

Liberal Theory in International Relations

From the *Cycle News Hour*, you're listening to *Power Play*. *Music cue* In this segment, we'll be learning all about political theory, explicating and demystifying this seemingly inscrutable science. This is part two of the "basic theories of International Relations" series. Last time, we covered realism, a theory of IR with a relatively narrow focus on the state as the primary mover and shaker of international politics. Today, we'll be talking about its primary counterpart, liberal theory. Liberalism sets itself apart from realism with a greater focus on non- and inter-state actors and how a state's political system affects its international behavior; this theory is also characterized by a lessened emphasis on questions of warfare and security politics. Yes, all the things that I know you, personally, love. I'm Cameron Lallana and, as you can tell, I'm a real hit at parties. Thank you for tuning in.

Before we go on, we have a bit of housecleaning to do—as is always the case in political science. First, let's talk about what we mean when we use the term 'liberalism.' You may have instinctively thought about the liberal-conservative dichotomy in American politics, but you're gonna need to go ahead and just about scrub that from your mind for the rest of this report. The first rule of understanding politics is that taking a name at face-value is, well, to put it mildly: ill-advised. Let's look back at realism for a moment. If we knew nothing about realism and liberalism, but were told to compare the two, we might assume that realism tries to be rational and, well, realistic—but the basis of realist thought is actually in an emotional understanding of human behavior. In the book *Scientific Man Versus Power Politics*, the godfather of realism himself, Hans J Morgenthau, argues *against* what he called 'liberal rationalism.' In his view, liberal theory overemphasized reason and rejected attempts to make politics more scientific. Now his argument is, of course, much more nuanced than that, but the important thing to remember is that classical realism is predicated on a rejection of the usefulness of human reason. Recall, Morgenthau was a Jewish refugee of Nazi Germany. The Nazis did not come to power by force; the Nazis were elected in a democratic system. There we find the limits of human rationality.

But that's a discussion for another day. My point is that knee-jerk reactions to terminology is a total barrier to honest engagement with political science. This is because the common connotations of terms, like realism, might be very misleading. Or it might be the case that political scientists use a particular term differently; or the term might have several meanings, even in political science. For example: in common parlance, libertarianism is connected with Ron Paul,

John McAfee, or perhaps the Vermin Supreme if you're less inclined to take the libertarian party seriously. Let's pretend that you're interested in joining this party, so you ask a political scientist about the best book to read if you want to understand libertarian ideas. This scientist might point you toward Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. I don't have time to go into Nozick's work, but it's not entirely dissimilar to Ayn Rand's theorizations. The main difference is that Nozick's ideas are comprehensive, rigorous, and intellectually serious. They're also more hard-line than the typical libertarian party policy. Think: 'police services should only be offered on a subscription basis' kind of hardline.

Okay, so now you have a copy of *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. You happen to run across another political scientist and ask them the same question. Oh, undoubtedly, it's *The Conquest of Bread* by Pyotr Kropotkin, they tell you. So you get a copy of that, too. But when you open it up, you find a totally different theory. Instead of Nozick's minimal state maintained by private interests, you find Kropotkin arguing for the total abolition of the state, for the workers to take control of their lives and the means of productive—and, wait, this is a communist theory. That's not libertarianism. *beat* You probably already hear the 'but actually' coming, so I'll spare you. Libertarianism, used to describe theories that oppose traditional liberal statism, contains not only what we think of as libertarian thought but also anarchist thought, which is what Kropotkin is: an anarchist communist. You could also call him a left-libertarian to more neatly contrast him to Nozick's right-libertarian ideas.

I hope you see my point? Common parlance may not match up with technical usage, which itself may have multiple meanings. Neoliberalism in IR is not the same thing as neoliberalism in political science and I guarantee neither is what you think it is. The Spanish Socialist Worker's Party aren't actually socialists. The Liberal Democratic Party of Russia is neither liberal nor democratic, and its leader has variously called for invading Afghanistan, Alaska, and California; he has also argued that Russia should re-establish its monarchy. I could go on all day about misleading terminology. Basically, if you don't already understand a term, don't make any assumptions about it.

