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This is a book about liberal international order. Central focus is on the order created by the United States in the aftermath of World War II; how did this liberal project unfold, what are the core characteristics of it in comparison to other varieties of order, how is the order challenged today, and what are its future prospects? Ikenberry is fundamentally optimistic; the crisis of the current order is a crisis of success, not of failure. The substance of liberal international order—an open and loosely rule-based system—is not in question. The crisis is one of authority, of roles and rights within this order. It follows that liberal international order has a potentially bright future provided that the United States—which continues to be the supreme constructor of liberal order—devotes itself to a grand strategy focused on liberal order building. I find much to agree with in Ikenberry’s masterful analysis, but I also argue that the book is too optimistic on behalf of liberal order and that the problems besetting it run deeper than a mere crisis of authority.

If disorder is “war and upheaval,” then international order is stable “rules and arrangements between states that define and guide their interaction” (12). The first part

of the book explores different pathways to the creation of international order and defines the particular characteristics of the post-World War II order. The relationship between power and varieties of order is a central theme. Ikenberry identifies three general logics of order: balance, command, and consent. The balance system is based on a multipolar or a bipolar distribution of power; this is the logic theorized by the realist tradition: sovereign states balance against each other in an anarchical system. “Command” is the imperial logic of order. A leading state creates and enforces order in the shape of a hierarchy, as in the Roman and other empires of the ancient world, and the colonial empires of the modern world. “Consent” is the liberal logic of order; it has unfolded among liberal democracies that have shaped common rules and institutions in order to promote their cooperation.

The American-led order established after the war contains elements of all three logics: a balancing coalition against the Soviet Union; a negotiated consent-order with European democracies; and a “hub and spoke” imposed order in other parts of the world. To its partners, the United States provided public goods, “rule-based cooperation, and voice opportunities and diffuse reciprocity.” Therefore, it is “not an empire—it is an American-led open-democratic political order” (161).

Even very powerful states want a stable and predictable environment; they also seek to foster legitimacy. That points in the direction of a rule-based order. But there are also tradeoffs in terms of having to give up policy autonomy. In the post-Cold War, unipolar world, the United States will lean more towards “hub and spoke” hierarchy, but there remain powerful incentives towards a system of rules and institutions because the latter increases U.S. legitimacy and helps reduce transaction costs.

With the end of the Cold War the inside liberal order that had existed under the structure of bipolar confrontation became the outside order. There was now only one order for the entire world, “bound together by multilateral rules and institutions, a globalizing form of capitalism, and American political leadership” (275). The common enemy is gone; that is a challenge to the cohesion of a unipolar order. There are other challenges: new norms of sovereignty open for the intervention of powerful nations into fragile states for humanitarian or security reasons, but the rules of engagement remain unclear. And there are new threats of violence from non-state actors in form of transnational groups of individuals.

It was in this situation that the Bush administration, after 9/11, proposed a reformed order based on American primacy: the United States would provide security to the world but it would not be seriously constrained by rules and institutions. In that sense, the United States would stand above the global order. It was a proposition that many states and most of the great powers were not ready to accept. They saw in it a contemporary form of empire. A stable liberal world order needs a better combination of capacity to dominate and legitimacy to rule.

This opens to the question of what kind of future international order that is in the cards. Several tensions or dilemmas have emerged in the current liberal order. Unipolarity is potentially a weaker foundation for a law and rule-based order than the earlier balance-of-power underpinning. Liberal internationalism is committed both to self-determination and non-intervention, and to a vision of universal rights that may involve intervention. Intervention may lead to liberal imperialism. A stronger role for international institutions must be aligned with democracy at home. And finally, the hegemony and leadership of the United States has been necessary for organizing and running the liberal international order, but hegemony is not democratic and if the U.S. turns toward self-seeking nationalist politics the system is in jeopardy.

The handling of these tensions will determine the shape of the forthcoming liberal international order. Ikenberry discusses three scenarios: (a) a post-hegemonic liberal international order with a much less pronounced role for the United States and more authority to universal institutions; (b) a renegotiated, American-led liberal order; and (c) the breakdown of liberal international order. Breakdown is not in the cards because the order is not terminally ill; it is plagued by governance problems. Nor is a post-hegemonic order likely; it would probably be ineffective in the long run. Ikenberry argues in favor of a renegotiated American-led order although the American dominance of the global system will be less pronounced in the future. In the last chapter of the book, he argues that the “planting the roots of a reformed liberal international order as deeply as possible” (348) is in the best self-interest of the United States.

The book is a great achievement. It clearly defines the distinctive qualities of liberal international order and instructively compares it to other varieties of order. In particular, the relationship between power on the one hand and a system of rules on the other is investigated in detail. The rise of the American system after World War II, the development and transformation of liberal order, and the challenges faced by the current liberal order are discussed in detail. All students of international/world order will need to engage with Ikenberry’s comprehensive analysis.

In what follows, I would like to take issue with the diagnosis of “authority crisis” and the optimism it contains on behalf of future liberal international order. I agree with the view that a full breakdown of liberal international order is not in the cards; nor is a post-hegemonic scenario likely, where much increased authority is ceded to international institutions. But a well-functioning, renegotiated American-led order is most probably not in the cards either. What we rather face is a liberal patchwork order, in some ways less liberal than before, probably less rule-based, and with insufficient capacities to confront rapidly increasing demands for global governance. All this is related to deep tensions in liberalism that amount to more than an authority crisis.

