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# ETHICS AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Edited by

PATRICK HAYDEN

THE ASHGATE RESEARCH COMPANION TO ETHICS  
AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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# The Ashgate Research Companion to Ethics and International Relations

*Edited by*  
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# Introduction

Patrick Hayden

This book focuses on normative issues of global importance, by examining historical, political and legal debates about the nature of international relations and which key theoretical paradigms are best suited to deal with the central ethical dilemmas facing international politics and world affairs. There is little doubt that the theory and practice of international affairs is tied in interesting and important ways to normative questions. Indeed, there is reason to suspect that world politics is, at bottom, a fundamentally normative enterprise. But this proposition runs counter to much of what passes for received wisdom in the discipline of international relations (IR). As Mervyn Frost (1996, 1) has pointedly explained, 'although normative questions regularly arise in the day-to-day practice of international politics the discipline of international relations has not accorded ethical theory a central place within it'. Despite this longstanding reluctance or, indeed, resistance towards normative theorizing on the part of mainstream IR, there can be no doubt that international ethics has become firmly established as a field of study straddling a number of disciplinary boundaries.

The contemporary field of international ethics is preceded of course by a long history of moral and political thought, which explores the many ethical and philosophical issues arising from the attempt to sort out how people should live their lives in a reflective and responsible way. Central to this ongoing argument is recognition of our social embeddedness, the fact that we are inescapably related to others and therefore that our moral beliefs and political decisions impact upon the lives and decisions of others. These basic features remain an essential part of the recent literature on ethics and international relations. The expression 'international ethics' did not come into general use until relatively late in the twentieth century, however, when it became clear that the sterile standoff of the first 'great debate' in IR – the intellectual struggle between so-called realists and idealists in the 1920s and 1930s over the nature of international politics and thus over the role of ethical principles therein – was not sufficient to meet the normative challenges confronting the world after the Second World War.<sup>1</sup> Strictly speaking, it was also not possible to

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1 For illuminating critical studies of the 'myth' or conventional historiography of the first of the four 'great debates' which have thus far defined the self-image of IR, see Ashworth (2002), Schmidt (1998), Smith (1995) and Wilson (1998).

refer in a formal sense to a subject called 'ethics and international relations' prior to the modern formation of an international system composed of sovereign states. Clearly the advent of the international system had led to more specialized and novel reflection upon the particular moral considerations unique to a world organized around nation-states. Nonetheless, we can find in the history of moral and political theory many important examples of normative thinking about the types of issues that permeate contemporary international affairs. In other words, thinking about the ethics of politics – and the politics of ethics – has been a characteristic feature of the negotiation of political life in pre-national as well as international contexts, and will continue to be so in the possibly post-national era that some glimpse on our own historical horizon.

Historically, the pervasiveness of 'the moral problem in international relations' (Hoffmann 1981, 10) has been apparent at least since the time of Thucydides, in the fifth century BCE. The conflict between Athens and Sparta depicted by Thucydides in the *History of the Peloponnesian War* presents a stark example of the dilemmas surrounding the role and demands of morality in international affairs, broadly construed. The Melian Dialogue, in particular, focuses on the central issue of whether justice or self-interest ought to guide relations between different political communities. Complicated by questions of empire, power, scarcity, freedom and honour, the Athenians justify their conquest of Melos and the slaughter and enslavement of its inhabitants on the grounds of necessity, stating that 'the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept' (Thucydides 1972, 402). Interestingly, the Athenian justification does not eschew morality *in toto* but defines it according to a natural relativism; the 'standard of justice', they claim, 'depends upon the equality of power to compel' (*ibid.*). In Aristotelian terms, the Melians advocated formal justice in international affairs, while the Athenians insisted upon proportional justice: different political communities are owed reasonably *unequal* treatment on the basis of their relative 'power to compel'. In these terms it is only fair or right for the stronger to rule the weaker, and for the weaker to submit to the stronger. Thucydides' work thus poses one of the most fundamental questions of international ethics: should 'strangers' be treated according to the same ethical principles or standards that we apply to members of our own community?

The position adopted by the Athenian delegation to Melos typifies a form of agent-relative partiality in the sense of insisting on a narrow scope of moral concern. On this view, it is not only permissible but even mandatory to favour one's own community when it comes to making decisions about whom to aid and whom to harm (see Hurka 1997; McMahan 1997). Ethical partiality resonates with 'commonsense' morality, of course, inasmuch as many people recognize the requirements we owe to those with whom we have personal relationships or special ties as normatively significant. Whether it be the relation of parent to child, spouse to spouse, friend to friend, or fellow citizen to fellow citizen, it is widely thought that one normally owes more by way of moral concern towards 'one's own', but less to mere acquaintances and least of all to strangers (Cottingham 1986).

Partiality in moral decision-making is a familiar though often controversial dimension of international ethics – particularly as consideration of which persons fall ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ the scope of moral concern came to be defined increasingly in terms of the territorially delimited boundaries of the nation-state. One prominent attempt to overcome the parochialism implied by moral partiality can be found in the cosmopolitan tradition. The cosmopolitanism endorsed by the Stoic philosophers of classical Greece and Rome, for instance, embodies a wide scope of moral concern because it maintains that this scope should be universal, extending to all human beings. For the Stoics, the common human capacities for reasoning provide the grounds for fellowship in a world community; if all humans as rational beings are equal, then all humans together form a single community. It is both desirable and possible for individuals to consider themselves citizens of their local communities as well as citizens of the world (Hayden 2005, 12–14). As Martha Nussbaum explains, classical cosmopolitanism sought to avoid treating moral partiality and impartiality as mutually exclusive alternatives by conceiving of our affiliations and moral obligations as a series of concentric circles that relate together those both near and far:

*The first one encircles the self, the next takes in the immediate family, then follows the extended family, then, in order, neighbors or local groups, fellow city-dwellers, and fellow countrymen – and we can easily add to this list groupings based on ethnic, linguistic, historical, professional, gender, or sexual identities. Outside all these circles is the largest one, humanity as a whole. Our task as citizens of the world will be to ‘draw the circles somehow toward the center’ ... making all human beings more like our fellow city dwellers, and so on (1996, 9).*

Though classical cosmopolitanism recognizes that anyone has claims to basic moral concern, regardless of the relationship in which he or she stands to the addressee, it also admits that these claims rest alongside those of persons to whom an agent stands in a special relationship (family, close friends, fellow members of a community). Nevertheless, critics have questioned the natural law foundation underpinning the philosophy of Stoicism and its modernist (or Kantian) variations (Hegel 1991); raised doubts about the attractiveness, practicality or efficacy of obligations towards distant others (Miller 1995; Walzer 1994), and wondered whether cosmopolitanism’s moral universalism is simply too demanding to be considered reasonable (Scheffler 2001). Further, as Thucydides had already grasped, within an anarchical society the reality of unequal power and the attendant preoccupation with self-interest greatly complicates the normative picture. Carrying out our responsibilities to other human beings – however far one extends the moral community – in a justifiable way clearly is no easy task.

A further step in addressing these issues more systematically, and in direct response to the emergence in Europe of the Westphalian order of sovereign territorial states, was taken by Immanuel Kant. Kant’s conception of international ethics is grounded on the categorical imperative, the various formulations of



which express the universalizability of the principle that all human beings possess intrinsic worth or dignity. This principle, Kant argues, is valid for all persons anywhere, and provides a basis for justifying the universal obligation to respect the dignity of others via the institutional mediation of a system of individual rights (1996). Kant's argument goes even further in that he regards the republican form of government as providing for the 'rightful condition' of justice. Morality or right, in other words, demands that states adopt a system of public law that provides one of the necessary conditions for the realization of individual rights. Kant (1991) sets out the architecture of international justice in terms of three overlapping components of public law: municipal or civil law (*ius civitatis*), international law or the law of nations (*ius gentium*), and cosmopolitan law (*ius cosmopoliticum*). Cosmopolitan law is intended to guarantee the right of 'hospitality', a 'universal right of humanity' to all individuals. Kant believed that developing an ethical international order on the principle of human dignity would lead us to the point 'where a violation of rights in *one* part of the world is felt *everywhere*' (*ibid.*, 107–8).

The power of Kant's vision has reached the point where almost everyone now recognizes human rights – or at least speaks the language of human rights – and the notion of universal human rights has become integral to, yet contested within, the theoretical and empirical development of international ethics. Whatever objections may be raised to Kantianism in general and rights theory in particular – many of these are aired in the following chapters – another significant dimension of Kant's formulation of international rights points towards the central question of war and whether there are some relevant principles of normative ethics attached either to the justification or to the condemnation of war. For example, Kant's conception of a confederation of republican states that would make lasting peace possible not only challenges the realist belief in the enduring conditions of anarchy and insecurity, it also draws attention to the way that the behaviour of states at the international level is strongly influenced by properties of their domestic political structure (or 'regime type').<sup>2</sup> Kant therefore favoured a republican constitution because it both best protects the rights of individuals and provides a mechanism for keeping peace between states that are similarly structured. Kant puts it thus:

*The republican constitution ... offers a prospect of attaining the desired result, i.e. perpetual peace, and the reason for this is as follows. – If, as is inevitably the case under this constitution, the consent of the citizens is required to decide whether or not war is to be declared, it is very natural that they will*

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2 Kenneth Waltz (1959) later referred to this type of focus on how domestic factors influence or cause international outcomes in terms of the 'second image' of international relations theory; the 'first image' focuses on causal factors at the individual or psychological level, such as the urge to dominate, while the 'third image' focuses on factors at the level of the international system, such as the pressures of anarchy. Kant's emphasis on the three levels of public law, it might be argued, demonstrates a nuanced grasp of how the three levels of individual, state and international system are inextricably entwined and mutually constitutive; see Harrison (2002).

