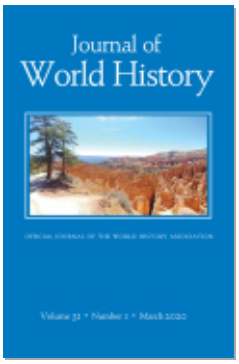
Liberal and Illiberal Internationalisms

Philippa Hetherington, Glenda Sluga



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Liberal and Illiberal Internationalisms

PHILIPPA HETHERINGTON
University College London
GLENDA SLUGA
University of Sydney

The twenty-first century is awash with diagnoses of the end of liberal internationalism.[1] In both popular and academic manifestations, declarations of liberal internationalism's 'crisis' tend to assume that the term has a stable meaning that it is clearly differentiated from illiberal internationalist variants. The aim of this special issue of the *Journal of World History* is to interrogate this assumption. We argue that a historical view of internationalism highlights the interrelation between and the mutual dependence of liberal and illiberal internationalisms since 1880. Taken together, the essays collected here position the politics of internationalism at the centre of a new historiography that rejects an axiomatic relationship between the liberal and the international. They do not aim at an additive history, demonstrating how socialists, or fascists, or evangelical Christians were *also* internationalists. This is well-known.[2]

[1] Edward Luce, *The Retreat of Western Liberalism* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2017); David Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics* (New York: C. Hurst & Co, 2017); John Lloyd, 'The New Illiberal International', *New Statesman*, 18 July 2018, accessed online via https://www.newstatesman.com/world/2018/07/new-illiberal-international.

[2] There is a rich and burgeoning literature on fascist, socialist and religious internationalism; see for example Abigail Green, 'Religious Internationalism', Madeleine Herren, 'Fascist Internationalism' and Patrizia Dogliani, 'The Fate of Socialist Internationalism', all in Glenda Sluga and Patricia Clavin, *Internationalisms: A Twentieth Century History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 17–37, 191–212 and 38–60; Arnd Bauerkämper and Grzegorz Rossolinski-Liebe, eds., *Fascism without Borders: Transnational Connections and Cooperation between Movements and Regimes in Europe from 1918 to 1945* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017); Jens Steffek, 'Fascist Internationalism', *Millennium* 44, no. 1 (2015): 3–22; Abigail Green and Vincent Viaene, eds., *Religious Internationals in the Modern World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Vincent Viaene, 'International History, Religious History, Catholic History: Perspectives for Cross-Fertilization (1830–1914)', *European History Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (2008): 578–607; Talbot C. Imlay, *The Practice of Socialist Internationalism: European Socialists and International Politics, 1914–1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Quinn Slobodian, ed., *Comrades of Color: East Germany in the Cold War World* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015).

Journal of World History, Vol. 31, No. 1

Rather, they seek to rethink how liberal and illiberal cooperated, co-mingled and co-produced one another on an international plane.

By probing the relationship between liberal and illiberal internationalisms, this special issue places the political attributes of internationalisms under an historical microscope that is more 'in the world', arguing that ideological debates look different if viewed from Lagos as well as London. The essays gathered here show how, over a century, international ideas and institutions worked their way through the nuanced global landscapes of war and peace. The special issue extends across a world that begins in the religious casting of international thinking in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Western Europe and the Middle East, travels through the technocratic idealism of interwar Geneva and Paris, examines ideologically-inflected 'scientific' humanitarianism directed at Cold War Yugoslavia, and ends with actors from India and Iran remaking the United Nations (UN). The essays gathered here emphasise the changing historical significance of internationalist thought by mingling views from Paris, Geneva and New York with Skopje, Tehran and Kabul.

Taken together, these essays constitute a call to rethink the diverse ways in which the liberal character of internationalism was historically an open question. Some essays restore internationalism to discussions of the nature of liberalism. Others bring *into question* any default characterisation of internationalism *as* liberal by deploying social, political, cultural and intellectual approaches to the study of the international past. Most importantly, perhaps, the essays collected here interrogate the points of internationalism's ideological liminality, the moments of intersection of liberal and illiberal politics and policies in the modern era. Rather than move between distinctively liberal and socialist internationalisms, the essays posit much more fluid and problematic renderings of internationalism as *one* manifestation of the shifting spectrum of liberal and illiberal politics through the modern era.