First, how much liberal progress can we expect to take place in coming years? Liberal optimism was at a new high after the end of the Cold War, but the last decade has not lived up to these profoundly optimistic expectations. Liberal progress is not a historical

given; “history has no libretto” as Isaiah Berlin used to say. When Ikenberry supports liberal internationalists in the view that “history is on their side” (360), the question then is how much progress we can really expect. A large number of countries have begun early phases of democratization, but the vast majority of them remain stuck in a gray zone between full democracy and outright authoritarianism; democracy might not prevail. China (and Russia) may consolidate systems that are liberal in the sense that they are based on capitalism, but strictly non-liberal in terms of their political systems. The society of states endorses liberal values, but more in abstract principle than in actual practice (e.g. human rights in China). In short, the value basis for a liberal world order is less secure than is often assumed.

Second, why would enlightened, liberal, public-goods-producing global leadership from the United States be forthcoming? A unipolar power typically attempts to do too much because it is unconstrained or too little because its focus is elsewhere. The Bush Jr. administration did both: on the one hand, unilateralist activism on the security front (Iraq); on the other hand, withdrawal from several treaties and agreements, turning away from a rule-based order. The Obama administration may have enlightened liberal ambitions, but it appears, for good reasons, overwhelmingly engaged in domestic politics rather than in a reformed liberal international order. And domestic support for such an order may not be readily available.¹

Third, not only the United States, but liberal democracies in Europe as well, are increasingly turning inward, pre-occupied with their own immediate problems. This happens at a time where intensified interdependence has increased the demand for regulation across borders. International institutions must be concerned with behind-the-border-issues related to the environment, product standards, investment regulations, transparency measures, and so on. If the financial crisis or global warming is anything to go by, both liberal democracies and non-liberal great powers are more concerned with preserving policy autonomy over their own affairs than they are interested in common standards for the common good.

Fourth, there is no secure economic basis for a reformed liberal order. Neoliberal deregulation has created a global economy which is “literally out of control.”² There is no agreement, not even among liberal democracies, about the appropriate state-market matrix; both the United States and the United Kingdom will want to preserve major elements of the neoliberal system that supports their role as leading centers of finance. A new, serious economic downturn is on the horizon, this time with countries rather than banks defaulting on debts. Liberal states have not undertaken deep-going reforms of their financial sectors and they appear comprehensively unready to face the new challenge.

¹ Charles A. Kupchan and Peter L. Trubowitz, “Dead Center. The Demise of Liberal Internationalism in the United States,” *International Security*, 32:2, (2007) 7-44.

² Stanley Hoffmann, “The Crisis of Liberal Internationalism,” *Foreign Policy*, (1995) 98: 166.

Fifth, international institutions are central elements in a liberal order, but liberal democracies support two different approaches to international institutions: a pluralist approach with universal institutions open to all sovereign states and a non-pluralist approach where member states are democratic. The challenges of a globalized world would appear to call for universal institutions, but such institutions are not enthusiastically supported by liberal democracies, and even if they were, it is not obvious how they can become more effective. Twenty years of debate has not led to any reform of the UN Security Council. And if membership reform were to happen, there is no simple connection between the fact of new permanent members (such as for example Brazil, India, Germany, and Japan) and the emergence of the Council as a more effective decision-making body. The non-pluralist approach would involve institutions with democratic membership. They are less legitimate in the eyes of international society; at the same time that might not always be compensated by more effective decision-making.

Sixth, Ikenberry specifically emphasizes the need for the United States to provide “public goods in the area of security” (281) as a precondition for a united, one-world order, with the United States at its center. But we live in a world where traditional security issues related to inter-state war are increasingly replaced by a different kind of security challenge, as Ikenberry also makes clear. Large-scale violent conflict with massive human cost is today mostly taking place in fragile states. There is no available blueprint for how the United States (or any other Western democracy) might be able to “repair” fragile states. Sovereignty remains the fundamental principle; even in a world of legitimate humanitarian intervention, interveners have to go home, sooner rather than later; they will also be concerned with the human and material cost of intervention. Even when outsiders arrive in fragile states with great force, they quickly find themselves dependent on insiders, on the willingness of locals, especially local elites, to move in the right direction. When there is insufficient local demand for reform, effective moves toward liberal progress are hard to come by, as most recently demonstrated in Afghanistan.

Behind all this is a liberal vision of international order which is conceptually flawed and therefore to a considerable extent in conflict with itself. Liberals support sovereignty and self-determination as a precondition for freedom, but sovereignty is also a vehicle for taking away freedom from large groups of people in fragile states. They are left at the mercy of self-seeking elites and exposed to a constant threat of violent domestic conflict. Free markets and open economies are a cornerstone of liberal order; but while minimally regulated markets produce transnational goods, they also produce transnational bads, including speculation and stark inequality. Liberals favor international institutions but they are also profoundly skeptical toward bodies with universal membership, so a quest for policy autonomy combined with opposition from strong domestic interest groups prevent measures that make international institutions more effective and legitimate.

There are no simple and straightforward answers to the dilemmas raised by the downsides of sovereignty, the growth of transnational bads in open economies, and the

combined demand for, and skepticism of, international institutions. Looking at the past two decades, there are reasons to be worried about the capacity and commitment of liberal democracies to confront these dilemmas. Instead these countries, and perhaps the United States in particular, have either been too self-confident and attempted to do too much; or they have been too passive and have done too little. Both of these postures contain elements that threaten to undercut liberal progress. It is by no means certain that the resulting liberal patchwork order will be sufficient to provide the people of the world with what should be the core promises of a liberal order: peace, freedom, well-being, order, tolerance, and equality of opportunity.

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