*have great hesitation in embarking on so dangerous an enterprise. For this would mean calling down on themselves all the miseries of war (ibid., 100).*

Kant suggests that as states with a republican form of government become more numerous, international conflict will decrease. In linking the belligerent or pacific behaviour of states to their specific political institutions, decision-making procedures and culture (as reflected, for instance, in a commitment to tolerance, conflict resolution and public debate), rather than to the exigencies of an anarchical international system, Kant laid the intellectual foundation for the democratic peace thesis. The democratic peace thesis – as developed by scholars such as Bruce Russett (1993) and Michael Doyle (1983) – refers to two propositions. One is that ‘mature’ or stable democracies can be expected to keep the peace between themselves, but not necessarily with other non-democratic states, and the other is that democracies are more likely than other states to be more pacific in their relations overall, including with non-democracies. While there is substantial debate about the strength of the empirical evidence used to support the thesis, it also has been said that it ‘comes as close as anything we have to an empirical law in international relations’ (Levy 1988, 662).<sup>3</sup>

Debates about the democratic peace proposition roughly coincided with both a renewed interest in the just war tradition (or with ethics and warfare more broadly) and a flourishing of normative theorizing about international affairs. While much of the international relations scholarship during the mid-twentieth century eschewed overt normative theorizing due to the charge that such approaches were naively idealist or ‘utopian’ – an accusation levelled by E.H. Carr (1981) against interwar liberalism in 1939 – much of political theory and philosophy (of the Anglo-American variety at least) during this same period was preoccupied with behaviouralism and positivist epistemology and methodology (Schmidt 2002, 118–19; Gunnell 1993). When political theory was normatively oriented, it tended to focus on public affairs at the domestic rather than international level. John Rawls’s hugely influential *A Theory of Justice* (1971), which develops an account of social justice on the basis of the ‘self-contained’ community, is a case in point. Rawls sought to address the question of justice between states (and ‘peoples’) in his later work, *The Law of Peoples* (1999), which has since been the subject of vigorous debate. Yet the intense superpower rivalry of the Cold War, with its numerous proxy wars and persistent threat of ‘mutually assured destruction’, as well as the disastrous wars raging in Southeast Asia in the 1960s and 1970s, brought attention back to the just war tradition initiated by Augustine and Aquinas and their attempts to establish a legitimate basis for the conduct of war. Indeed, the just war tradition developed sophisticated distinctions between *ius ad bellum* (just resort to war), *ius in bello* (just conduct of war), and even *ius post bellum* (just termination of war) (Orend 2002; Walzer 2004). Michael Walzer’s (1992) work in particular revived just war thinking and demonstrated its continued relevance to the moral issues raised by the problem of war.

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3 For critiques of the democratic peace theory, see Layne (1994), Moaz (1998) and Rosato (2003).

In addition, the changing contours of the international political landscape and rapidly evolving technological developments proved conducive to a rapid rise in 'new normative approaches' to international relations and world politics (see Brown 1992): decolonization led to the transformation of colonial territories into sovereign, independent states; human rights and norms proscribing genocide became institutionalized within the UN system and assorted international regimes; nuclear, chemical and biological weapons proliferated alongside the emergence of 'high-tech' warfare; states became increasingly interdependent economically and processes of globalization accelerated; social movements, interest groups and NGOs dramatically multiplied across more porous state borders; humanitarian crises or emergencies arising from drought, famine, armed conflict and forced migration led to calls for (and against) military intervention in distant lands; the gap between rich and poor both within and between states widened inexorably; democratic transitions from repressive regimes spread; and global environmental problems such as climate change, air and water pollution, and food and resource scarcity continued to mount. In the wake of such developments, normative approaches to world affairs have become not only increasingly popular, but seemingly imperative.

Although normative theorizing about international relations was relatively neglected in the first half of the twentieth century, it is clear that this is no longer the case today (see Smith 1992). The surge of interest in ethics and international relations that began in the late 1960s gradually gathered pace over the following four decades; the turning point signalling the field's 'arrival' can perhaps be marked by the appearance of a new specialist journal, *Ethics & International Affairs*, in 1987. Since then the expression 'ethics and international affairs' has come into general use.

Several features of this recent trend are especially noteworthy. First, while contemporary issues of the day fuelled the growth of normative theorizing, it also has been driven by a renewed attention to the classics of moral, social and political thought. This interest reflects awareness that the history and resources of international theory extend well past the twentieth century, and recognition that issues central to the concerns of recent decades often had been examined with sophistication and depth by early modern and pre-modern thinkers (see Boucher 1997; Jahn 2006). A second feature of contemporary normative theorizing about international relations is the wide array of topics it addresses. While much of the initial literature appearing in the 1960s and 1970s was dominated by discussions of issues traditionally central to the ethics of warfare, scholars soon turned their attention to a much more expansive set of concerns, such as global distributive justice (for instance Beitz 1999; Pogge 2002), immigration and refugees (for instance Cole 2000; Nyers 2006), the gendered aspects of IR (for instance Enloe 1990; Robinson 1999), and environmentalism (for instance Attfield 1999; Eckersley 2004). A third notable characteristic of recent international ethics is its openness toward post-positivist perspectives and a concomitant willingness to challenge the traditional dominance of liberalism and realism (whether classical or 'neo'). Critical theory, feminist theory, hermeneutics, postcolonial theory and poststructuralism have been insufficiently appreciated in international theory, yet each brings important

challenges to the orthodox examination of contemporary world events – such as deconstructing the binary oppositions that have conventionally framed ethical questions and issues (Edkins 1999). All of these features indicate a favourable climate for greater pluralism within ethical and political theory of international relations.

Given these developments, the aim of this *Companion* is to provide an up-to-date survey of the state of the art in ethics and international relations. It makes no attempt to cover every possible issue in the field, as both current events and theoretical innovations thwart such aspirations. Instead, it is a selective though reasonably comprehensive representation of some of the most important debates, theories and issues shaping the past, present and future of normative international theory. With this in mind, the chapters are both surveys that inform the reader of relevant figures and literature and assess salient developments, and original essays that reflect the distinctive viewpoint and insight of their authors. They are intended for advanced undergraduate and graduate students, as well as for those with some knowledge of the field looking for an authoritative and stimulating reference work on international ethics today.

As the preceding discussion indicates, the approaches and interests of those working in the field of ethics and international affairs have become quite diverse. A glance at the table of contents hopefully reveals that this diversity is well represented in the present volume. The *Ashgate Research Companion to Ethics and International Relations* is divided into five parts. Part I covers the most influential theoretical approaches discussed in the field, whether defined as ‘traditions’, ‘paradigms’ or ‘schools of thought’. As Martin Wight (1991, 259–60) observed, it is important to resist treating theoretical traditions as ‘railroad tracks running parallel into infinity’; rather, they are like ‘streams with eddies and cross-currents’ that ‘influence and cross-fertilize one another’. Indeed, normative theorizing at an international level reflects a wide range of competing yet cross-cutting approaches, including political realism and liberalism – perhaps the two most dominant theories of international affairs in the twentieth century – as well as Marxism and, more recently, critical theory, feminist theories and poststructuralism. The major living religious traditions also have contributed to discussion about normative international issues.

Part II consists of essays examining various dimensions of and approaches to questions of war and peace. Aggression and peaceful coexistence have been of long-standing interest to political theorists, ethicists and international relations scholars, although perceptions about the causes and consequences of both vary considerably amongst realist, pacifist and just war perspectives. Even though theoretical reflection on war and peace is not new, current conditions have led to renewed consideration of foreign policy, the rules of war, the prospect of lasting peace and the complex association between humanitarianism and militarism.

Part III addresses a set of issues concerning human rights, while Part IV turns to issues of international justice. In many respects the chapters in Parts III and IV exhibit a tendency not only to extend and clarify normative thinking but also to ‘apply’ ethical theories to specific issues within contemporary world affairs. This is not to suggest any kind of formulaic application of pre-set values, beliefs or

principles; rather it is to stress that the activity of 'doing' international ethics often becomes most explicit when it engages with those issues that, at any given time, appear most prominent in public discourse. Concerns relevant to human rights, cultural identity, democratization, poverty, development and the environment, to name just a few, inform many national and international public debates today.

Part V explores some relatively new directions for ethics and international affairs arising from the advent of globalization and the unique ethical challenges it brings forth. Here many of the assumptions of the theoretical approaches surveyed in Part I are re-evaluated in light of our global age, and the prospects for new forms of political action, dialogue, community and citizenship are addressed. While the problems and opportunities raised by globalization are neither entirely unique nor subject to general consensus, they pose significant questions for all those interested in thoughtful reflection on ethics and international relations.

In the end, it is hoped that readers of this volume will encounter not only exposition and criticism of prominent issues and approaches, but also distinctive viewpoints on how we are to understand the implications of particular normative theories and subjects under discussion by some of the most distinguished and interesting scholars in the field. Whatever else its publication may accomplish, this volume will have achieved its main purpose if it contributes to the continued flowering of international ethics.

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PART I  
ETHICAL TRADITIONS AND  
NORMATIVE PERSPECTIVES



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# The Origins of Realism Revisited

Gabriella Slomp

A tomato looks innocent, but it is not. It tastes like a vegetable, it is excellent in soups, its flavour is enhanced by olive oil and salt, and yet the tomato is – the experts tell us – a fruit, a cousin of the apple. Political realism looks innocent too. One wonders whether it is a fruit or a vegetable. Political theorists, like botanists, need to classify their crops. And like botanists, they look to genetics and evolution to provide answers to their questions of classification.

