The constitution of “liberalism” in the twentieth century international thought: the burden of being opposed to reality in the discipline of International Relations

Frederico Seixas Dias

In the lexicon of international politics, the concept of “liberalism” has acquired a very peculiar meaning through the twentieth century, one that almost seems to be in contradiction with the significance of the concept in other main areas of study and practice, such as economy or domestic politics. If in those areas “liberalism” is often associated with orthodoxy, progress, order, equilibrium, empirics, and so on, in the newborn discipline of International Relations (IR) liberalism was deeply associated with the lack of a realistic sense, with irresponsibility, wishful thinking, bigotry, pre-scientific standpoint, sometimes just naivety itself, but most of the times, treachery with hidden interests. For sure, liberal-inspired approaches to the international questions were never the only targets of those self-proclaimed realists of the interwar years who consolidated the discipline in the United States. Socialists, jingoists, and even were accused of mismanaging international affairs after the Great War, paving the way to an even deadlier conflict two decades later.

Though that semantical content, it can easily be argued, has been surpassed with the refinement of liberal approaches to international relations, relocating the idealist lot – which clearly has remained – to other newer, more radical trends, the language of foreign policy debates still has in the division between realism vs idealism, the most comprehensive, effective, and explicit political rhetoric, not only in the US but in many other Western, and even non-Western countries.

The semantic structure made up by the asymmetrical counterconceptual relation between realism and idealism well fit Gallie’s notion of contested concepts. Who are the idealists, anyway? Conceptual history shows that idealism has once been a dear concept, one that could really empower the political agent. Constructed as a negative conception, now one is expected to try to evade the label. But how much is the concept of idealism still referring to liberal perspectives on international politics today?

After a brief review of liberalism history in the Anglo-Saxon political thought, led by new approaches to the theme, the paper addresses liberal internationalism development in the discipline
of International Relations to check how much the concept is still linked with an idealist posture to world politics and identifies some strategies to overcome its pejorative status in the field.

“Liberalism” history and status in political thought: new insights from the recent literature

If one should want a political concept to study, one in which the most expressing features of this phenomenon, according to a hermeneutic, historical and critical approach, an undoubtedly very impressive candidate for his project is “liberalism”. In general, it is widely affirmed as the “constitutive ideology of the West”, or the hegemonic idea of that civilization. And rightly because of that, the claim of being liberal, the demonstration and acknowledgement of one’s political thought or actions consistency with the idea, may be the basic disputed identity in intellectual and political life in modern Western societies. For that, its meaning is commonly taken as given, leading to the apparent triviality of conceptualizing it. For the same reason, the disputed claim of being the most consistent representative of liberalism, there is a great variation of adjectives associated to it, threatening the concept usefulness for the seriously and responsibly thinking about and acting in political life. As the studies in the history of ideas have shown, the concept is contested through a multitude of political dimensions. By novelty – ancient, modern, classical, neoclassical, new, neo, post –, region – European, Atlantic, British, French, American, Brazilian –, by the result of association with old rival ideologies – liberal conservatism, social liberalism, etc. Therefore, it may sound not very encouraging to engage in a study which the most obvious starting question to answer, in this case “what is liberalism?”, may never have be satisfactory achieved.

This is not to imply that satisfactory concepts should be free of contest, not even in the natural sciences. Concepts are always subjected to controversy. Still, most of these contentions are resolvable by elucidative rational arguments, new proposals of meaning, or even by the agreement on the very necessity of contention as characteristic of a concept. However, there can be found another kind of concepts – also in political philosophy – towards which distinct groups disagree on the proper meaning and use, and even with the efforts to resolve the disputes, each party still maintain that its interpretation is the only coherent one, even against arguments and evidence that, in the absence of their singularity, one would considers persuasive. Gallie (1956) has proposed the notion of “essentially contested concepts” to this condition, and it could well fit into “liberalism”, a concept which its relevance is shown by the disputes over its basic meanings, and applications, while these contentions takes place within some shared fundamentals of the concept which makes advancement possible, while not ending the dispute over the essence of it. Therefore, any contextual study of this kind of political concept should deal with contest itself, not with the search for
canonical principles and authors. However, accounts of liberalism often portray it as if they were uncontentious, leaving many distinct interpretations behind, ignoring that rival formations of liberalism usually are found clashing their visions in the same political issues (FREEDEN; STEARS, 2013).