Across the seven essays, there are three axes of analysis that allow for this interrogation of the categories of liberal and illiberal: religion and internationalism (Abigail Green and Tim Nunan), technocratic and expert internationalism (Phillip Wagner, Dave Petruccelli and Ljubica Spaskovska), and the ideological underpinnings of international organisations and internationalist thinking (Alanna O'Malley and David Goodman). For the rest of this introduction, we will introduce each theme in turn, noting how the articles contained herein extend our understanding of illiberalism, liberalism and internationalism.

Religion

Recently, a number of historians have drawn on Talal Asad's famous insistence that 'the concept of the secular cannot do without the idea of religion' to explore the religious underpinnings of twentieth century modernity.[3] Such studies necessarily implicate forms of self-consciously 'secular' liberalism that claim an origin in the Enlightenment, and that supposedly infused internationalism since at least 1880. One way in which the essays assembled here engage the literature on internationalism is by investigating the role of religion in the 'liberal' world order. Whereas much literature on modernity's religious underpinnings has focused on Christianity, Abigail Green's and Timothy Nunan's contributions examine Judaism and Islam, looking at the possibilities and limits religious organising presented for those wishing to act on an international plane. They pose a number of central questions: How has religion historically been included or excluded from 'liberal' internationalism? Have certain religions been framed as being more compatible with the liberal internationalist system than others? What role does chronology play in our analyses of religious internationalism? And were religion and internationalism more complementary at the *fin-de-siècle* as opposed to the 1980s?

Green's study 'Liberals, Socialists, Internationalists, Jews' interrogates the history of internationalism as a means of simultaneously exploring the limits of liberal and illiberal as political categories at the turn of the twentieth century. She investigates just how different international and national politics look when we capture political ideas and practices at the level of individual lives. Her individuals are the French Victor Basch, who was a founder member of the *Ligue des Droits de l'Homme*; Paul Nathan, the German political journalist-founder of the *Deutsche Demokratische Partei*; and the British New Liberal Herbert Samuel. The careers of these men and their various socialist, masonic, liberal and pacifist networks cut across the most significant episodes in the conventional history of 'internationalism'. Green juggles their religious and political identifications, challenging any 'easy ideological categorisation'. Focusing on their diverse engagements with Jewishness, she shows how their lives cut across 'liberal/socialist, religious/

[3] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 200. See also James Chappel, *Catholic Modern: The Challenge of Totalitarianism and the Remaking of the Church* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018); Joan Scott, *Sex and Secularism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

secular and national/international boundaries'. In this history neither religion nor politics keep to their conventionalised conceptual borders: Jewishness and secularism worked together, while internationalist ideas allowed for the incorporation of a discourse of Jewish nationhood that spoke to socialists as well as some liberals. Religion was the site at which the boundaries separating liberal and illiberal were often contested. Jewish activists could be nationalists and internationalists all at the same time; the national, imperial and international were mutually constitutive. Ultimately, Green underscores the difficulty and value of biography, of investigating individual negotiations of the politics of categorisation as critical dimensions of how we understand the past, and the unpredictable politics of internationalism. The challenge she puts to the historian is precisely how to accommodate 'the contradictions within individuals, as well as between different levels of politics' in our broad-brush reliance on the concepts liberalism and internationalism.

In his article on Islamic internationalism in the 1980s, Nunan brings together two political contexts often kept separate: Iranian Islamism and liberal internationalism. As he demonstrates, Iranian Islamists were deeply conscious, albeit harshly critical, of the universal claims of organisations such as the UN in the period after the 1979 Revolution, and they attempted to engage the UN as part of their struggle for recognition. On the one hand, intellectuals associated with the 1979 Revolution called for a global Islamic movement that was internationalist (if not universalist). They were self-consciously non-national, as the brotherhood of the faithful extended beyond national borders and raised spiritual above temporal authority. On the other hand, 1980s Islamists combined their global vision with a vigorous critique of the inadequacies of both liberal and socialist internationalism, particularly in the context of the expanding reach of global financial capital. This critique filled the pages of the periodical *Habl ul-Allah*, a Persian-language journal distributed among *mujahideen* in Afghanistan. As Nunan delineates, the Islamist critique of liberal internationalism contained in *Habl ul-Allah* actually necessitated a consistent engagement with liberalism. Just as organisations like the UN positioned themselves against the supposedly regressive goals of pan-Islamism, Iranian internationalists defined their vision of a global community through their engagement with the UN. Nunan thus emphasises the interdependent nature of religious and secular as well as liberal and illiberal visions in the late twentieth century, taking all four terms as contested political terrain.