In textbooks and the works of specialists alike, we are presented with myriad definitions of realism: it is an 'orientation', a 'tradition', a 'paradigm', a 'philosophical disposition', an 'attitude of mind', a 'framework', an 'approach'. For example, we read: 'Realism is an approach to international relations that has emerged gradually through the work of a series of analysts who have situated themselves within, and thus delimited, a distinctive but still diverse style or tradition of analysis' (Donnelly 2000, 6).

Although there is no consensus on how exactly one ought to classify political realism, there is nevertheless widespread agreement on two points: political realism has a certain origin and it incorporates specific key ideas. Unlike the tomato, which hails from Latin America, political realism is of European origin: we find it in the works of Thucydides, Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes. Moreover, the body of ideas for which realism stands has been described thus:

*Almost everyone in the field is able to identify the central tenets that are associated with realism, which typically include the following claims: that the sovereign state is the most important actor in international politics; that state behaviour can be explained rationally; that states are unitary actors; that there is a sharp distinction between domestic and international politics; that states pursue power in an anarchical self-help setting; and that the issues of war and peace are paramount (Schmidt 2002, 9).*

In this chapter, we shall focus on the origins of realism with the overall aim of shedding light on its essence. This will be carried out in three steps. Firstly, we shall investigate what realists make of the works by Thucydides, Machiavelli and Hobbes,

and we shall support the camp of interpreters who emphasize the selective nature of the realists' reading of classical texts. Secondly, we shall contend that much of what realists overlook in the discourses of Thucydides, Machiavelli and Hobbes is relevant and arguably even central to arriving at a correct understanding of the theories of these classical writers. It will be suggested that realists have no genuine historical or analytical interest in the 'real' Thucydides, Machiavelli and Hobbes. Thirdly, we shall reflect on the trend for ideologies in the twentieth century to appropriate the Machiavellian or Hobbesian 'brand' – and hence make claim to an illustrious progenitor – and yet show scarce interest in the complex and challenging theories of these writers. We shall conclude that from the point of view of a political theorist, realism is very much like a tomato: a fruit that pretends to be a vegetable, a colourful ideology that presents itself as a neutral approach or a scientific paradigm.

## I

Thucydides is generally considered to be the earliest and most notable expression of political realism in Western political thought. From Martin Wight to R.G. Gilpin, the *History of the Peloponnesian War* is regarded as one of the most powerful accounts of the systematic use of force to achieve political ends: 'One of the supreme books on power politics is the history by Thucydides of the great war between Athens and Sparta' (Wight 2004, 24). Michael Doyle voices the opinion of many when he claims that 'Thucydides belongs to the Realists. They belong to him' (1997, 91).

Among the passages of the *History* that have particularly attracted the attention of realists, the Melian Dialogue stands out. The Melians were a colony from Sparta that refused to follow the other islanders in joining the Athenian enterprise; rather, they had remained neutral at first and had then become open enemies of Athens. During the speech to the Melian governing body, the Athenian representatives advocated the time-honoured view that justice depends on equality of power and that among parties that are unequal, the strong does what he can and the weak endures what he must.

Another dialogue in the *History* that arguably lends itself to a realist interpretation is the oration to the Corinthians by the Athenian ambassadors in the early stages of the Peloponnesian war. The Athenians are reported by Thucydides to have justified their expansionist policy thus: 'We were forced to advance our dominion to what it is, out of the nature of the thing itself; as chiefly for fear, next for honour, and lastly for profit' (Hobbes 1843, 81).<sup>1</sup>

The Athenian ambassadors imputed Athens' behaviour to the very essence of human nature, thereby suggesting that there is no need to excuse it: 'So that, though

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1 All references are to *The History of the Grecian War Written by Thucydides*, translated by Thomas Hobbes, Volumes VIII and IX of the *English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, edited by Sir William Molesworth, London, 1843.

overcome by three the greatest things, honour, fear and profit ... we have therein done nothing to be wondered at besides the manner of men' (*ibid.*, 82).

These three motives for action – fear, prestige and profit – are central to Thucydides' narration. Fear in particular plays a crucial role in the *History*: fear is motivated by uncertainty, results in diffidence, brings about anticipation and affects human deliberation. In the few passages where Thucydides reveals his own point of view, he suggests that the war arose chiefly because of the fear by the Lacedaemonians of Athens' increasing power and desire to rule: 'The causes why they broke the same [league], and their quarrels, I have therefore set down first ... the truest quarrel. Though least in speech, I conceive to be the growth of the Athenian power; which putting the Lacedaemonians into fear necessitated the war' (*ibid.*, 27).

Throughout the narration it is suggested that the havoc of war destruction is bound to be repeated throughout human history with no possibility of salvation. The *History* conveys the impression that one of the reasons for being pessimistic about the future is people's incredible optimism. During the Mytilenean debate, for example, Diodotus puts forward an argument that recurs in the *History*, namely that people and cities are guided in their actions more by hope for success than by fear of failure; he argues that deterrents such as capital punishment do not work as human beings hope to achieve their objectives with impunity; in his words: 'encouraged by hope, men hazard themselves ... They have it by nature, both men and cities, to commit offences; nor is there any law that can prevent it' (*ibid.*, 311, emphasis added). To sum up, various features of realism can be found in Thucydides' work: his analysis of the conflict between expediency and ethics, his pessimistic view of human nature, his interpretation of political motivations and behaviour leading to conflict and war, and his investigation into the notion of self-interest and power all adhere to realism's central tenets.

Michael Doyle defines Thucydides' position as 'complex realism' and recognizes in it the seeds from which different species of realism will grow. Indeed, according to Doyle, the rejection of the 'unity thesis' of realism is consistent with the defence of the 'continuity thesis' according to which 'realism does hark back to Thucydides' (1997, 50). Jack Donnelly, however, is among those interpreters who harbour reservations about the extent of Thucydides' realism. Donnelly insists rather forcibly that it is not the whole of Thucydides' *History* but 'the Melian Dialogue [that] is an important touchstone in the realist tradition' (2000, 24). Donnelly stresses that although the Melian Dialogue provides 'perhaps the best known, and certainly one of the strongest, statements of realist amorality' (*ibid.*, 167), the argument for justice introduced by the Melians constitutes an important thread in Thucydides' narration. Donnelly concludes: 'Justice is rarely triumphant in Thucydides' *History*. It is however regularly present, relevant, and even important' (*ibid.*, 170).

Although we have shown above that realism in the *History* is not at all confined to the Melian Dialogue, Jack Donnelly's problems with the realist interpretation of Thucydides' stand on justice seem reasonable. In the last twenty years, a number of interpreters have emphasized that 'Thucydides is not for every theorist of international relations an unremitting Realist' (Boucher 1998, 67) and denounced the privileging of certain hand-picked aspects of the *History* by realists. Although

in Thucydides' narration there are indeed reflections or claims that are consistent with a realist standpoint, there are also important discourses that do not conform to the realist approach and that seriously undermine the 'continuity thesis' that grounds realism in Thucydides' *History*. One could go even further and argue that although the Athenians emerge as enthusiastic supporters of power politics, the verdict of Thucydides' *History* is, in fact, that the realist approach to politics cost the Athenians their empire, their wealth and their domestic stability. This hardly amounts to an endorsement.

## II

Niccolò Machiavelli is also regarded as having made an important contribution to the development of the realist creed. Machiavelli is the father of 'fundamental realism' for Michael Doyle (1997), a voice of 'empirical realism' for David Boucher (1998), one of the six realist paradigms for Jack Donnelly (2000), and an inspiration for *Realpolitik* according to Howard Williams (1992). In Doyle's words:

*Machiavelli's realism rests causally and directly – fundamentally – on the individual leader, citizen, or subject and his or her ambitions, fears, and interests. ... [Machiavelli] takes what was one element in Thucydides' view of interstate politics and distils from it a practical guide to the behaviour of new princes and the leaders of expansionist republics (1997, 93–4).*

*The Prince*, *The Discourses on the First Decade of Livy* and *The Art of War* are regarded as important contributions to the development of political realism. Many themes that one finds in Thucydides are developed by Machiavelli: a negative notion of human nature, the importance of power and self-interest, the conflicting claims of conventional morality and expediency, and the battle of necessity and chance in human affairs.

Friedrich Meinecke's classic work arguably offers one of the most stimulating readings of Machiavelli. For Meinecke, Machiavelli's 'whole political way of thought is nothing else but a continual process of thinking about *raison d'état*' (1957, 29). Even if the expression itself did not exist, as Meinecke points out, the concept did and Machiavelli made a tremendous contribution to its development.