At the same time, the work on the history of political thought has, from different heritages, remembering investigators not to be limited to the construction of the concept by scholars and intellectuals, but should also focus on leaders, politicians, and institutions, incorporating the discursive and non-discursive elements of the process of meaning attribution in social life. In other words, the idea not as a pure abstract epistemological phenomenon, but its real occurrence in historical contexts. In this sense, two recent contributions to the history of liberalism seem to be a good departure for the specific development of the idea in the twentieth century global/American academic discipline of IR, and later, the brief study on the meanings carried today by politicians and political analysts when referring to liberal internationalist positions in the current American race for the presidential election later this year. Edmund Fawcett’s *Liberalism: the life of an idea*, though not a strict scholarly study, is no less serious and instigating, and maybe precisely for that, very refreshingly free of some vices committed in the historical study of ideas. The other contribution comes from an article published by Duncan Bell, *What is liberalism?*, in which Bell offers a very innovative way of dealing with the complex history of such a contested concept.

In order to carry his ambitious study, Fawcett (2015) has not only included the traditional key figures of thought, but also players of the political scene. He starts from the struggle to define liberal tradition, even if it must be in a wide form, but trying to clearly set its borders, the very borders of his study. He then suggests that the four core principles: the perennial conflict of interests, the resistance against excessive power concentration, the belief in human and social progress, and the respect for everyone else’s individuality, privacy, and property. It is more than liberty, therefore. All of its historical competitors – conservatism and socialism in the nineteenth century, fascism and communism in the twentieth – and its contemporary rivals – “competitive authoritarianism, national populism, and Islamic theocracy” (FAWCETT, 2015: xiv) –, somehow (have) seemed to defend liberty, at least in their own understanding of it. Those four ideas together represent their singular search for neologisms to deal with contradiction of their ideals of individual

---

1 The term “global/American IR” is used throughout the text to explicitly emphasize the influence or dominance of that national academic setting over other ones worldwide. John Jacobsen refers to the “American – virtually synonymous with ‘mainstream’ – international relations.” (Jacobsen 2003: 40).
The first appearance of the term as a political ideology happens around the beginning of the nineteenth century, advocating reforms to set a new status quo, leaving absolutism and despotism behind, but without falling into radicalism or collectivism. Proto-liberal ideational sources can be traced back to early modern times in Europe, in the fight against absolutism, but also to much older republican traditions in Rome and democratic ones in Ancient Greece. Many of its contemporary themes were developed in these pre-nineteenth century experiences, such as the individual freedom, resistance to abuses of power, the rule of law, social equality, rationality, universality, nationalism, and even imperialism (generally hidden as a *mission civilizatrice*). But, as liberalism became a self-consciously family of resemblant arguments about social order as an emancipatory project only in the nineteenth century. Fawcett asserts that those so commonly cited father figures of liberalism – Smith, Hume, and Kant – can only be taken account as inspirations to what is defined by the concept. They were surely dealing with the importance of liberty, in some of its specific arguments, but they could not experience, nor imagine, the revolutionary, ever-shifting world that would arise in the nineteenth century North Atlantic societies, exactly the context that helps explaining the meaningfulness of liberalism as a historical concept. Therefore, as a political project encompassing those four core principles, liberalism can be clearly identified from the 1830’s to the 1880’s when, amidst the industrial boom and the victorious revolutions in the US, Netherlands and France, liberals rose to power in successful results in implementing first constitutional rights, and then economic freedom. Since then, liberalism matured in a second phase, until 1945, when it definitely compromised itself with democracy, liberals sought to create a transhistorical tradition, linking their intellectual traits not only to the fifteen hundreds, but also to the inspirations of Greeks and Romans in antiquity.

In fact, Fawcett (2014) shows how this process of tradition creation was important to liberals. Creating tradition by “unveiling” a genealogy of liberalism in the European past, Fawcett argues, was an essential rhetorical move in the political struggle against conservatism and its sympathetics, while socialists were attracted by liberals acknowledgement of conflict and power and their management as crucial to advancing social progress (though not through revolution, but reform). In the end, liberals stood in between conservatives and socialists as potential allies. This contradictory forces encompassed by the ideology were represented by nineteenth century liberals who confronted the contributions they would bring from their chosen heritage. Therefore, for example, Bentham’s understanding of the need of state action in the name of public interest against
Smith’s plea for minimum state interference in individuals’ economic freedom. Meanwhile, from the end of the eighteen hundreds, capitalists would support the intense rise in state budgets, while workers were improving their syndical organizations pressing for better wealth distribution in society. “New liberalism” was a British solution towards the reconciliation of the clash of those classic liberal contributions while New Deal and the latter embedded liberalism in the international economic postwar order are American counterparts (FAWCETT, 2014; RUGGIE, 1982).

