

Humanitarianism and the End of Liberal Order: Editor's Introduction

Juliano Fiori

Head of Studies (Humanitarian Affairs), Save the Children; j.fiori@savethechildren.org.uk

The first thing to say about liberal order is that it hasn't been that liberal. Since the Second World War, the production of subjects obedient to the rule of liberal institutions has depended on illiberal and authoritarian methods – not least on the periphery of the world system, where conversion to Western reason has been pursued with particularly millenarian zeal, and violence. The wishful idea of an ever more open and global market economy has been continuously undermined by its champions, with their subsidies and monopolistic distortions. And as liberal hopes for a pacific and technocratic utopia have taken leave of empirical reality, the assumption of progress has been sustained primarily through myth-making and cognitive gymnastics. Fake news is not the antithesis of liberal truth but its progeny.

Nonetheless, the notion of liberal order is useful to the extent that it signals the role of liberal ideas and politics in the consolidation of Western hegemony and, more specifically, the expansion of American power. Franklin D. Roosevelt's Four Freedoms, set out in 1941, provided particularly American inspiration for the post-war development of liberal global governance.¹ But the principles of great-power trusteeship and balancing, reflected in the Dumbarton Oaks proposals in 1944, were decisive in the creation of the United Nations.² Despite the early proliferation of liberal institutions under the aegis of the UN, Cold War prerogatives undermined cosmopolitan aspirations for world government. Cancelling each other out in the Security Council, the US and the Soviet Union prioritised bilateral negotiations. UN institutions were then often used, and even designed, explicitly as vehicles for the pursuit of US interests: the World Food Programme, for example, was established in 1961 to channel American agricultural surplus to the developing world.

Liberal internationalism as we know it today, with its particular political and cultural associations with the US, is a product of the 1970s. As Samuel Moyn has argued, it was in the second half of that decade that human rights

had its first breakthrough as a cosmopolitan political agenda to promote individual entitlements that transcend national citizenship (Moyn, 2010). In his inaugural address, in January 1977, President Jimmy Carter declared that 'Our commitment to human rights must be absolute' (quoted in Moyn, 2014: 69). Under the guardianship of the UN, following the UDHR in 1948, the concept of human rights had lacked prescriptive force; only once adopted by the US as an instrument of order and hegemony did it become the basis for a global movement.

For many liberal commentators at the turn of the 1990s, the collapse of the Soviet Union represented a final victory for Western liberal democracy – an unexpected Hegelian denouement in the knotweed of History. Their euphoria – albeit short-lived – provided the entrance music for a new ethical order, constructed by the US, with a basis in liberal humanitarian norms. Without any direct and immediate threat to its hegemony, the US merged its geostrategy with a humanitarian ethics. In 1991, after the Gulf War, the US invaded Iraq in the name of humanitarian concern. The following year, to the applause of numerous humanitarian NGOs, it led a multinational military task force into Somalia, with the stated aim of protecting relief operations. These humanitarian wars, and others that followed during the 1990s, were waged not only to respond to a perceived evil but also to define good and evil and the limits of acceptable behaviour (Fiori, 2018).

Other Western governments also now looked to humanitarian agencies as allies in the liberal transformation of the developing world. During the Cold War, humanitarian NGOs had generally been limited to operating in countries under Western tutelage, but even those inspired by anti-communism were cautious about structural integration into Western security strategies. At the beginning of the 1990s, NGOs shrugged off their scepticism for the morality of state power, working more closely with Western military forces.

Private and government funding for humanitarian operations increased. With the help of news media, humanitarian agencies boosted their political capital, presenting themselves as providers of public moral conscience for the West.

A new political economy of humanitarian aid developed, reinforcing the symbiosis between humanitarianism and the state. The sufficiency of a humanitarian minimum became justification for cuts in public expenditure, particularly as NGOs offered themselves as subcontractors for the provision of essential services at home and abroad. Western governments placed pressure on NGOs to carry out neomanagerial reforms that would promote cultural synergies with their own overseas aid departments, now reorganised according to the business imperatives of the New Public Management. And NGOs used these reforms to accelerate the professionalisation of the aid sector (Fiori *et al.*, 2016).

But at the turn of the millennium, there were indications of a downturn in the influence of humanitarian ideas on Western geostrategy. The strategic value of humanitarian intervention diminished as the US launched its totalising war on terror. Humanitarianism was little more than an afterthought to the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Since then, despite the continued rise in donations to humanitarian agencies, the political currency of liberal humanitarianism and its institutions has steadily waned.

In recent years, liberal order has been flagrantly challenged by a visceral and affective politics, produced by globalisation itself. Global income inequality increased significantly with the acceleration of globalisation following the end of the Cold War: from a Gini coefficient of 0.57 to one of 0.72, between 1988 and 2005 (Anand and Segal, 2014: 968). Then, following the 2008 financial crash, capital doubled down. While those most responsible for the crash rewarded themselves with hefty bonuses, those experiencing the worst of its rippling social consequences rebelled against systemic injustices.

Left-leaning protest movements of *indignados* took to the streets. They rejected economic austerity and promoted progressive social reform. But they soon became marginal to the spreading politics of anger. In the main, the global backlash is now directed against progressive neoliberalism – the dominant ideological variant of late liberalism – with its ‘flexibilisation’ of everything in the economic sphere and its disintegration of tradition in the social sphere.