The realist feature of Machiavelli's thinking is aptly captured by the following quotation from *The Prince* that summarizes many of his views on politics:

*But my hope is to write a book that will be useful ... and so I thought it sensible to go straight to a discussion of how things are in real life and not waste time with a discussion of an imaginary world. For many authors have constructed imaginary republics and principalities that have never existed in practice and never could; for the gap between how people actually behave and how they ought to behave is so great that anyone who ignores everyday*

*reality in order to live up to an ideal will soon discover he has taught how to destroy himself, not how to preserve himself. For anyone who wants to act the part of a good man in all circumstances will bring about his own ruin, for those he has to deal with will not all be good. So it is necessary for a ruler, if he wants to hold on to power, to learn how not to be good, and to know when it is and when it is not necessary to use this knowledge (1995, 48).*

Realist values are not confined to *The Prince*. In the *Discourses* we read:

*This counsel merits the attention of, and ought to be observed by, every citizen who has to give advice to his country. For when the safety of one's country wholly depends on the decision to be taken, no attention should be paid either to justice or injustice, to kindness or cruelty, or to its being praiseworthy or ignominious. On the contrary, every other consideration being set aside, that alternative should be wholeheartedly adopted which will save the life and preserve the freedom of one's country (1970, 515).*

There is a multiplicity of reasons that explains Machiavelli's classification as an early realist: he was not interested in what people ought to do but in what people actually do, he did not see politics as the pursuit of the good life but as the attempt to achieve and retain power, he had a pessimistic view of human nature, he considered power and security to be fundamental concerns, and he subordinated all other considerations to political success. Indeed, for Machiavelli, the pursuit and protection of political power justifies the use of all means. As Meinecke explains:

*Enemies learn to use each other's weapons. Virtù has the task of forcing back fortuna. Fortuna is malicious, so virtù must also be malicious, when there is no other way open. This expresses quite plainly the real spiritual origin of Machiavellism: the infamous doctrine that, in national behaviour, even unclean methods are justified, when it is a question of winning or of keeping the power which is necessary for the State (1957, 36).*

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli focuses on historical examples of rulers or statesmen such as Cesare Borgia, Maximilian and Pope Julius II. He emphasizes the differing abilities of these leaders to cope with good and bad luck; he reflects on the ill effects of procrastination in politics, on the need for prudence in careful balance with a willingness to take risks, on the importance of self-confidence and being prepared to be ruthless and disliked when required, on the relevance of appearances, and on the impossibility of a government resting on force alone. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli comes to the conclusion that the rarest of qualities – but also the one that is most crucial to making a leader successful – is the ability to adapt in the face of changing historical circumstances.

In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli again stresses the paramount importance of being flexible when confronted with variable and unfamiliar events, problems and conditions: the mixed constitution of Rome meant to ensure this degree of

adaptability to changing sociopolitical landscapes. This flexibility is explained and discussed throughout Machiavelli's writings by means of three related concepts: *virtù*, *fortuna* and *necessità*. As Meinecke has pointed out: '*virtù*, *fortuna* and *necessità* are three words which keep on sounding again and again throughout his writings with a kind of brazen ring' (*ibid.*, 37).

Although many reflections related to these concepts have a realist flavour, some do not. Indeed it is here – at this crucial juncture of his political thought, the complex relationship of *virtù*, *fortuna* and *necessità* – that Machiavelli shows the non-realist aspects of his theory and the reasons why legions of interpreters have associated his name with humanism and even idealism. Meinecke, for example, sees in Machiavelli's theory of *virtù* a 'striking mixture of pessimism and idealism' (*ibid.*, 33); he points out that over time, 'the ethical aim of statecraft', his 'ancient heathen idealism of the State' were no longer understood by his readers; all they understood was 'the ancient heathen realism of his statecraft' (*ibid.*, 45).

In the first half of the twentieth century, we have philosophers such as Benedetto Croce who claimed that Machiavelli was a humanist crucified between the conflicting claims of 'what is' and 'what ought to be'; in the second half of the century, Quentin Skinner argued forcibly that Machiavelli is an exponent of classical republicanism and the supporter of a specific notion of freedom. Even among interpreters of international political thought there seems to be consensus that Machiavelli 'was indeed a much more complex thinker than Realist interpretations generally allow' (Boucher 1998, 91). According to Donnelly, for example, 'Machiavelli, like Thucydides, insists on the relevance, even centrality, of considerations of justice, decency and the common good' (2000, 174): 'Machiavelli simply does not prefer or recommend an amoral politics of power and interest' (*ibid.*, 177).

### III

At the high table of the founding fathers of realism, a special place is usually reserved for Thomas Hobbes. Unlike Thucydides who was a general and Machiavelli who was a diplomat, Thomas Hobbes was a tutor and not a man of action. Hobbes's life was touched only slightly by international affairs. From the biographical notes written by one of his contemporaries, we know that on 5 April 1588 Thomas's 'mother fell in labour with him upon the fright of the invasion of the Spaniards' (Aubrey 1982, 150); indeed Hobbes used to joke about his mother giving birth to twins, himself and fear. He was well aware of European politics because as tutor to the Earl of Devonshire he travelled extensively in Europe; we know from his correspondence that he had sometime to interrupt his journeys because of impending wars. Moreover, since his undergraduate years in Oxford when he took great delight in looking at maps, Hobbes was very curious about the New World; he was interested in international trade and later in life he even had affairs in the Virginia and Summer Island Companies (Malcolm 2002).



It was not international politics in any of its facets, however, but domestic politics and the English Civil War that had a tremendous effect on Thomas Hobbes and turned his mind from philosophy, literature and mathematics to politics. His superb translation of Thucydides's *History* into English marked the beginning of the period of his life in which politics became the focus of his reflections. Interestingly, Hobbes regarded Thucydides as 'the most politic historiographer that ever writ' not for his understanding of international politics but for his insight into the dynamics of political associations, for his indirect critique of democracy, for his account of the stasis of Corcyra and the plague of Athens. Indeed, interpreters have shown striking parallels and even textual concordance between Hobbes's and Thucydides' writings (Klosko and Rice 1985; Slomp 1990).

Hobbes maintained that domestic peace could be attained independently from what happens at international level. He also believed that by using the right methodology it was possible to explain the phenomenon of civil war and to suggest a recipe 'for immortal peace' within a state's borders. He highlighted a number of characteristics about human beings: they are capable of rationality, they fear violent death at the hand of others, they are equally vulnerable in the sense that the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, they desire to increase their power and prestige, and they are by nature independent and free. On the ground of these assumptions, Hobbes derived logically his famous account of the state of nature where men who are rational and interested in self-preservation, equal to each other in their ability to harm, and who desire dominion over others, live together without police, without arbiters, without laws that restrict their freedom and without central authority that decides the distribution of the limited resources. He claims that the combined effect of all the assumptions is a war of all against all. Driven by fear of being killed, all individuals attack each other in anticipation; he explains that war does not consist always in actual fighting but in the expectation of fighting. From David Gauthier to Gregory Kavka, from Jean Hampton to Russell Hardin, many interpreters have applied game theory to the Hobbesian state of nature and illustrated with prisoners' dilemmas, coordination games and supergames, how the 'natural conditions' of mankind turn into a state of war of all against all.<sup>2</sup>

Hans Morgenthau stressed that Hobbes gave the classical analysis of the unlimited desire for power in Chapter XI of *Leviathan*. Morgenthau quotes the following passage from Hobbes:

*So that in the first place, I put for a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in Death. And the cause of all this, is not that a man hopes for a more intensive delight, that he has already attained to; or that he cannot be content with a moderate power: but because he cannot assure the power and means to live well, which he hath present, without the acquisition of more. And from hence it is, that*

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2 I review all these applications in Slomp and La Manna (1996) and I critique the game-theoretical approach to Hobbes in Slomp (2000).



*Kings, whose power is greatest, turn their endeavours to the assuring it at home by Lawes, or abroad by wars: and when that is done, there succeedeth a new desire; in some, of fame for new conquest (1948, 67, n. 16).*

Hobbes claimed that the only way to escape from this perpetual war was to modify two characteristics of the state of nature: the natural equality and the natural liberty of all individuals. By means of the creation of a formidable artificial entity – the sovereign state – that is superior to all citizens and can restrict their liberty, Hobbes thought he had found the recipe for domestic order. By wielding absolute and unlimited power – power that is grounded on the unconditional obedience of all – the Leviathan can provide each and every one of its citizens with security and protection against internal and external enemies.

In *De Cive* the state of nature is presented to the readers as a thought experiment, but in *Leviathan* Hobbes claims that the state of nature can occur in actuality under three historical circumstances: in primitive societies, in the heat of civil war, or in international relations. He famously wrote:

*But though there had never been any time, wherein particular men were in a condition of warre one against another; yet in all times, Kings, and Persons of Sovereigne authority, because of their Independency, are in continual jealousies, and in the state and posture of Gladiators; having their weapons pointing, and their eyes fixed on one another; that is, their Forts, Garrisons, and Guns upon the Frontiers of their Kingdomes; and continuall Spyes upon their neighbours; which is a posture of War (1991, 90).*

Hobbes also alerted his readers to differences between the state of nature and international relations: 'But because they [states] uphold thereby the Industry of their Subjects; there does not follow from it, that misery, which accompanies the Liberty of particular men' (*ibid.*, 98).

The state of nature plays a crucial role in Hobbes's construction of the state and has been a focal point for the attention of IR scholars (Beitz 1979). Hedley Bull describes 'the Hobbesian or realist tradition' thus:

*The Hobbesian tradition describes international relations as a state of war of all against all, an arena of struggle in which each state is pitted against every other. International relations, on the Hobbesian view, represent pure conflict between states and resemble a game that is wholly distributive or zero-sum: the interests of each state exclude the interests of any other (1995, 23).*

According to Jack Donnelly, 'Chapter 13 of *Leviathan* ... presents a fine example of a strong realism that gives roughly equal weight to egoism and to anarchy' (2000, 13–14).