Technocracy and Expertise

Just as secular internationalism was historically constituted through a supposed opposition to the religious, so too 'technocratic' internationalism has often been invoked as a politically neutral alternative to liberalism. Time and again, international actors engaged in technocratic work have framed expertise as non-political intervention in the international sphere. This mentality can be observed, for example, in the 'sans-frontièriste' movement represented by *Médecins Sans Frontières* that emerged in the early 1970s as an alternative to the overtly political internationalism of the revolutionary left.[4] However, simultaneous with an assertion of political neutrality, liberal internationalists have often tried to affirm technocratic internationalism as their own. Given liberalism's historic claim to represent the application of 'rational' ideals to the political realm, this is perhaps unsurprising. As Phillip Wagner demonstrates in his contribution to this issue, a number of liberal internationalists in the interwar period proffered the tautological argument that the rational application of science was both apolitical and inherently liberal. Thus, their assertion of certain liberal principles was supposedly based not on ideology but on empirical fact (a position recognisable in neoclassical economics today). This is not to say that illiberal international technocrats were absent; indeed, in Soviet and Nazi iterations in particular they abounded in the interwar period. However, the insistence on apoliticism was largely absent from illiberal claims to authority. The very notion of expert internationalism as above or 'outside of' politics was an ideological construction articulated by liberal technocrats themselves.

While the liberal gloss on the technocratic international may now appear self-evidently political, it is significant that many individual actors involved in technocratic work over the course of the twentieth century *thought* they were doing something different. The articles on expert internationalism in this issue explore the apolitical politics of expert internationalism by asking the following: Was technocratic internationalism historically more 'flexible' than other forms of internationalism? If so, what was the relationship between liberal and technocratic internationalism? How do we understand the relationship

[4] Eleanor Davey, *Idealism Beyond Borders: The French Revolutionary Left and the Rise of Humanitarianism, 1954–1988* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Jessica Whyte, 'Powerless Companions or Fellow Travellers? Human Rights and the Neoliberal Assault on Post-Colonial Economic Justice', *Radical Philosophy* 2, no. 02 (2018): 13–29.

between the 'political' work of International Organisations and their 'technocratic' wings?

By focusing on the interwar International Federation for Housing and Town Planning (IFHTP), Phillip Wagner's article provides an apt case study for the political fluctuations of technocratic internationalism. As he demonstrates, self-declared liberals, socialists and National Socialists were equally adept at appropriating the IFHTP for their own goals. The main difference between them was that, while socialists and National Socialists alike were open about their political motivations, the 'liberalism' in liberal internationalism was framed as apolitical, a fiction that allowed its adherents to define the work of town planning against the threat of urban Bolshevism. Whereas socialist town planners involved in the IFHTP strove to remake the city around communal and non-hierarchical ideals, liberals such as Charles Purdom argued that town planning must utilise the resources of the existing building economy. In their eagerness to exclude socialist calls for a nationalisation of the building economy, Wagner argues that these figures opened a space for the gradual takeover of the IFHTP by National Socialist planners in the 1930s. This illiberal evolution was arguably produced by the aporia at the heart of liberal universalism.

In his contribution to this issue, David Petruccelli takes as his starting-point E. H. Carr's (in)famous critique of interwar liberal internationalism in *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, in order to call for a reassessment of the political valences of the League of Nations itself. Petruccelli argues that, while the League may have 'failed', it was not necessarily a failure of liberal internationalism, as the League represented the embrace of ideologically flexible approaches to international cooperation that included avowedly illiberal practices. This flexible approach has previously been missed because it was most evident in the technocratic, rather than the overtly 'political', work of the League. Technical work included the actions of the League's criminologists, who were concerned with formulating transnational criminal sanctions on trafficking in women, drugs and weapons, and who constitute Petruccelli's case study. By demonstrating the increasing influence of 'illiberal' calls for the expansion of police powers over individuals amongst the jurists and criminologists associated with the League as the 1920s turned into the 1930s, Petruccelli argues for a wide-ranging reconsideration of the relative liberalism of one of twentieth century internationalism's most emblematic institutions.