Globalisation has uprooted people symbolically as well as materially. A growing ‘impulse’ for social protection has received little response from the receding welfare state.³ In the absence of an economic resolution,

the assertion of cultural sovereignty has become a *fuite en arrière* – a retreat, to nostalgic fantasies of grandeur, fascistic tropes of national belonging and religious fundamentalisms.⁴ *Ressentiment* has given rise to diverse anti-modern social phenomena, from ISIS to the Tea Party to the Hindu nationalist movement associated with the Bharatiya Janata Party (Mishra, 2017). And latterly, with considerable contribution from contemporary technologies of mass communication and voter manipulation, it has been institutionalised through the ballot box.

The election (or near-election) of demagogic, right-wing nationalists in Europe in recent years seems indicative of a growing preference for illiberal democracy in the cultural home of liberalism. In opposition to liberal migration and trade policies, Europeans have increasingly opted for a closing-inwards of the nation state, calling into question the viability of the European project itself. The Brexit referendum, in June 2016, provided a clear example of this.

Politics on the periphery has taken a similarly illiberal turn, with more violent consequences. In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte boasts of carrying out extra-judicial killings and threatens to kill corrupt state officials, and he has launched a bloody war on drugs, for which he has been rewarded with record approval ratings. In Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, a captain of the Army Reserve, was recently elected president; he publicly pays homage to former military dictators and torturers, and his talk of gunning down opponents has provided licence for the spread of political violence.

The election of Donald Trump in the US, in November 2016, was a watershed for electoral politics, giving global significance to rightward shifts elsewhere. With Trump in the White House, the US itself has become the greatest threat to the liberal order it once authored, not because of his own idiosyncratic way of doing politics but because of the strategic realignment that his presidency represents.

According to Trump, his administration’s security strategy is guided by ‘principled realism’. The apparent incoherence of his foreign policy is as indicative of what this entails as his specific interactions with other governments. With every diplomatic encounter imagined as a stand-alone opportunity to strike a winning ‘deal’, the norms-based, multilateral system of global governance becomes at least irrelevant, if not a hindrance, to the US. Trump’s consistent disregard for multilateralism and his authoritarian posturing towards allies and enemies alike now confirm the trend away from liberal internationalism that, despite cosmopolitan rhetoric, was already evident under the presidency of Barack Obama.

This trend is not simply part of the secular fluctuation in American foreign policy between idealism and realism: its end is a rupture with the American exceptionalism essential

to both traditions. The National Security Strategy of 2017 proposes that ‘the American way of life cannot be imposed upon others, nor is it the inevitable culmination of progress’ (White House, 2017: 4). Renouncing progressive historical narratives, the Trump administration signals the end of the ‘American century’ and discards the particular universalism that has sustained liberal order.

Posing direct, if distinct, challenges to US power, China and Russia do not seek to create an alternative to the multilateral system. On the contrary, they now become defenders of the institutions of liberal order, pointing to the humanitarian hypocrisy of the US. But as they vie for leadership of the multilateral system, they also attempt to resignify it, demonstrating almost no concern for liberal ideals themselves.

Liberalism might yet be recovered as the basis for global order. But it is unlikely that liberal institutions undermined in recent years can recover their legitimacy; and it is unclear what will emerge in their stead. ‘The crisis’, Gramsci noted, referring to the detachment of the masses from traditional ideologies and authority, ‘consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying out and the new cannot be born’ (Gramsci, 1971: 276). The same is true of the current ‘interregnum’, during which a struggle for meaning, narrative and reason is constitutive of the struggle for power that will eventually give birth to ‘the new’.

Humanitarianism has been a defining feature of liberal order. But it is not simply a pillar of liberal ideology. Indeed, essential to any universalist politics of *the human*, its liberal character is contingent. Amid the crisis of liberal order, humanitarian norms and practices are increasingly contested, and the concept of humanitarianism itself is being redefined.

This first issue of the *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs* looks at what the possible end of liberal order means for humanitarianism. How are changes in the international system affecting humanitarian institutions and cooperation? How is humanitarianism changing? How relevant are humanitarian ideas and practices today? The issue includes contributions from:

- Stephen Hopgood, on the closure of ‘liberal space’ and its likely consequences for humanitarian action;
- Mark Duffield, on ‘post-humanitarianism’ and the government of precarity;
- Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, on the impact on Palestinian refugees of US budget cuts under Donald Trump;
- José Luis Fiori, on the new security strategy of the US and the disavowal of liberal internationalism;
- David Rieff, on the legitimacy of humanitarian agencies in a changing political landscape;

- Mel Bunce, on humanitarian communications and ‘fake news’;
- Celso Amorim, on transformations in global governance and the influence of Southern states;
- Caroline Abu Sa’Da, on search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean; and
- Olivia Umurerwa Rutazibwa, on coloniality and liberal humanitarianism.

Notes

- 1 In his State of the Union address of 1941, Roosevelt suggested that all the people of the world should enjoy four fundamental freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want and freedom from fear.
- 2 The Dumbarton Oaks Conference took place in Washington, D.C., from August to October 1944. Delegations from the US, the UK, the Soviet Union and China gathered to discuss plans for a post-war international organisation. The United Nations then came into existence in October 1945, when 51 countries ratified its charter in San Francisco.
- 3 In *The Great Transformation*, Karl Polanyi refers to a double movement that occurs in the development of the ‘Market Society’: marketisation is followed by popular attempts to secure greater social protection (Polanyi, 1957).
- 4 Contrary to cosmopolitan hopes and expectations, globalisation itself has wrenched forth the forces of nationalism.

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