Not all IR specialists, however, are convinced by the association of Hobbes with realism. For example, we read:

*Hobbes was not concerned with inter-state relations; his observations about them are offshoot, a subordinate part of his explanation of domestic politics and his justification for government. It is somewhat surprising therefore that his few and brief references to IR have been so influential. This is partly due to the vivid and forceful style of presentation, partly because it appears in outline to fit the simple realist model, and partly because of the general paucity of philosophical speculation about IR (Evans and Newnham 1998, 227).*

Among Hobbesian specialists, one can distinguish between two camps. On the one hand, there are interpreters such as David Gauthier, Gregory Kavka and Richard Tuck who have welcomed the study of the international implications of Hobbes's theory and encouraged the enquiry into the relationship between Hobbes and realism; on the other hand, Howard Warrender and Noel Malcolm have led the camp of those who are worried and irritated by misuses and abuses of Hobbes. Malcolm claims that the portrayal of Hobbes by IR theorists 'appears to be based, for the most part, on a handful of passages in one or two of his works (ignoring many comments on international affairs elsewhere in his writings); and even those few passages have been misunderstood' (2002, 435).

In 1957, Howard Warrender pointed out that the Hobbesian state of nature cannot be equated to international relations as, unlike natural men, states do not have equal power (1957, 119). This claim was echoed by some IR specialists but resisted by David Gauthier on the ground that equal nuclear vulnerability secures the analogy of international relations to the Hobbesian state of nature (1969, 207–8). To conclude, many associate Hobbes with realism; Hobbes's main qualifying credentials include his negative notion of human nature, his commitment to security issues, his concept of anarchy, his notion of state sovereignty, his claim that a law without sanctions is no law, and his attempt to separate morality and politics. For others, realism reaps very little of what Hobbes attempted to sow.

## IV

We have seen above that realists privilege some parts or aspects of Thucydides', Machiavelli's and Hobbes's arguments. In this section I am going to suggest that the realists' reading of classical texts is not only selective but at times even incorrect. I will offer as an example Hobbes's notion of the function of state sovereignty.

There is a long-standing debate on the conflicting claims of state sovereignty and human rights and whether such a dichotomy can be overcome (Brown 2002a; Lyons and Mastanduno 1995; Jackson 2007). It is beyond the scope of this chapter to address this complex debate; here it suffices to note that Hobbes is often associated with the dichotomy of state sovereignty versus human rights and with the endorsement of the interests of the state. Such an interpretation can be challenged on the ground of textual evidence.

Of course, the notion of human rights was foreign to Hobbes's way of thinking. Even so, it is easy to show that this seventeenth-century writer did not value state sovereignty *per se*. On the contrary, like Bodin, Hobbes developed the concept of state sovereignty with a view to protecting a people's way of life from the interference of external entities such as the Pope, the emperor or foreign princes. For Hobbes the main purpose of the state was to provide people with the conditions for a safe and industrious existence. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes writes: 'The End of the institution of Sovereignty [is] the peace of the subjects within themselves, and their defence against a common Enemy' (1991, 150). Hobbes spells out that the sovereign provides protection in exchange for obedience and that absolute protection requires absolute obedience to the Leviathan. A hasty reading of Hobbes's theory might suggest that sovereign states are their own judge and jury, that they have an absolute right to wage war, and that they can treat their own citizens as they wish. In fact, Hobbes did not identify sovereign power with arbitrary power. Even if the Leviathan is not accountable to the Hobbesian citizens, he is accountable, Hobbes claims, to God for the treatment of his people.

Immanuel Kant interpreted Hobbes's concept of sovereignty correctly and indeed he endorsed it (Tuck 1999; Slomp 2007a). In an essay entitled *On the Common Saying: 'This May be True in Theory, but it does not Apply in Practice'* Kant (1991) accepts the Hobbesian principle that the function of the sovereign state is to provide protection in exchange for obedience, but he expands the list of rights that the state is supposed to protect. Of course, doubts have been raised about Kant's view that Hobbesian sovereignty is compatible with liberal principles and international institutions (Morgenthau 1948).

To attribute the sovereignty versus rights dichotomy to Hobbes is inappropriate in so far as Hobbes was in favour of state sovereignty for the self-preservation and well-being of people. The dichotomy of sovereignty and rights is a relatively recent invention that was unknown to Hobbes. Kant did not reject Hobbes's concept of sovereignty but simply expanded the list of rights that the state ought to protect. By ignoring this important, arguably central, aspect of Hobbes's theory, realists show that their interest in Hobbes is neither historical nor analytical.

## V

Although the above account is by no means comprehensive, it is hoped that it provides sufficiently persuasive support for the view that the realist reading of Thucydides, Machiavelli and Hobbes is often selective, sometimes incorrect, and always guided by some overall project that has nothing to do with achieving a greater historical understanding of classical texts or with exploring the contributions that past masters can make to current debates.

We may recall that in the twentieth century a number of philosophers and theorists adopted Machiavelli or Hobbes as the intellectual progenitors of their politics. In the 1930s, the Italian Fascist Alfredo Rocco singled out Machiavelli as

the founding father of Fascism. Conversely, Antonio Gramsci forcefully argued that Machiavelli was the pre-incarnation of Lenin.

Hobbes, too, witnessed a twentieth-century struggle between competitors who wished to lay claim to his intellectual bones. In the late 1930s there was a lively debate between those who argued that there was a link between Hobbes and totalitarianism and those who strongly denied it. In 1938, for example, Taylor interpreted Hobbes's theory as a deontology – a theme developed later by Warrender. According to this view, there is more than prudential morality in Hobbes's argument, and as such Hobbes is a precursor of Kant. In the same year Carl Schmitt wrote his work on Hobbes's *Leviathan* and argued that Hobbes was in fact the forerunner of Spinoza and liberal constitutionalism.

What does realism have in common with all these other 'isms' – Leninism, Fascism, totalitarianism, nationalism and liberalism – that in the twentieth century have claimed Machiavelli or Hobbes as their founding fathers?

Although there is scope for debate, it can be argued that realism shares a fundamental feature with all these worldviews: it is, like them, an ideology. Of course, it is well known that 'ideology is the most elusive concept in the whole of social science' (McLellan 1987, 1). Even so, theorists claim that ideologies have a number of distinctive features that distinguish them from traditions of thought, scientific paradigms or philosophical frameworks. In particular, we are often told that ideologies contain three basic ingredients: a description of the world, a prescription of a better world, and a strategy on how to move from what it is to what ought to be. *Prima facie* realism does not appear to be an ideology as it rejects the idealization of the world and the idea of moving from what is to what ought to be. However, the normative aspect of realism is easily uncovered: the attempt to conserve the world as we find it is as ideological as it is to try to change it. And to offer a description of the world focused on security as its fundamental concern is as ideological as to offer a description of the world based on different priorities.

Even the selected reading of classical texts by realists is ideological and not random. Why focus on the passages where Hobbes talks of eternal human nature desiring power after power and not on passages where Hobbes claims that the desires of men can be shaped by means of education and training? Why consider what Machiavelli says about necessity and not his reflections on how *virtù* can control and modify human destiny?

Also, the tendency to offer grand narratives of the political that explain everything from the dawn of time until the present is a typical feature of the ideologies of modernity. Brian Schmidt writes:

*While symbolically or metaphorically, contemporary practitioners may wish to describe themselves as descendants of Thucydides or Kant, a serious conceptual mistake is made when the history of the field is written in terms of the development of an epic tradition beginning with classical Greece or the Enlightenment and culminating in the works of contemporary scholars (2002, 7).*

Schmidt's claim is particularly true when applied to realism.

## Conclusion

This chapter has suggested that realism is not a neutral framework or a philosophical orientation or a scientific paradigm. Its interest in Thucydides, Machiavelli and Hobbes is neither historical nor analytical. The epic rendition of the past and the tendency to claim illustrious founding fathers is typical of the ideologies of modernity. To claim that realism is an ideology is indeed only a small and modest step; yet it is an important step on the path to capturing its essence.<sup>3</sup>

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# Liberalism

Andrew Williams

*A large part of history is ... replete with the struggle for ... human rights, an eternal struggle in which a final victory can never be won. But to tire in the struggle would mean the ruin of society (Einstein 1954, 35).*

*Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness (Matthew 23:27).*

## Introduction: What is Liberalism?

Liberalism is at the heart of the project that we usually call 'the West'. It is a 'Grand Theory' like practically no other, in that it expresses a 'systematic theory of "the nature of man and society"' (Mills 1959, 23). And yet it has been formulated by so many thinkers and policy-makers in so many ways as to defy neat categorization. Perhaps this is why so many liberals have decried the very idea of 'Grand Theory', a condemnation that Quentin Skinner (1985, 3–4) has noted as being a common feeling of some very prominent liberal thinkers, with Sir Lewis Namier, the great 'Whig' historian, and Karl Popper, that Hammer of the Left (and of all 'utopian' thought), as archetypal debunkers of any school of thought that aims at explaining and understanding everything. Yet that is precisely what liberalism does. It is its great strength and its ultimate weakness, as open to attack as any all-encompassing theory.

The difference with this theory, as distinct from Marxism, for example, is that it espouses an ideology of openness and non-discrimination with such fervour that it inevitably opens itself up to attack from multiple angles and lays itself bare for charges of hypocrisy and duplicity in a way that no other grand theoretical framework does. So when an American or British politician claims that he is ordering troops into an oil-producing Middle Eastern country for the purpose of freeing the local population from a 'tyrant', eyebrows are raised in a way they never would have been when a Soviet politician ordered his troops to defend 'socialist order and the international proletariat' in Hungary or Afghanistan, or a German nationalist his troops to uphold German 'dignity' in Poland. All ideologies



and totalitarian states have claimed liberal language for their own. The Chinese National Anthem has the line '[l]et us stand up and fight for liberty and true democracy' while having scant regard for either.<sup>1</sup> Many writers like Karl Popper and J.L. Talmon have identified totalitarianism as liberalism's most obvious enemy and an optimistic liberal opinion would rightly be that totalitarianism has been defeated more often than it has won against liberalism (Talmon, 1961; Popper 1971).<sup>2</sup> Outrage there may well be in these cases, and hypocrisy is the least of the charges against them. But liberalism claims to mean what it says on liberty and democracy, and this is both its strength and its weakness.