Bell (2014) argues that tradition invention was a fundamental move in the consolidation and then predominance of liberalism as the constitutive ideology of the West. Since the early nineties, references were already being made by liberal pioneers to their assumed inspirational fathers of thought. However, the move becomes definitive in the wider context of the great transition of the world academic epicenter from Britain to the United States. That is when Locke, the most consensual liberal original thinker today, got into this tradition. The eighteen hundreds politically successful liberals would hardly mention Locke at all. But from the end of that century, liberalism was suffering tough sustained critiques for not being able anymore to offer a stable basis for national and international economic and political order. Especially in the face of the great depression of the 1930s and the surge of totalitarian alternatives in Europe, threatened liberals started to construct a narrative of their tradition which would push their origins to the early modernity and throughout the Western world, a narrative of continuity and agreement along different intellectual contributions that made liberalism the very identity of their civilization, “the metacategory of Western political discourse” (BELL, 2014: 683).

Beyond the work on political theory and economics, the newly founded American discipline of the History of ideas, for which academic émigrés running away from totalitarianisms and World Wars in Europe were greatly responsible, was also a fortress of the hegemonic project of liberalism. The challenged faced then was not a small one: the liberal singularity for the concept of democracy was hotly contested by the own versions of democracy offered by Nazis, Fascists, and Soviets. The new discipline found in Locke the protective founding father liberals needed to engage in this global dispute over the meaning of democracy. It quickly gained terrain in American culture and education – and Bell does not hide the governmental interest in it through the secret CIA funding of the Journal of the History of Ideas –, transfiguring liberalism from a specific, questioned political position to the major trait of their Western civilization. With this hegemonic status, most contemporaries who identified themselves with rival political ideologies seem to have been incorporated into the liberal creed. As he argues, “the scope of the tradition has expanded to encompass the vast majority of political positions regarded as legitimate” (BELL, 2014: 689). But
Bell is not offering a whig history of liberalism, and we should remember the contested nature of the ideology remains. If liberalism was again celebrated for confronting (and finally defeating) the Soviet communism in the second half of the twentieth century, we must be remembered that it has also into skepticism and instability in the contemporary period, in front of the planetary challenges of today, such as the pervasive instability of the economic order, radicalism and terrorism, global warming, the migration ever-growing crisis, and the horrifying wealth inequalities among individuals around the world (FAWCETT, 2015).

From a perspective of combative concepts, such as Koselleck’s *begriffsgeschichte* (2004), one must face this liberal hegemonic project simply as the very nature of political concepts: not only indicators of social relations they are supposed to describe and explain, but as constitutive forces behind their relations. Locke, then, more than “found” as a liberal founding father, must be read as an enlisted combatant in that grievance. In other words, Foucault (1981) would say that, before being an instrument of description, translating political conflict, discourse is the object of political desire itself. In the form of common-sense, is the ultimate form of power to be seized (SMITH, 1996). The tendency in the historical study of ideas of creating traditions is a central part of this project, and it has received general critique, in this recent trend of the history of political thought. Bell has the strongest arguments available to repeal this kind of work. Though it is comprehensible from a theory construction perspective, this movement must be denounced for it unbalances the ideological disputes in society, even in the academic setting. The innovative approach to the history of political thought Bell offers allow us to detour from this common mistake. In his conceptualization of liberalism, he searches for “the sum of the arguments that have been classified as liberal, and recognised as such by other self-proclaimed liberals, across time and space” (BELL, 2014: 685).

This should be the best approach if one is to comprehend liberalism as a historical instance, with all the variety and contradictions it incorporated along contingencies of times and places. Some – and that include both admires and denouncers of liberalism – prefer to ignore this situation and simply write a consistent history of a continuously coherent set of liberal ideas through history. Others engage with “boundary work”, trying to define what is and what is not liberalism, leading to the abstraction of liberalism from its real demands of everyday political practice. There are those who prefer to work with individual writers, reducing liberalism to the personal understanding of certain authors. Others still, work with stories of rise or decline of liberal societies, what obviously tends to be explained by their own ideological preferences on the subject. Bell underscores his contribution to the contextualist tradition, which prefers to define an idea by its real use in particular
moments of history, considering not only the contingencies that sets possibilities and limits for meaningful ideological expressions, but also the idiosyncrasies of the authors’ intentions in their messages. It would, for example, exclude the richness of the recent studies in the history of political thought that point to the apologetical behavior of liberals towards their own countries imperialism.

