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Article:

Honeyman, V orcid.org/0000-0003-2084-1395 (2021) Liberal internationalism, OK, but for whom? The Political Quarterly. ISSN 0032-3179

<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923x.12978>

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‘A World Safe for Democracy’ by G. John Ikenberry (Victoria Honeyman, University of Leeds)

Book reviews can often appear to quite prescient and this book review was no exception. As I was reading this book, which focuses on the tangled history of liberal internationalism and the difficulties that can cause, rioters were attacking the Capitol Building in Washington DC. A violent uprising in the modern-day home of democracy demonstrates how fragile the accepted traditional political systems can be, even in what are considered the most stable and established democracies. While the Trump era may have been the result of underlying issues and conflicts, his four years in the White House demonstrate how easily the liberal norms of western society can be undermined and utilised by those who seek its downfall. There has, perhaps, never been a better example of the issues which Ikenberry raises in his book.

The scope of the book is fairly epic – to outline the competing themes and threads within the evolution of liberal internationalism and then analyse them through the discussion of different periods of history and the nations which have adopted and adapted liberalism along the way. Ikenberry begins by discussing the intellectual roots of liberalism before turning his attention to different events over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries (with a brief nod to the 21st), focusing on specific examples of liberalism under pressure and how it was able to survive and move into the ascendancy. These highlight the strengths of liberal internationalism, but also how these strengths can become part of the weakness of the theory. The book is, understandable, US and UK focused, something which Ikenberry defends. He argues that these two liberal nations have dominated the international system since the end of the Napoleonic wars ‘providing the setting and opportunities for liberal interventionist ideas and agendas. (p. 64)’ Therefore, it is important to focus on these dominant nations, and also on the crossover of influence from Pax Britannia to Pax Americana (p.63).

Ikenberry argues that the actions of the Trump administration undermined liberal internationalism, and therefore the political system it underpins has never been in such danger. He argues that there have been many other challenges to liberalism and the global system which supports it and that the very nature of liberalism makes it fundamentally vulnerable to attack. By taking inspiration from other political theories and approaches, liberalism has been able to appeal to a wide range of individuals and nations, allowing them to work together successfully with similar goals and values. However, this variety, this universality, means that the ‘all things to all men’ theory can end up suiting no-one. When this is combined with the red heat of extremism, poverty and division, the implication is that liberal internationalism simply cannot survive without champions to uphold it. The assumption that it would continue forever because it simply could not fail does not hold water in Ikenberry’s view, and events certainly seem to support his argument.

Ikenberry argues that while liberal internationalism has continually shaped world events, it has, in turn, been shaped by events meaning that the systems of government and democracy which exist in many nations across the world have been impacted by the victories and defeats of different facets of liberalism. ‘Liberal internationalists also found themselves building coalitions – intellectually and politically – with political actors who had

different ideas and agendas. (p.65)' Additionally, he argues that the short-term needs and wants of those who support liberal internationalism has often led to contradictions and dilemmas. 'Britain and the United States were driven by incentives and imperatives that took them away from, not closer to, liberal international visions of order. (p.65)' Perhaps the UK and the US are their own worst enemies, allowing short term goals to chip away at their intellectual foundations.

The clear argument of the book is that liberalism is, in some ways, a collection of related ideas, and that they need rigorous protection if they are to survive. To *almost* quote Churchill 'democracy [or liberalism in this case] is the worst form of government, except for all the other ones.' For liberalism, and liberal internationalism to survive, Ikenberry argues that the theoretical approach needs to be reconsidered, strengthened by critical evaluation and rediscovered in many ways. The lazy assumption that totalitarianism, or excessive nationalism, were relics of the past, has already cost nations such as the US and the UK dear and will continue to do so unless we as a society think carefully about the values we cherish and how they fit together within our global world. Without formal Empires and the forceful introduction of a form of liberalism which favours the few and not the many, how can that collective conversation take place and decisions be made? Answers on a postcard.

The book itself is very well written and very well researched. It takes a scholar with considerable skill to write so insightfully on such a long period of time with such variety of actors and events. It certainly isn't a book you can casually read on a rainy Sunday. You will need to give this book your full attention, as the argument is complex and compelling. It is very much a book 'of its time' and the author has clearly anticipated the threat to liberalism which we are currently experiencing. Ikenberry's argue is fairly simple – if nations such as Russia and China, whose politicians treat liberalism as a danger to their very survival, succeed and prosper in the international environment, it could sound the death knell for liberalism (p. 301). Why adopt such a difficult governing system if dictatorship or one-party rule will do just as well instead? He argues that societies which value liberalism must work together to ensure its survival, as alone they cannot succeed (p. 307).

The message of Ikenberry is unsettling but not unexpected – it is vital to fight for the political values that you hold dear and that requires an appreciation that the current systems of government may not work for everyone. Liberal internationalism's champions must ensure that nations work together to protect liberalism, but that it also widens its focus and benefits more than the chosen few. How exactly that is to be done is not entirely clear.