This chapter will examine why that is the case, and do so by examining the evolution of the liberal idea and how it often seems to founder on 'hard cases'. The areas I have chosen to consider (obviously there are many others) are those of how the liberal should view the links between the individual and the community; how liberals have looked at questions of international intervention in the affairs of other states; and how they think wealth should be created and distributed in an equitable manner – what is known in political theory as 'distributive justice'. These categories of thought and action, in the domestic, international and economic spheres are clearly linked as our increasingly global system has been the product of liberalism's slow but steady advance over the last two centuries. But they also show up liberalism's internal contradictions. For instance, capitalism – the major lasting economic legacy of liberalism – claims to liberate the individual to become rich, and has spread its practices across the globe, mainly because of capitalism being forcibly exported by imperial powers and by the less forcible but nonetheless inexorable spread of market forces. Capitalism has undoubtedly made the globe vastly more prosperous, but wealth has been unevenly distributed, with billions languishing in poverty while their neighbours live in conditions of unbelievable riches.

Equally, I will suggest that liberalism's main political child, democracy, is, in Winston Churchill's definition 'the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time'.<sup>3</sup> Thus the approach here will be to take a number of categories within which liberalism's great strengths and evident weaknesses (historical and case-based) can be demonstrated, and then show how these strengths and weaknesses can be best be illuminated.

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1 Engel (2008). The other endearing quality of liberal democracies like the UK is that they can never match the efficient political machinery of states like the Peoples' Republic of China, but they do not execute so many of those 'people' quite so efficiently either. Engel comments: 'And all the while we thought the Chinese leadership had no sense of humour. No, liberty is not their strong point.'

2 It must be said that Popper's identification of Plato as one of the key enemies of the open society is open to some incredulity, but his other candidates, Hegel and Marx in particular, may be justifiable targets.

3 Churchill, Speech to the House of Commons, 11 November 1947.

## Liberalism Defined

As C.B. Macpherson (1962) suggested, every political theory requires a conception of the person, and liberalism is that theory par excellence. Whereas Marxism and conservatism can be said to be theories that privilege community above all, liberalism is the theory of the emancipation of the person. Conventional definitions of liberalism always contain four basic elements, as summed up by John Gray:

*Liberalism is individualist, in that it asserts the moral primacy of the person against the claims of any other social collectivity; egalitarian inasmuch as it confers on all humans the same moral status and denies the relevance to legal or political order of differences in moral worth among human beings; universalist, affirming the moral unity of the human species and according secondary importance to specific historical associations and cultural forms; and meliorist in its affirmation of the corrigibility and improbability of all social institutions and political arrangements (1986, 10).*

This definition can only be accepted in general terms however for, as Richard Bellamy has pointed out, all of these categories have been developed within particular societal contexts at different historical epochs and under particular geographical, cultural and social conditions. Bellamy (2000) does nonetheless accept that liberalism embodies a generalized philosophical acceptance of the principles of 'equality, liberty, individuality and rationality'; a social commitment to notions of 'liberal individualism'; a 'general concern with protecting each individual's ability to pursue his or her own conception of the good'; and politically, 'a strict distinction of state and civil society, as well as a commitment to the rule of law and parliamentarism'. Liberals also like to think that they are creatures driven by ethical imperatives, and especially the idea of what Kant called the 'categorical imperative', which bids us to treat others as having value in themselves, and to act in accordance with principles that are valid for all other actors. An actor's moral motives are therefore a key part of a liberal's analysis of the actor and of others. Reason is the key for Kant in determining what these motives are (Donaldson 1992, 136–7).

Of course this 'do as you would be done by' maxim has a bit of an 'Alice through the Looking Glass' feel to it. 'Reciprocal justice' has a very grand ring to it but how many humans act out of such disinterested motivation? All manner of realists will attack such pious claims, and not without reason as many of the names associated with such statements are of religious origin. But it is in the use of the idea that we see the problem writ large. Bellamy uses the critique of Carl Schmitt to point to a few evident problems with the operationalization of the reciprocal idea of 'democracy' over time. Parliamentarianism and democracy are not necessarily equivalent, for example, and the rule of law can be oppressive as well as liberating. Industrial societies create hierarchies of power so that the rich tend to get more of their agenda respected. In short, Schmitt believed that 'mass democracy deforms rather than reinforces liberalism' (Bellamy 2000, 68–76). This is a view partly shared

by more ardent defenders of liberalism like Alexis de Tocqueville and J.D. Talmon, as we will see below.

Notwithstanding these clear caveats, liberalism can be said to encompass a number of concepts that have come to define what is now seen as a basic political 'good' in the core countries of the West and far beyond. Hence, Gray's definition of modern liberalism may be a good summary but it does not cover all of the signposts along the route to now (Williams 2006, Chapters 1 and 2).

One area that is not addressed by these definitions and their critics is that of how liberals have realized that to bring about the kind of 'progress' (or 'meliorism') they desire, they have to observe and try to influence not only the domestic but also the international sphere. James Bryce, a great nineteenth-century British liberal, said in 1922 that for him liberalism did not just mean

*... that blind faith in the certainty of human progress ... but rather that aspiration for a world more enlightened and more happy than that which we see today, a world in which the cooperation of men and nations rather than their rivalry and the aggrandizement of one at the expense of the other, shall be the guiding aims.*

This way of seeing liberalism also includes the idea of 'fairness' both in domestic and international life that has continued to be a key debate within liberalism and against it. Kant was the first notable modern advocate of a cosmopolitan liberal view that a different kind of international 'order' is necessary before economic and political 'justice' and the legislation of human rights can become the necessary bases of any national or international order (Donaldson 1992).

The idea of 'fairness' has been a feature of much liberal thinking ever since the emergence of the 'new liberalism' in the nineteenth century, with L.T. Hobhouse (1964), T.H. Green (1883) and others stressing the responsibilities of rich societies to care for their weaker members. In the period after 1900, and particularly after 1945, this came to mean variants on Franklin Delano Roosevelt's 'New Deal' or the British welfare state. But there has always been a tension between this welfare approach and that of the above-mentioned individualism, which predates the 'new liberalism' and has its roots in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century classical liberalism of John Locke (1690) and Adam Smith (1776), the political and economic fathers of liberalism. This critique was at the heart of Macpherson's 'possessive individualism', and has seen political form in a periodic reaction against welfarism. This was especially so in the 1980s in Britain where Margaret Thatcher's dictum 'there is no such thing as society' came to be emblematic of an uncaring free-market individualistic liberalism that was prepared to throw vast numbers of miners and others onto the dole queue in the name of 'progress'.

A last area that is both distinctly 'liberal' and also distinctly ambiguous lies in the natural continuation of individualism into the political, social and cultural realm – that of 'human rights'. As David Forsythe (2000, 3) has put it: 'In the classical liberal view, the good society is based on respect for the equality and autonomy of individuals, which is secured through the recognition and application of the

fundamental legal rights of that person ... liberalism is a synonym for attention to personal rights'. Again, we can point to problems that arise when we try and impose 'our' views of what rights are, as compared to 'their' ideas of what these should comprise. But like motherhood and apple pie, who can disagree that rights are a 'good' thing? To say otherwise lays us open immediately to charges of 'cultural relativism', an argument that says, essentially if brutally, that 'we' would obviously not tolerate certain practices (female circumcision, child-beating, capital punishment) but that it is alright elsewhere as 'they' have different cultural norms. However, should those who live in glasshouses throw stones – surely we also have practices that 'others' find abhorrent?

Alexis de Tocqueville is a seminal thinker for an understanding of how communities can be liberated and how they can also oppress using the basic tenet of the liberal credo. It might seem strange to emphasize him rather than the better-known 'fathers' of liberalism like John Locke and Jeremy Bentham, but his approach is useful in that it encompasses critiques of both Locke's and Bentham's theories while not denying their fundamental virtues. De Tocqueville is also a useful starting point in that he had observed at close hand the negative side of democracy in the French Revolution and also the emergence of a new American liberal democracy in the early nineteenth century. He was thus much more of a man of the modern age than Locke, whose theorizing about liberalism took place in the context of a very embryonic parliamentary democracy in pre-industrial seventeenth-century Britain. Locke nonetheless had a great rhetorical influence on the constitutional arrangements of the young American Republic (see Doyle 1997).

The main prediction by de Tocqueville, that the 'Anglo-Américains' and the Russians would come to be the dominant world powers was a brave one when he wrote it in 1833–35. It reflected his belief that liberal democracy would prove to be one of the most dominant future political and ideological forces on the planet at a time when there was arguably only one real democracy in existence – the United States. He 'knew that [he] was walking on difficult ground [*terrain brûlant*]' for in Europe the peoples' voice was rarely heard while in the US 'the people dominate in all things [*sans obstacles*]' (Tocqueville 1981; Guellec 2005). Universal suffrage, support for the rule of law, and freedom of speech could give rise to the sublime rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence of 1776 and the Constitution of 1784, but they could also lead to the down-treading of the native population and ultimately to a 'perfect equality and an illusory freedom ... a world without belief or conviction, inhabited by mild, will-less ruminants ... a benevolent totalitarianism' (Kaledin 2005).