Following the work of Pocock, Skinner, Tully, and others (Bell study is explicitly aware of its restriction to the Anglo-Saxon world), Michael Freeden, Bell argues, was an innovation in intellectual history of liberalism. He proposed to investigate it by focusing on those who called themselves liberals and those who were called as such. This anti-essentialist approach allowed him to understand the plasticity of the idea, but it was still compromised with identifying some pattern in it, locking him into boundary setting again. Bell argues that the explanatory and prescriptive objectives of a study in ideas – despite having their own utility – blur the comprehensive quality of such a job. “A comprehensive contextualist analysis of liberalism should provide a framework for grasping the diverse ways in which liberal languages emerge, evolve, and come into conflict with one another, rather than trying to distill an ahistorical set of liberal commitments from conceptual or canonical investigation.” (BELL, 2014: 689). Adjusting Freeden’s proposal, Bell indicates, leads to a fruitful interpretive strategy he called the summative approach. But that cannot mean to sum up all who called themselves liberals, or all those who were called this way. That would exclude those who, though assuming their liberal position, were denied the label by defenders of other variants of liberalism, or even include those who did not identify with it, but who the critics would pejoratively charge as expressions of liberalism. Therefore Bell’s summative approach would only include those who were called liberals by those who already called themselves liberals, and not only sparsely, but those called as such over a single generation. This could threat the political analytical utility of the concept of liberalism, but it would certainly be more apt to capture all the polissemical contest in its history.

This approach would then satisfy the condition of an essential contest defined by Gallie, a struggle that is not resolvable by any kind of argument or evidence: “these mutually contesting, mutually contested uses of the concept, making up together its standard general use.” (GALLIE, 1956: 169). Liberalism seems to fit well the different criteria proposed by Gallie (1956) to identify an example of a contested concept. First, it deals with a valued achievement, such as the dynamic order preserving and fueling individuality all over society. Surely, a political system that reflects such achievement has a complex character, involving precise economic, political, and cultural institutions, very well designed and functional electoral systems, judicial instances, active and accountable private actors like banks, firms, unions, and the list would be very long yet. Though,
the liberal achievement is of a holistic nature, never being the satisfaction of any list of singular pieces of it. This would be the second trait of an essentially contested concept. The third, is that its worth may be explained by the value of its compounding parts. So, liberalism could be appraised by any of its different characteristics: freedom for the individual, general political participation, guarantee of private property, and equality of opportunity for all. Openness, the next trait of an essentially contested concept, must be taken as the very basic historical condition which defines liberals: the search for a new, dynamic, order in which individual fundamental rights would be guaranteed. The historical challenge of liberalism, urges it be open to new understandings under new contexts. The contemporary debate between the defenders of representative democracy and the proposals of deliberative, participative democracy is a good exemplar. Gallie still adds two further conditions, very definitive for understanding contested concepts. First, a derivative, original exemplar enjoying authority by the contestants. This is surely the case with figures like Locke, Tocquevlille, and Mill, as intellectual cornerstones. But, standard empirical experiences are also available: the American revolution, the Industrial revolution, and so on. Finally, the continuous competition tends to be progressive – as long as contestants maintain the foundational exemplars of the concept, greater coherence in the use of the concept is possible of being achieved. For Gallie, it should not be a matter of perfectly checking the seven conditions, but the more a concept fits them, the more we can understand it as an essential contested one.

**Liberalism and its development in the academic discipline of International Relations**

Differently of what happens in the most relevant (Western) social sciences disciplines (or subdisciplines) – for example, political theory, political science (GUNNELL, 2001), or economics –, where “liberalism” holds a prominent place, if not a hegemonic one – the concept has traced a particularly difficult path in the discipline of International Relations. This is a very curious situation, if taken into account the fact that discipline has mainly evolved in two of the most consolidated liberal societies today, originally in the United Kingdom, but, also after World War II, mainly in the United States. Maybe it shouldn’t be so surprising, for the liberalism that constitutes those societies, a condition supported by most of the literature, is an effect of that very literature (GUNNELL, 2001: 126). But in IR, the same supposed liberal society has produced a field where liberalism is a deviation of the empirical facts a social science should be devoted to. Realism, the theory of power politics (and then power politics and reality are tacitly the same), is understood as the dominant theoretical approach to explain the relations between sovereign states and other relevant actors in
the world political scene, starting right from the patterns of American conduct in its international affairs. Of course, after Gunnell, one should immediately be thinking of the constitutive effects of the realist discourse over American foreign policy and international relations more broadly. Even more, the critique of methodological nationalism should also be brought in. The pervasive tendency found in the invention and consolidation of modern social sciences of delineating social phenomena inside the limits of national borders, be it because of ignorance, naturalization of a social construct, or national policies of territorial limitation (WIMMER; SCHILLER, 2002), may be responsible for a permissible situation where the liberal discourse for the domestic environment is a hegemonic form of explanation and prescription (even if it comes to happen with very ambiguous results from some liberal viewpoint), but no more than utopia, naïvety, or even conspiracy when it comes to world politics, where different, separated, autonomous political communities (even if there is plenty of liberal inspired international institutions, norms and rules all around).\textsuperscript{2}