Having said that, if liberalism in political science doesn't mean liberal as it's commonly understood, then what does it mean? *Sigh* I know that I posed that question, not you, but we're going to pretend that you brought it up and boy have you stirred up the hornet's nest with that one. If I were to give you a conservative estimate about how many books have been written about liberalism, it would number comfortably in the hundreds. Possibly the low thousands. So much ink has been spilled, so many different forms have evolved over time, that I would need to make it my

full-time career to comprehensively explain liberalism. So what I'm going to give you here isn't a real answer, but the bog-standard version taught to thousands of newly-minted political science majors. Short to the point of being reductive, liberal theory is first recognized as a coherent political philosophy during the Age of Enlightenment. Then, it was characterized by its adherence to the idea of human reason and rule of law, and its opposition to monarchy and state religion. In the paper "Liberalism in IR," Michael Doyle and Stefano Recchia identify 4 features which characterize an ideal liberal society:

- 1) Citizens possess equality and other fundamental civil rights
- 2) State sovereigns derive their power from the electorate and thus are a representative force, acting with consideration toward civil rights
- 3) Recognition of private property
- 4) Economic decisions are shaped by the forces of supply and demand.

Before we move on, I just wanted to quickly point out that "private property" is one of those things where the term is misleading. The term 'private property,' meaning things that one owns but does not directly use, exists alongside 'personal property,' meaning things that one owns and directly uses. So political ideologies which do not recognize private property aren't suggesting that your toothbrush is the property of the whole block, but that you should not be allowed to claim ownership over, say, a house, if you don't live there.

The important thing to know about liberal ideology is that its assumptions underlie all modern democratic states. For this reason, you may sometimes hear it referred to as 'liberal-democratic' theory. Okay—I know I said to scrub the liberal-conservative dichotomy from your mind, but let's bring it back for a moment: what we call liberalism and conservatism are belief sets that exist within the broader viewpoint of philosophical liberalism. *beat* I'd like to tell you that political philosophy gets easier, but instead I'm going to tell you what a friend of mine once told me when I asked him if learning Russian ever gets easier: No. Get out while you can.

So that's domestic liberalism, more or less. Heavy emphasis on the less. How does this relate to IR? Well, much like realism grew out of German philosophy, liberalism grew out of, well, liberalism. The concerns of classical liberalism are apparent in liberal theory.

Okay, having said all of that, let's—finally—talk about liberal theory in International Relations. *Beat* I know, we're only just now getting into it. If you're wondering, this is what poly-sci students feel nonstop. This, of course, exempts people who study electoral systems because math is actually far less sad than German philosophy.

To give a basic overview of liberal theory, let's open with an excerpt from "Introducing Liberalism" by Jeff Meiser. Quote

Liberalism contains a variety of concepts and arguments about how institutions, behaviors, and economic connections contain and mitigate the violent power of states. When compared to realism, it adds more factors into our field of view—especially a consideration of citizens and international organizations.

Endquote.

If you'll recall our episode on realism for a moment, realist academic Kenneth Waltz accuses liberalism of producing incomplete analysis—he says that they draw their predictions of state outcomes from the internal features of states, rather than focusing on how state-to-state relationships determine behavior. This is an accurate description of liberalism, though its proponents would undoubtedly say that this form of analysis is not as complete as Waltz says. Similar to how Hans Morgenthau ultimately saw the basic behaviors of states to be a result of human nature, liberal theory emphasizes a state's political characteristics. This can mean anything from state bureaucracies, to the organization of a state's legislature, judiciary, or executive branch; it can mean a state's policing powers, whether it respects civil liberties, if it's a democracy or an autocracy or an anocracy, and so on and such forth. How a state is organized affects its decision-making calculus. Who is the decision-maker beholden to? Who bears the cost of their decisions, etc. etc.

Practically, what does this mean? Take the example of North Korea in contrast with the US. A structuralist realist would expect both countries' decisions to be driven by pressures from the same international states and organizations. Although their decisions might be different, they're reacting to the same forces. In contrast, a Liberal theorist would focus on the liberal-democratic features of the US and the autocratic features of the DPRK to explain international behavior.

Let's make our example a little more specific and talk about survival of the executive. In this context, survival is a technical term referring to the ability of an executive branch to continue operating, whether than mean re-election or merely holding onto power. You may also hear this used in regards to a legislature. In the US, executive survival hinges on re-election. So actions in the global sphere could conceivably be affected by a desire to appeal to voters, even if it isn't necessarily

what the President wants. The DPRK, on the other hand, has a totally different set of worries and incentives. Autocratic leaders have greater worries about their removal by force, since often their political position is tied to their personal safety meaning that they may fear coups by elite members of government or by the general uprising. This affects both domestic politics—such as the implementation of extremely cruel punishments—to create extreme deterrents for potential coup plotters, for example. It will also affect the international sphere as they aggressively posture to maintain a sense of power to their own people.