Moving beyond 1945, Ljubica Spaskovska's article addresses the legacies of a technocratic internationalism lived in the Cold War context of the 1963 earthquake that struck the southern Yugoslav city

of Skopje. As Spaskovska shows, at this critical moment in environmental history, communist (non-aligned) Yugoslavia became an important site of cultural engagement, and internationalist 'humanitarianism' became a space for conceptualizing political cooperation across liberal and illiberal ideological divides and characterisations. Her investigation fills out our knowledge of how, in the 1950s and 1960s, innovative conceptions of urban planning and architecture, and cultural forms, constituted important dimensions of institutionalised internationalism valued across Cold War borders as contributions to humanitarianism. The Yugoslav story draws our attention to the extent of international networks of technical and cultural expertise across socialist and liberal states, across western and eastern Europe – and the importance of context and networks across liberal/illiberal ideological divides as crucial dimensions of twentieth century internationalism.

Ideological Underpinnings of International Organisations

How should we think of the iconic international organisations – the League of Nations and the United Nations – in this story? Both are the regular subjects of critique not only for their shortcomings in terms of efficiency and effectiveness, but also for more fundamental links to the history of empires and decolonisation, for their illiberal origins and the practices that pursued their standing as instruments of liberal internationalism.[5] But as David Goodman and Alanna O'Malley's essays show, there was much more ideological depth to the significance of their operations.

Goodman takes as his case study the League of Nation's Covenant on Censorship, probing how that interwar inter-governmental body became a critical forum for thinking through questions of individual freedoms and their protections. Goodman's parsing of the twists and turns of debate around the League's covenant makes clear that what could be conceived on one view as liberal, could also have crucial illiberal implications, depending on contexts and actors and

[5] See for example the now standard works, Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea, 1815 to the Present* (London: Penguin, 2012), Susan Pedersen, *The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), and Glenda Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), as well as the projects emanating from the Socialism goes Global project, based at the University of Exeter.

interpretations. Limiting 'free speech' to protect the rights of individuals, or to inhibit the influence of racist or exclusivist politics easily became the source of arguments for limiting freedoms, a practice that was in turn cast as illiberal.

O'Malley's essay picks up the liberal/illiberal theme in the second half of the twentieth century, with her examination of the UN as a forum that enabled the global attack against apartheid in South Africa. O'Malley reveals the difficult status of 'liberal' in the conceptualisation of an international order built on the foundations of nation-states and their intergovernmental institutions, and the international legal infrastructures that reflected the enduring influence and biases of Western empires, even after they had been dismantled. As ostensibly liberal democratic Western states either openly or implicitly supported racial segregation and colonialism, it was the 'Global South' states – particularly India – that forced a confrontation of the persistence of empire in the international and national institutions they had invented, and that led the move towards a more egalitarian and emancipatory post-colonial liberal internationalist order. O'Malley's account of the rise of the 'Global South' at the UN, contrasted with Goodman's study of the League's experiment with the censorship of illiberal politics, once more suggests the importance of geopolitical context – or scale – in deciding these conceptual and historical questions.

A Wider International, Global World

The essays collected in this issue share an impulse to restore the study of international ideas, organisations and practices to the history of modernity – without assuming we understand how those forms of internationalism were legitimated, used, or their consequences. Instead, their authors argue for an expansion of our assumptions of the limits of national and global histories, for adding the international as a default category of the modern past and as a necessary focus for understanding the difference of our present. They also underscore the extent to which it is impossible to reduce that history to any simple story of the illiberal character of liberalism.

We are grateful to the *Journal of World History* for giving us this forum to take a broader geopolitical perspective and a longer historical view of the history of internationalism and its sometimes ambiguous, multiple and multi-layered politics. In probing the Mobius strip-like

interaction between apparently oppositional understandings of the relationship between the state, the individual and the international sphere, this special issue will have done its job if it helps us to deconstruct historiographical assumptions regarding the stability of both 'liberal' and 'illiberal' as modifiers when referring to internationalism.