Liberalism in world politics, international relations, or foreign affairs, both in political practice and academic study, has doubtlessly met the same definitional difficulties that makes it a essentially contested concept in political science, political theory or domestic politics. As an example, Bell (2015), writing for the Encyclopedia Britannica entry of “Liberal Internationalism”, has identified it with the belief on the possibility of international progress – taken as the tendency towards harmonious cooperation among states – from an efficient organization or reform of international system – its morality, law and institutions –, the regard of violence as a last resort, giving preference to diplomacy and multilateral politics, or even supranational integration. Michael Doyle and Stefano Recchia (2011) proposed that liberal internationalism as something more specific, that is, the attempt to promote the principles and institutions of liberal states – individual equality before the law and the guarantee of civic rights such as religion choice and free press, representative legislatures elected with popular voting, private property rights (including the means of production), and market economies, with minimum government intervention – to the international system, all of which would lead to peaceful relations among sovereign states.

The origins of liberal internationalism as an approach of the academic study of international politics is linked with the very foundation of the discipline in British and American universities from 1919 on. The year is not simple coincidence with the creation of the League of the Nations. International Relations courses and departments were mostly an initiative of diplomats who were there negotiating peace in the Conference of Paris, inspired by the fourteen points of Woodrow

\textsuperscript{2} For a fuller discussion of this inside/outside issue, see WALKER (2006).
Wilson, making way to “the American liberal tradition [to be] presented with a world event that allowed it to summon up its own views about war and the possibilities of peace” influencing generations of scholars later on (IKENBERRY, 2009: 207). The fact that these proposals could do little to save the western civilization from another, deadlier, total war, denounced liberal internationalism as a dangerous utopia to be avoided in the study and practice of international politics by one of IR theory most acknowledged foundational figures, Edward H. Carr (CARR, 1946). Of course, Carr included a variety of utopias for the blame of the twenty years’ crisis after the Great War besides liberals – socialists, labor party members, unionists, and other leftist organizations. Though their ideologies were pretty distinct, their similar views on the possibilities for peaceful progress in international politics – closer than they would prefer –, made legitimate to include all of them in a label that became generalized in the new discipline: idealism. Idealism was a concept built in opposition to the approach critics presented, self-labeled as “realism”, the view that international relations are driven almost exclusively by power politics, where ideals – be it liberal or socialist ones – serve only as a mask to hide the real interests of sovereign states in power and dominance over other political communities. The fact, most idealists attacked by those realists like Carr, Hans Morgenthau, Arnold Wolfers, John Herz, and others, were supporting liberal values and institutions to world politics, consolidated that undesirable adjective to liberals that served almost as a synonym to their approach (WILSON, 1999; ASHWORTH, 2002. COX, 2009 and SHILLIAM, 2007 have particularly shown Carr’s and Morgenthau’s engagement against idealism as a personal contend they had with previous “limited”, “backward” experiences of the “liberal” project in England and Germany, respectively). As Peter Wilson has argued (WILSON, 1999: 3-4):

Since many of the thinkers of the twenty years' crisis were unquestionably liberals this representation may not be an inaccurate one. Indeed it might be argued that Carr's critique was only rhetorically a critique of ‘utopianism’; in substance it was a critique of liberalism, especially nineteenth-century doctrines of laissez-faire. Arguably Carr labeled his liberal prey ‘utopian’ simply in order to further discredit them.

In this sense, I have argued before (DIAS, 2011) that the relation between the concepts of realism and idealism fall into the notion of asymmetrical counter-concepts advanced by Reinhart Koselleck (2004). These are characterized by a relation in which the terms used to express the identity of the self and other are unilaterally defined, i.e. they are not mutually acknowledged as the terms to be used in their relation. This is because “other” is pejoratively identified. “Self” monopolizes the meaning of the concept and excludes “other” from its qualities, what is linguistic equivalent to a violent deprivation. Before Carr, the critics to Wilson’s proposal for international
peace discredited it with adjectives that connect it to a utopian stance. Although, the completion of the semantic structure – the point when a term captures all the diverse elements of the political experience it refers – had to wait the contribution of IR theorists, mainly Carr, and its “importers” in the US, like Reinhold Niebuhr, Morgenthau, George Kennan, Arnold Wolfers and Walter Lippmann.