Executive survival, of course, isn't the only feature that affects the decision-making calculus of democratic or autocratic leaders, but this is a good example of one domestic concern that may translate into action on an international level.

Okay, so there's our first feature of liberalism: domestic politics create international action. Another characteristic feature of liberalism is its greater emphasis on non-governmental and inter-governmental organizations. So...think the United Nations, the European Union, the African Union, NATO, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and so on and so forth. Realists have a tendency to write these organizations off, arguing that they are primarily used as an informal tool of statecraft by the dominant country in each organization. Liberals, on the other hand, tend to believe that states prefer to think of gains in absolute, rather than relative terms. For example, let's say that there is a bill in the UN that would give the US five apples and the DPRK ten apples. From a realist perspective, this is obviously a bad idea—even if the DPRK has fewer apples than the US, it now is relatively closer to the amount of apples that the US has. A liberal on the other hand might argue that it's still a good deal because it means the US has five more apples than it otherwise would have. In other words, it's an absolute gain. This basic logic is why liberal theorists argue for the usefulness of inter-governmental organizations and international law: even if a state is not able to maximize power due to limiting factors, it will still benefit from the existence from an organization like the UN, which also minimizes the possibility of power loss due to underhanded play.

Additionally, even if realists tend to disregard the international order as an entity separate from the countries that run it, the Liberal World Order nonetheless exists.

The Liberal World Order, unlike many other things in IR, is not a term for a theoretical concept, but a concrete set of institutions. It refers to the set of institutions that almost every state in the world engages with, such as the aforementioned UN, World Bank, IMF, and so on. Why call it the Liberal World Order? Well, first, as I just mentioned: almost every state in the world interacts with it. It shapes the way the world orders itself. The Liberal aspect comes from its roots; this modern order emerged entirely after World War 2, when the US was left as the most powerful nation in the world, uniquely undamaged by the ravages of the conflict. It was the primary force behind the creation of these institutions. From a optimistic perspective, this was done in order to spread norms of non-violence, democracy, and human rights. If you wanted to take a more cynical approach, you might view this as an attempt to crystalize US dominance, as all of these organizations, while providing benefits to all members, disproportionately favored the US and their international goals. As for the truth? Well, it contains aspects of both of these perspectives.

But the Liberal World Order isn't just the institutions. It's also the ways that these institutions allow states to interact. In his article, Jeff Meisers identifies three characteristics.

- 1) International laws and agreements work in tandem with inter-governmental organizations to pool resources for common goals, provide a consistent arena for diplomacy, and provide all nations with the possibility of being heard.
- 2) These institutions spread free-trade capitalist policies and create trade ties between nations. These connections increase the economic cost of war between two nations, and thus increases the likelihood that a peaceful outcome will be found.
- 3) It sets and defines international norms, such as co-operation, human rights, democracy, capitalism, and so on. In addition to setting these norms, organizations like the UN create potential consequences for

violating these norms. Take the international response to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, for example.

Essentially, liberal theorists are deeply concerned with how states can foster cooperation by overcoming incentives to break from international agreements, reducing the state of anarchy that realists are so concerned about. This can only be done through effective international institutions, the argument goes. These institutions already exist, even if they are imperfect, and there hasn't been a world war since the creation of the Liberal Order. So...it must be working?

Well, maybe. Or maybe it's something else that emerged after World War 2. But that's a question for another time. Unfortunately, we're about out of time this week, so we'll have to continue our discussion of liberal theory in the future.

To sum up: liberal theory in IR is based in philosophical liberal traditions of rationality, rule of law, and market economies. It assumes international state actions are largely affected by domestic concerns, and it focuses on non-state actors and organizations as powerful and important features of political analysis.

If you're interested in learning more, I primarily relied on the text "Introducing Liberalism in International Relations," by Jeff Mesier.

For the two of you who are still listening, thank you. I'm Cameron Lallana, you're listening to the Cycle News Hour, and this has been *Power Play*.

If you're interested in learning more about the international system and how American foreign policy works (and sometimes doesn't), I would highly recommend "The Hell of Good Intentions" by Stephen Walt. It's an excellent overview and critique of the US foreign policy blob, focusing especially on our interaction with the liberal world order.