouring states.

And the populations of most of the major states of the Middle East are deeply ideologically and religiously divided in their beliefs about the very nature and identity of their states. - something that makes workable democratic government difficult if not impossible; for how can the basic identity of a state be changed to and fro with every election?

The fragility of these states makes them fierce to their own populations (they are commonly called by Arabs *mukhabarat*, or secret police states); it also makes them believe (usually with good reason) that rival neighbours not only have different interests, but threaten to destroy them through subversion and support for internal revolt; and that they must therefore defend themselves by threatening their rivals with destruction by the same means. These fears and hatreds have in turn been exploited and encouraged by outside great powers to strengthen their own positions in the region.

 Americans' own fears concerning their internal divisions and the threats to the legitimacy of their political system have grown greatly in recent years. In certain respects, the United States is coming to resemble Turkey, Egypt or Iran, where huge sections of the population differ radically on the very nature and identity of their state and society and therefore cannot bear to be defeated in elections.

The fear and hatred that resulted from (enormously exaggerated) Russian influence on the 2016 elections was due partly to the specific needs and impulses of the Democratic Party, but it also reflected much deeper anxieties about the stability of the U.S. state system. From the point of view of the Putin

regime, of course, Russia was simply responding to continuous U.S. attempts through propaganda and influence to undermine the legitimacy of the existing Russian state and its allies.

The Chinese ruling elite equally believes that the United States is dedicated to its destruction and the crippling of China; and much of the language of U.S. politicians and institutions like the National Endowment for Democracy and the International Republican Institute seem calculated to increase these fears. The result is to make co-operation between America and other states on essential common goals much more difficult; and in the worst outcome, to bring about levels of fear and distrust that eventually lead to war.

The Future is Another Country

The emphasis on history in this essay is intended not only to demonstrate the inadequacy of teleological liberal understandings of state formation and state legitimacy in the past and present, and the dangers this poses for U.S. strategy and international peace; it is also a lesson that we cannot know the future. At present, liberal internationalism has fallen into an almost schizophrenic state of cognitive dissonance on this subject: on the one hand, worrying obsessively (but with good reason) about the domestic decay of American democracy; on the other, continuing to insist on its compulsory export all over the world. To try to square this circle leads to the identification of the domestic threats to democracy with an alleged "alliance of authoritarianisms", and therefore to the dangerous implication that democracy in America can only be saved by the overthrow of other governments and states.[44]

A better way of understanding the past and the future is that economic, military, cultural, social, demographic and ecological change repeatedly throughout history throws up new challenges to existing state systems. Some adapt and develop in response to specific challenges, and thereby establish or strengthen their legitimacy in the eyes of their population. Others fail, and their legitimacy collapses as a result. Some prove spectacularly well-adapted to face one set of challenges, but – perhaps only centuries later – fail completely in the face of radically new ones, which their very nature makes it impossible for them to meet. The classic historical example of this is the failure of imperial China's "Confucian" state system – by far the most successful in history in terms of longevity – and its incapability to adapt in the face of the Western capitalist and imperialist irruption during the 19th Century.

Today, all states are facing a radically new challenge in the form of climate change, and their future legitimacy will depend heavily – very likely chiefly – on their success in meeting this challenge. Perhaps democracies will prove successful. Perhaps authoritarian states will. Most likely some in each category will succeed, and some fail. Quite possibly, we will all fail.[45]

Up to 2023, the issue of action to limit climate change has been one that to a considerable extent cancels out the distinction between democratic and authoritarian systems and between allies and rivals of the United States. China under authoritarian rule has become the greatest emitter of greenhouse gases; but over the past generation, in terms both of emissions per capita and rejections, failures and inconsistencies of policy, the worst offenders overall have been the energy-rich monarchies of the Persian Gulf, and three "Anglo-Saxon" democracies: Australia, Canada and the United States. At the time of

writing, the U.S. and Australian governments have committed themselves to strong action – but this could easily change again at the next elections.[46]

We cannot possibly therefore say with any certainty that only democracies will succeed and survive. What we should be able to say with certainty is that in the face of a future of potential universal chaos, it is the height not just of irresponsibility but of political immorality to seek to undermine or destroy existing, reasonably well-ordered states.[47]

To meet the threat of climate change, and the growing threat of catastrophic international war which is itself helping to thwart action to limit climate change, we need to move from what Bernard Williams called "Political Morality Liberalism" to an approach that will be morally founded, because committed to international peace and progress, and common human efforts to overcome common human threats; but also because it will recognize how in this fallen world, even seemingly moral ends can be hopelessly entangled with selfish ambition, made even worse by self-righteous moral arrogance and lack of self-examination.[48]

This would correspond to the search for what Hans Morgenthau called a "cosmopolitan ethic", rooted in morality and seeking moral goals, but recognising both the realities and limitations imposed by the actual world, and the limited nature of our own intelligence and morality. It is worth noting in this context that while Morgenthau has conventionally been portrayed as a thinker who accorded importance only to state power, his most famous work was subtitled "The Struggle for Power *and Peace*" [my emphasis].[49] Previously, the pursuit of peace was regarded as central to the goals of liberal internationalists; but that was when they not only remembered the horrors of war, but also understood how war so often does terrible damage not only to

the immediate wellbeing of populations, but to human progress; and this includes war waged in the name of some noble end. As memories of the great wars of the past fade in Western countries, so too does the memory that all sides in these wars claimed to be fighting in the name of defending a higher culture.

As Reinhold Niebuhr (a great theologian as well as a philosopher of international relations) wrote, in the Old Testament,

"The prophets never weary of warning both the powerful nations and Israel, the righteous nation, of the judgment which waits on human pretension…[T]he pretensions of virtue are as offensive to God as the pretensions of power. One has the uneasy feeling that America as both a powerful nation and a "virtuous" one is involved in ironic perils which compound the experiences of Babylon and Israel." [50]

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[17] US National Security Strategy September 2002 at https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2002/; US National Security Strategy 2022 at https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf.

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