Many might say they see this world reflected in the consumerist nightmare of the present-day US, but Kaledin stresses that de Tocqueville also saw a more happy potential outcome for American democracy, namely, 'the possibility of a democratic future of unparalleled political and cultural activity, new form of community, a broader idea of humanity, and warmer, more natural human relationships' (*ibid.*, 48–9). Edmund Burke, who has been claimed by both liberals and conservatives as one of their great prophets, prefigured de Tocqueville in seeing the potential dangers of democracy becoming totalitarian. Burke's opposition to the French Revolution in the 1790s reflected what Jennifer Welsh calls his conservative 'empiricism and its

denunciation of metaphysical discussions of what constitutes the “good” (Welsh 1995, 11), but he was also a major supporter of the American desire for ‘liberty’, a metaphysical idea if ever there was one. His support for the American Revolution as one ‘within a tradition’ as opposed to the French ‘revolution in sentiments, manners and moral opinions’ (*ibid.*, 93) was mainly due to the way the French revolutionaries *behaved*, not their initial ideological impulse. He was also outraged by the French having, as he saw it, broken up the society of states that existed before the French Revolution (also often known as ‘Christendom’) which worked according to generally accepted rules that the French so flagrantly breached in the 1790s (*ibid.*; Brown 2002). Chris Brown points out that they may have done so in some areas (chopping off the King’s head and invading a lot of Europe to ‘liberate’ it being two obvious examples) but there was a regular Anglo-French boat link between Calais and Dover (the ‘packet’) and British participants at Parisian scientific congresses throughout the Napoleonic Wars (2002, 34).

Of course, both de Tocqueville’s and Burke’s visions have continued to epitomize our dualistic view of what the US, or indeed France, represents in terms of the potential for liberal regimes to deny or encourage freedom and therein lies their enduring fascination. As with Britain in the nineteenth century, so with the US in the twentieth, the great liberal power carries all the contradictions of liberal greatness of their respective epochs as their special burden. This is best shown by liberalism’s actions in the international sphere, whether it be under British or American direction.

## Liberalism, War, Interventionism and Imperialism<sup>4</sup>

As we have by now seen, liberalism, an ideology with a clear idea of the ‘good’, has inevitable cross-border ramifications. When the record of liberalism is applied to the international sphere and the perceived need to intervene to ‘keep the peace’, prop up a ‘failed state’ or deal with a ‘humanitarian disaster’, this statement comes to life even more strongly. Liberalism has been the most active player on the international stage of all other ideologies. Not even Soviet Marxism, and certainly not National Socialism, can be said to have had such a lasting and global impact. Liberalism has claimed the need for global solutions based on the language of rights and the search for the ‘good’. Kant, whose thinking on the international has already been mentioned above, is the liberal philosopher most associated with a society of states that would be based on republics, even a proto-world government based on liberal and ‘cosmopolitan’ principles. The way that this Enlightenment philosopher, and his brethren, saw such an international system would be one that would sweep aside the old obscurantism of religion and intolerance and bring us into a new era of emancipation and ‘Perpetual Peace’ as he put it in a celebrated tract of 1794 (Brown 2002, 40–46). This is a cry that we have heard many times since, in Marxism, other forms of socialism and endlessly

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4 The next few paragraphs draw on Williams (2007, 300–304).

for all sorts of supporters and deniers of liberalism. The United Nations is a clear beneficiary of such thinking, for example.

But as a result of the mixing of liberal ideas, power and influence, even the most sacrosanct of liberal icons can now be assailed. Mark Hoffmann has rightly written that 'international affairs have been the nemesis of liberalism' (cited in Smith 1992, 201). Liberal states, and especially the hegemonic 'Anglo-Americans' have seen themselves pilloried for excessive zeal in their desire to spread their self-defined 'morality' or 'ethics' and democracy by force over the last two hundred years, as with the declaration of an 'ethical foreign policy' by British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook in 1997 (Smith and Light 2001). The latest version of this liberal 'proselytizing' can be found in the wrongly named 'neoconservatism' or, perhaps more rightly, 'militant liberal Wilsonianism' and actions against 'Islamofascism' in Afghanistan and Iraq (see Williams 2007, Conclusion). Maybe one reason for this zeal is that liberals put so much Kantian emphasis on 'reason' and a duty to find the 'moral' course to take that they forget that others do not reason or moralize in the same way as they do?

This has arguably long been the case when the epithet 'imperialism' is juxtaposed with the term 'liberalism'. Locke has been accused of creating a distinction in liberal states' treatment of those populations who exist in a 'state of war' and those in a 'state of nature'. The former are those who seemingly obey and respect no clear laws and thus put themselves beyond the pale (Doyle 1997, 216–26; Williams 2006, 21–4). Even John Stuart Mill has not escaped opprobrium on these grounds. Joseph Hamburger asked 'How Liberal was John Stuart Mill?' (1995, 109–22), while Beate Jahn attacked Mill for his 'imperialism' (Jahn 2005, 599–618), though it must be said that the basis for this was his seeking the invasion and suppression of the Barbary pirate kingdoms of North Africa. Mill's 1859 tract *A Few Words on Non-Intervention* has clearly influenced liberal policy-makers and thinkers who believe that non-intervention should be the norm, but dealing with 'primitive peoples' can constitute an exception to this norm (Brown et al. 2002, 486). What could be more obviously 'primitive' than the Taliban or the Shia militias of Moqtadr el-Sadr, we might ask?

But must 'intervention' therefore always be 'imperialist'? Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair's foreign policy advisor Robert Cooper is a recent convert to justifying selective intervention, as he does in his book *The Breaking of Nations* (2004). His use of the epithet 'liberal imperialism' to describe Blair's foreign policy in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 was not used with irony or distaste. Others have compared 'humanitarian intervention' (Wheeler 2000), now enshrined in a UN General Assembly Resolution as the 'Responsibility to Protect' with such thinking (Welsh 2004). But is not intervention just that, whatever the justification? The same logic used by Mill to defend 'illiberal' attacks on other states and peoples is now being used to justify dealing with 'failed states' in Africa and elsewhere. The liberal is seemingly always being thrust back onto 'realist' actions by necessity and self-defence. Again the communitarian attack on interventionist liberalism strikes home – we act because what we need to do is 'right' for us, not necessarily 'good' for 'them'.



The tradition of using liberal principles to justify 'imperialist' practices thus pre-dates the modern era by over a hundred years. Duncan Bell's (2005) article on John Robert Seeley, the Victorian 'public intellectual' and historian, shows this well. Seeley had a 'good claim to being the individual most responsible for broadening the imaginative horizons of Victorian political thought', yet was clearly a 'realist' in that he is often seen as being in the same political lineage as George Kennan, Martin Wight, Herbert Butterfield or Reinhold Niebuhr, some key members of the realist canon (as for example by Deudney 2001). Bell shows how Seeley has been subsumed into what Karma Nabulsi (1999) calls the 'martialist' tradition of late nineteenth-century thinkers who lauded the development of the Britain Empire.

But as Bell points out, he was also a fervent believer in 'progress' and '[l]ike many liberals, he [Seeley] supported the utilization of political violence in the struggle for national liberation'. He was a great supporter of Kantian and other ideas of federation, in line with many liberals of his day and since, even to the point of a 'federal Greater Britain and a reunion with America'. His imperialism was that of the typical liberal, one which saw the Empire as 'civilizing' and having within it a 'moral obligation to support [for example] the Indian people in the quest for progress.... The British, that is, were to act as the midwives of Indian modernity'. As Bell goes on to say: 'Once again, such a heavily moralized concern with what we might now call "nation-building" does not find prominent place in the constellation of realist thought' (Bell 2005, 567).

So how can Seeley (or for that matter Mill, Locke or Blair) be a liberal in some ways but not others? David Williams (2001) has suggested that liberalism as a 'political project' is not just 'the production of theoretically justified ends and arrangements'. It has to include a 'sociological and political account of the barriers to achieving those desirable ends and arrangements', it 'involves the use of certain characteristic "techniques of transformation" [and it] can only be a project embodied in a political agency'. It has, in other words, no reality without practice.

A greater test than imperialism of such practice is surely liberalism's attitude to war itself, the great leveller of international and national politics. If James Bryce's comments above were sincere in wishing liberalism to be seen as trying to bring about a better way of doing international relations, without constant recourse to war, then how can that be seen as having had any success in practice? One answer lies in the belief that liberty has on occasion to be fought for. Prominent early twentieth-century British liberal Gilbert Murray opined: 'Nothing but the sincere practice of liberal principles will save European society from imminent revolutions and collapse' (Morefield 2005, 1). On another occasion in 1921 he wrote:

*I start from the profound conviction that what the world needs is peace. There has been too much war, and too much of too many things that go with war.... Before the [Great] war I was a Liberal, and I believe now that nothing but the sincere practice of Liberal principles will save European society from imminent revolution and collapse (1921, 5–6).*

He had had no problem in supporting the war against Germany; 'Of course I supported the war. I believe it was necessary' (*ibid.*). This belief was once again shaken by experience. The 1930s were a period of particular challenge for liberalism, as capitalism seemingly collapsed across much of Europe and democracy came under great strain. In the heartlands of the US and the UK 'planning' became the order of the day, and government interference in economic life became accepted in a way that would have been unthinkable before 1914. L.T. Hobhouse predicted that liberalism would be in trouble even before 1914: 'The nineteenth century might be called the age of Liberalism, yet its close saw the fortunes of that great movement bought to their lowest ebb' (1964, 110).

