CHAPTER 14

Liberalism in a Non-ideal World

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Abstract

The author addresses the meaning and significance of liberalism in international relations. The high estimation of the role of liberal worldviews in the formation of the general atmosphere of peaceful values and the construction of the international institutions is obvious. At the same time, at least at the academic level, liberalism is still open for discussions and dialogue. A good possibility is emerging with the very deep and interesting book *The Law of Peoples* by the famous American philosopher John Rawls. However, at the same time some trends have recently appeared in which liberalism is viewed like some sort of ideology in which the ideas are fixed once and for all and in which any criticism or suggestion of biases is totally rejected. This recent trend presents a very serious danger that contemporary liberalism must face, because in the global world pluralism is a necessary condition of a peaceful world.

Keywords


Professor Leif Wenar from King's College (London) in one of his lectures at the LUISS university (Rome) told the students a story, which really impressed me: sometime in the 19th century a relatively small group of people, Quakers, met to discuss the problem which concerned them greatly at the time—slavery and slave trade. Under their influence and activity public opinion changed completely and within about a decade the Law was installed that prohibited slavery as immoral and inhuman. This aim was not an easy type of work. Slavery and the slave trade was a part of the history of trade in many parts of the world. We may be sorry to recognize it, but slavery and the slave trade is in European history as well. Let us recall the practice of Venice and other Italian republics of early modernity that were selling slaves and buying spices in the Middle East—not to mention the slave trade of the Portuguese, Spanish, and English for generations since Columbus and others “opened” a new continent...
for Europeans. In a sense, slave trade was regarded by many at the time as a part of human nature, or at least as a part of a normally functioning economy. Nevertheless, this attitude was completely broken and, as we see, broken very quickly from a historical point of view. This story shows that just several people can change the course of world development, if they are really honest in their beliefs and follow them.

I recalled this story when contemplating the position of liberalism in today’s world, especially on the international scene. When Francis Fukuyama declared the “End of History” and the final victory of Liberalism, obviously, this phrase became the slogan of the day, but at the same time it was a ringing sign of the pretense for the monopoly of liberalism, which, as we all know from the history of political thought, is quite dangerous for any type of thinking, especially political thinking. What now is the status of liberalism? Let us try to address this question.

As is only natural, liberalism through all of its history attempted to say something about international relations and not only about values and institutions in internal politics. It was not successful for a lengthy period of time and at least the ultimate goal—peace and security—was formulated. Rather often we underestimate the influence of these liberal dreams and utopias. Somehow we always remember them even while rejecting the main liberal ideas. Take, for instance, Hans Morgenthau as one of the “founding fathers” of “political realism.” Even talking about the significance of power and national interests in international relations, he never forgot about the ultimate morality in international relations—sounds very similar to the main liberal thesis. He consciously attempted to decrease the destructiveness of power politics. He was writing about it in his work Scientific Man vs. Power Politics (1946). Nearly two thirds of his famous book Politics among Nations was devoted to the problem of the compatibility between political realism with its positivist foundation and human morality. As Russian historian Vyacheslav Ja. Belokrinitsky underscores in one of his books, “if the realist, statist paradigm has some analogies beyond the Western, Renaissance tradition, the liberal direction was forming just and only on the Christian-renaissance foundations.”

4 Вячеслав Я. Белокреницкий, Восток в международных отношениях и мировой политике (Москва: Восточный университет, 2009), с. 44. [Vyacheslav Ja. Belokrinitsky, The East in International Relations and World Politics (Moscow: Oriental University, 2009).]