Concepts are not as much linked to a word as they are to the experiences they refer and constitute. That’s why the label varies: liberalism, utopianism, idealism. Still, it is interesting to notice that the positive side of the conceptual antithesis never varies, reinforcing the sense that it is really real, as opposed to the unrealistic others. That in fact is a violent privation of the group referred to as idealists to reason over their experience in the real world. Therefore, if in the 1910s the first appearances of the antithesis could be found under the terms of nationalism-internationalism, by the 1940s, as the stakes got higher and higher in the opposition between those strategies of balance of power politics and of community power politics, the equation of them with the opposition of realism-idealism offered by Carr may have shown incredible rhetorical effectiveness to the greater public. Not to call his opponents directly liberals was a form to detach it from the hegemony liberalism was then experiencing in political science and political theory, as the last section has asserted. At the same time, “idealism”, understood as an anti-realist position, could be understood as a completely unfit posture for the young science of international politics.

Idealism, then, was liberal internationalism. Liberal internationalism was not truthful to the reality it should be studying, more than resolving (BUZAN 2001). We must reinforce this conceptual formation of liberal internationalism as idealism detailing the great deal of themes – not necessarily consistent with one another, as liberalism itself is an essentially contested concept – targeted by the realists as utopias (WILSON, 1999: 7):

(E)spousal of world government; pacifism; assertion of the need for an international police force; belief in progress and the efficacy of the ‘world court of public opinion’; commitment to the League of Nations and collective security; appeasement; disarmament; emphasis on the need for a more comprehensive system of international law; distrust of traditional means and goals of statecraft (especially secret diplomacy and the balance of power); and confidence in the pacific propensities of growing interdependence. (...) Some contend the central claim of idealism is that war is a product of domestic political organization: dictatorships being inherently bellicose, democracies pacific. Others contend that a key feature is faith in the ability of international law and organization to preserve order and prevent war. Others still have emphasized the weight given to the role of reason in human affairs. According to this view, the central idealist assumption is that human beings are rational, intelligent,
creatures capable of recognizing the good and willing to implement it purely on the strength of its moral worth or intellectual merit.

Therefore, there can be no doubt of the historical burden imposed to liberals in that consolidating moment of IR. This is usually called by IR historians as the First Great Debate of the discipline, but many have shown that there was no real debate, for liberals wouldn’t accept the pejorative adjective associated with them, and did not feel as they had to answer those critics (WILSON, 1999; ASHWORTH, 2002). Being it a myth (in the sense of being a false description of that period) or not, the contraposition between realism and liberalism, by offering clear alternative worldviews on international politics, marks the most defining characteristic of the global/American IR, implicitly or explicitly setting the ring for all the other specific debates and research programmes (IKENBERRY, 2009). And the best indication that, however, liberals in this academic setting have felt the burden, is the intense efforts made by them to improve the liberal theory of international relations. And they have tried to do so in, basically, three ways: a) by arguing that liberal internationalism is by no way a naïve conception of world politics, explicitly or implicitly refusing the term idealism (and even liberalism in some cases!); b) by recurring to a supposedly longstanding tradition in international thought before them; and c) by trying to follow a “scientificist” path of theory modeling.