Another prophet of doom, Reinhold Niebuhr, the celebrated theological 'realist', predicted the end of the age of liberalism was nigh in 1934 in that there were forces developing even then that he thought would put an end to the age of seemingly unending progress that had produced such liberty of thought and action in the West (Lovin 2008, 158). These forces would be both political and economic. The political he saw in the rise of the totalitarian dictatorships, the economic was emerging in what we would now call 'globalization' and the apocalyptic results of global climate change. Such apocalyptic thinking was not the preserve of theologians. The emergence of what, at the time, seemed to be the counter-promise of liberalism – the Soviet system – led Stephen Spender to write a tract entitled *Forward From Liberalism*. Although his flirtation with the Communist Party of Great Britain was brief, as he was expelled for being, predictably, unable to conform to strict Party guidance, he represented a whole generation of young Western intellectuals who felt that liberal democracy was doomed. Spender was not wrong when he said: 'Democracies are passing through a stage of acute disappointment with the very limited and ineffective political power which they enjoy' (1937, 17). Such paralysis was indeed to lead to 'apathy [and] despair', for liberal democracy only works when the people feel themselves empowered by it to change their lives and those of others, for the better.

In the contemporary era after the end of the Cold War, several pundits have declared that liberalism had finally triumphed. The 'End of History' has been announced by Francis Fukuyama with his claim that 'the modern liberal democratic state ... is free of contradictions' and that the world will from now on become a 'universal and homogenous state ... resting on the twin pillars of economics and recognition' (1992, 139, 204). But even he encapsulated the inherent pessimism of all liberal triumphalism by warning in his book's title about the dangers of excessive consumerism, in the figure of Nietzsche's 'Last Man'. Since 1992 a whole industry has sprung up to denounce such 'speech acts' and 'critical theory' has been reborn to attack liberalism on its own turf of excessive 'possessive individualism' and lack of emancipatory politics (see el-Ojeili and Hayden 2006, 10). In the international sphere that critique has concentrated on the evident contradictions of the Kantian claim that Western triumph in the Cold War has led to an unthinking imposition of the 'liberal' (or 'democratic') peace in attempts to bring democracy to states that cannot handle it or capitalism to places that will be destroyed by it (see Richmond 2005; MacGinty and Williams 2009). One of the key accusations is that liberalism



rides roughshod over local cultures and practices, that it misunderstands the very nature of what it seeks to transform, which is often local 'identity', and is in the process self-destructive and also destructive of the 'other' (see, for example, Krause and Williams 1997).

## Distributive 'Justice'

Along with its desire to bring peoples into Locke's 'civil society', liberalism has both figuratively and actually always put emphasis on both economic efficiency and justice. Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* of 1776 and his classical economic liberal followers could see no problem with the idea that increasing the economic pie through capitalism would benefit all classes of society though the notion of 'comparative advantage'. The encouragement of trade has played a significant role in this liberal thinking about comparative advantage ever since, as well as the idea that trade links encourage peace. As Jacoby has succinctly put it: 'Living freely is thus trading freely' (2007, 524). The question has always been, and will continue to be, how this justice can be delivered in economic terms; that is, how wealth can be both created and distributed. Socialism, it has often been suggested, is bad on the first count, but very keen on the second; liberals argue about how to balance the two.

But we also need to ask what 'justice' means. Brian Barry suggests that there are two versions of this, 'justice as mutual advantage and ... justice as impartiality'. Both derive from the observation that *in* all societies and also *across* societies there are 'unequal relations between people', the 'high' and the 'low'. In justice as 'mutual advantage' we are asked to accept that hierarchy is inevitable and that therefore cooperation is better than conflict, a policy of 'rational prudence'. In the second way of thinking about it, Barry says that justice should be based on 'impartiality' in that for those lower down the pecking order not only 'is a just state of affairs ... one that people can accept not merely in the sense that they cannot reasonably *expect* to get more but in the stronger sense that they cannot reasonably *claim* more' (1989, 3–9). This view of justice is much more in the utilitarian mode of Bentham of the beginning of the nineteenth century than in the 'new' liberal mode of the end of it. Brown makes a similar point: international 'justice' meant for many centuries 'respect for the rights of sovereigns' not 'social' rights (2002, 9). So why should there be 'distributive justice' not only within states but also internationally?

John Stuart Mill's attack on Benthamite utilitarianism (which led to a more welfarist turn in liberal thinking and practice) and the New Liberalism of the nineteenth century (which led to even more of the same) showed a clear commitment to economic as well as political fairness. In recent years, as has been mentioned, John Rawls's book *A Theory of Justice* of 1971 is seen as the most stimulating statement of this principle. Richard Rorty, who in the US is seen as, and described himself as, a 'leftist' (1998), is another writer who might be said to have unusually pursued the idea of American 'welfare-state liberalism'. So liberals from Locke in the seventeenth century, through Kant and Mill in the eighteenth and nineteenth, and Rawls (1971;

1993) in the late twentieth centuries have all had the idea that communities can be made fairer or more just by the application of liberal principles. Each of these reiterations of that basic idea has evoked their counter-arguers. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Jean-Jacques Rousseau and G.W.F. Hegel posited that freedom and justice could only come through the liberating role of the state, and that without such institutions individual liberty was meaningless. In a comment on this communitarian debate Michael Sandel summed it up as a debate 'on the challenge to the priority of the right over the good' (see Mulhall and Swift 1992).

Others have also seen problems in Rawls's absolute belief in the need for fairness in domestic and, though Rawls does not claim this, international society. For Michael Walzer (1992), for example, this personalizing of politics is again a problem given that the inevitable consequence of such thinking may be to interfere in the lives of individuals and polities that do not want such interference, which leads to internal contradictions within the liberal impulse itself. Much of the communitarian critique of liberalism is, again not directed at overthrowing its tenets but rather not wanting it to be imposed on those who do not choose it of their own free will (Mulhall and Swift 1992). It is a tension at the heart of liberalism, summed up by Isaiah Berlin as the clash between 'positive' ('freedom which consists in being one's own master') and 'negative' ('not being prevented from choosing as I do by other men') freedoms (Bellamy 2000, Chapter 2).<sup>5</sup>

## Conclusions: Simpering Idealists or Monstrous Imperialists?

What is striking in all of this is that for such a vibrant, if contested, ideology, liberalism has been declared dead very many times. All the way through the twentieth century its 'optimism' has been deemed dangerous or deluded. Georges Sorel wrote that 'the optimist in politics is an inconstant and even dangerous man, because he takes no account of the great difficulties presented by his projects ... Liberal political economy is one of the best examples of a Utopia that could be given' (1941, 9, 33). John Pilger, a prominent journalist for the *New Statesman*, itself a British periodical that has its roots firmly embedded in the liberal tradition of the beginning of the twentieth century, asserted that '[s]hould Obama beat John McCain to the White House in November it will be liberalism's last fling. In the United States and Britain, liberalism as war-making, divisive ideology is once again being used to destroy liberalism as a reality' (2008, 32). Richard Bellamy has called the nineteenth century the 'golden age of liberalism' (2000), as did Hobhouse, quoted above, and it was against the complacency of a seemingly triumphant liberal capitalism that Sorel was railing.

He might just as well have been complaining about Norman Angell in *The Great Illusion* (1910) proclaiming war as illogical and therefore impossible between

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5 Bellamy denies Berlin's claim that Mill is a representative of 'positive' freedom and Green of 'negative'.

the great powers of Europe. Right and Left in Western politics have always simultaneously accused liberalism of perpetrating what Johan Galtung (1969) terms 'structural violence', or misunderstanding the necessary purificatory violence by the working class, advocated by the syndicalist Sorel or indeed the national socialists Adolf Hitler or Benito Mussolini. This way of reasoning has formed the basis for criticizing liberalism, which always resorts to violence in what it always claims is 'the last resort'. Hence the easy accusations of hypocrisy, of covering up the 'real' motives of a dominant capitalist bourgeoisie, with the fine words of liberal emancipation.

So what conclusions can we draw after briefly examining the evidence for the prosecution and the defence? Liberalism has been widely attacked for its conflation of 'justice' and 'fairness', especially in light of the domestic and international experience of politics in the past century. Perhaps liberalism is at its best when it pursues what philosopher Gillian Rose (1997) terms 'good enough justice' – a recognition that there is no perfection and therefore that we have to try to achieve it by accepting inevitable moral compromises.<sup>6</sup> This is a hopeful way of looking at the world, and counters both liberal hubris in its desire to 'fix' the world's ills, and poststructural inertia, in its tendency to wallow in them. Another way might be to ask if the liberal knight has more dragons to slay in the seeming triumph of globalization and the widespread acceptance of the norms of democracy and human rights. Indeed he or she does. Extreme and potentially violent nationalism still rears its head, and increasingly so, in China and Russia. More worrying is that there are nations who would consider themselves 'liberal', like the French, that talk about the problems of '*hyper-liberalisme*' and the '*détournement*' by the US of the principles of the Rights of Man that France did so much to promote (see Laurent 2006). If the liberal credo has been declared dead in error over three centuries, might this one prove to be its last? Maybe liberalism just represents the 'optimistic' side of thinking in the West about the possibility of political agency, with Sorel and others cited above the 'pessimists'. When the West feels good about itself, as in 1990–92 or most of the nineteenth century, liberalism flourishes. When the West is despondent, as it is now, liberalism is put on the back foot. But it would be dangerous to predict its total demise any time soon.

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6 Although Rose herself is not of liberal persuasion. My thanks to Kate Schick for this quote.