For the first strategy, Doyle (1986) offers a good example. He tries to show that the commonsense of the peaceful nature of liberal states in their foreign relations does not survive the empirical records. Some liberal states are definitely more involved in foreign wars than authoritarian ones. He proposes that the idea of liberal pacifism – where democratic capitalism would lead to peaceful relations comprised by rational domestic citizens avoiding warlike governments, and capitalists profiting from free trade – and that of republican liberalism – where republics master the accumulation of resources to engage in war to keep its citizens free from foreign oppression – could be pulled together in a synthesis of liberal internationalism to form a coherent theory of world politics to explain the pacification of foreign relations among liberal states and imprudence in the warlike activities against non-liberal countries. Another good example, now taken from my personal experience, comes from John Ikenberry. He has been arguing over the last decades after Cold War, that the chaos supposed by realists with the end of bipolarity would not make its way because of the liberal traits of an international open order which would cushion the fall of the Soviet empire (IKENBERRY, 1996). Later, with the concretization of China’s rise, he wrote on the same line of argument, the China would be absorbed into this liberal international order which, at first, made possible its growth towards a global power status (IKENBERRY, 2008).
In 2011, I had the chance to be the commentator of a lecture Ikenberry offered in Brasília, in the University I teach at. At the end of his exposition of why China’s rise won’t lead to a hegemonic war, contrary to the realist hypothesis, a first-year undergrad student of mine, learning the basics of the IR realist-idealist discourse, asked him: “Isn’t this view of yours an expression of idealism?” Ikenberry’s reaction was effusive, as he felt he needed to defend himself of such a denunciation, arguing that he could never be an idealist, for he was definitely considering the elements of power politics in his argument. Other examples are all around: Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye had continuously to point to the readers of *Power and Interdependence* in their preface, edition after edition (1977, 1985, 2001, 2012) that they were not liberals, as they were trying to push Morgenthau’s realism into the new phenomenon of complex interdependence, “although careless readers and commentators have sometimes interpreted *Power and Interdependence* in this way” (KEOHANE and NYE, 2001: xxiii). Keohane himself has explicitly argued that his is not a liberal theoretician of international relations (KEOHANE; MARTIN, 1995), though his main work dealt with the possibility of international institutions bring a stable international order in the absence of a hegemony imposing its own preferred rules (KEOHANE, 1984). In fact, Andrew Moravcsik (1997) has argued that neoliberal institutionalist (the label associated with Keohane’s theory), is not liberal at all, for it comes to close to a modified version of realist rational choice theory.

The second strategy was to appeal to a liberal tradition long constructed before IR liberals in the twentieth century. Bell and Fawcett, as shown in the first section of this work, argued that there can be no genuine historical liberalism before the early nineteenth century (but note that, in the “Liberal internationalism” entry in the Encyclopedia Britannica, Bell himself points uncritically, certainly for didactic purposes, to “John Bright and Richard Cobden, and philosophers, including John Stuart Mill and Herbert Spencer”). Doyle (1986) was recurring to Machiavelli and Kant to support his liberal internationalist synthesis. Moravcsik, too, in proposing his version of a liberal theory of world politics, argues that he is “drawing on a liberal tradition dating back to John Stuart Mill, Giuseppe Mazzini, and Woodrow Wilson” (MORAVCSIK, 1997). Doyle and Recchia (2011) expand the list to include Locke, Smith, Montesquieu, and Thomas Paine. As the work on the history of political thought has advanced, the invention of traditions has clearly become understood as a legitimation move of someone’s ideas, not having a historical value and are unfair to the writings of those pre-twentieth century writers. David Armitage noted that this situation was only possible because of the distance kept between the fields of Intellectual history and International Relations for more than fifty years since the consolidation of both fields (ARMITAGE, 2004). However, he himself noted the changing situation almost ten years later, noting that “International
thought now means less a body of authoritative doctrine to be deployed for present purposes than the past tense of international thinking as the activity of theoretical reflection upon international affairs. In this, it has paralleled the contextualist history of political thought as practised in the past fifty years.” (Armitage 2013: 26) Therefore, it is clear that inventors of traditions in IR have a very difficult time to support these connections to something more than occasional inspiration to contemporary analytical approaches. If one is to leave this presentist approach and acknowledge the history of political thought not as antiquarianism, research must be engaged with how these contemporary liberals are dealing with politics itself, the combat for meaning attribution to the reality, considering contexts, intentions, and intersubjective conceptual structures.

At last, liberal internationalists have engaged in constructing their theories in a more scientific fashion. Keohane (1984), as already noted, went down the way of turning institutionalist theory into a rational choice theory of egoistic states with common interests dealing with the challenge of cooperation amidst unequal distribution of power among them. Moravcsik (1997) noted that liberals in IR history have been labeled idealists for not having presented their theories in a rigorous social-scientifically way. His intervention proposed to do so by showing how the variation of domestic preferences in the context of interdependence set the stage for the validity of realism or institutionalism, becoming prior in causality than those theories. He took as desirable the overcoming liberalism as pure ideology of international relations to become a formal, positive theory of IR. The concern liberals have developed, carried by a major tendency of empiricism in American IR since the behavioral revolution of the 1950’s, has also been exposed by Jack Levy, arguing that the democratic peace thesis is “the closest thing we have to an empirical law in the study of international relations” (LEVY, 1989: 88). While liberal internationalists celebrate this move, critics, worried about the potential contribution o liberalism to IR, have contended that the concern with positivism in theory building and with rational choice models has made it less relevant to political action, for its theoretical-methodological strategy has drained out the philosophical resources to normative reflection about change in world politics, an essential trait of early liberals at the down of the nineteenth century monumental changes in political-economical order (REUS-SMIT, 2001).

Despite the critics, many liberals may have been satisfied with what they have achieved in the field. David Baldwin (1993) has argued that neorealism and neoliberalism have become, in the late eighties, the dominant approaches in IR, and their debate the most relevant, fruitful of the field, for the ontological, epistemological and methodological claims they shared. Ole Waever (1996) even indicated a rationalist synthesis between the two as the result of such a debate. Jack Snyder
(2004), updating the main theoretical divisions of IR in 2004, suggested that the main theories of the day would be realism, liberalism – the mainstream of the discipline – and the novice constructivist approach, which inherited the label of “idealism” in his approach. It is understandable that Snyder meant to say ideationalism, for the central importance ideas have in the social constitution of international relations to constructivists, not “idealism” as wishful thinking and action. But the use of the term “idealist” is very sensitive in a field where it has incorporated such a pejorative meaning to it. In this sense, Peter Wilson agrees that “(i)t might be contended that Carr's dialectic is still in operation” (WILSON, 1999: 1-2). In this sense, Snyder’s description of the field today as a divide between realism, liberalism, and idealism (constructivism) sounds more like “realist”, “not so realist”, “not realist at all”. Ikenberry, for his turn, seems to have his own celebration of the status reached by liberals in IR, for “Realism and liberalism as theories and strategies of foreign policy occupy centrestage together.” (IKENBERRY, 2009: 206). But “together” is a very strong word for the fact that in the end, liberals could never be accepted by realists as an effective theoretical alternative. At most, it is accepted as the best complementary approach of IR as an addendum to realism (MEARSHEIMER, 1994), nothing more than the residual hope of American image of self. Ikenberry would similarly assert – without being as critic as the argument here – that “In both cases— foreign policy and academic study—America in the twentieth century is defined by the repeated encounter of American liberal ideas with the tough and often unyielding realities of the wider world.” (IKENBERRY, 2009: 206).

Contemporary realists, like Henry Kissinger and John Mearsheimer, do understand that liberalism is, to the contrary of the discipline of IR, the dominant discourse in American foreign policy. However, American foreign policy record tends to confirm what realists theorize about universalizing ideologies being themselves one important form of power politics in foreign policies (KISSINGER, 1994; MEARSHEIMER, 2001). Anyways, it is clear that in the foreign policy community of the US this duality is even more present, marked, for example, by the large discussions around the classification of Obama’s foreign policy strategy. In thinking of the discursive coherence and connections between these two activities – IR and American foreign policies – it is useful to pick a leading scholar naturally analyzing Obama’s performance abroad through these poles: “Anne-Marie Slaughter, a professor of international affairs at Princeton and a Democrat, wrote in the liberal journal Democracy that an overreaction to the Bush years might
mean that ‘realists could again rule the day, embracing order and stability over ideology and values.’”

Conclusions

Due to the burden imposed to liberal internationalists in the discipline of IR – that of being insufficient realistic in the treat of the empirical facts of world politics – scholars developing this approach have become more and more similar to the nemesis they had to overcome. This movement of approximation with realism in IR may have turned liberal internationalism in less recognizable to liberals in other areas of study. Nevertheless, Bell has indicted that the transfiguration of liberalism, in its trajectory towards hegemony in Western societies, has made interpretation more challenging, for now liberals and conservatives share a common ideological basis, together in their antagonism to communism (BELL, 2014: 704). And it has not helped liberalism to be more useful to political critique and action – to the contrary, getting closer to realism and to abstract theory only made liberal internationalism less relevant. In the way it has been historically constructed, liberal internationalism, contrary to its original declared aims of progress, individual freedom and social equality, should then be seen as forming the core of a discipline where the claimed incapacity to play liberalism in the international scene is apologized by the realist “nature” of international politics. Or, in more sympathetic words, “realism provides the core intellectual para- meters and scholarly questions focused on the anarchy, power and statecraft. But liberalism provides the modernizing vision.” (IKENBERRY, 2009: 206)

Liberal internationalists should, then, loosen scientific ambitions of formalizing its theory to satisfy the popperian falsification principle, making it relevant for social scientific positivist standards but less useful to political thinking and action. Moreover, it should not neglect the ambiguities that make it a historical fact of individual engagements in the real world of politics,

---

such as its involvement with imperialist apologies (PITTS, 2005), turning liberal internationalism into a stage for the exposition of normative and practical concerns of global politics defined by a compromise with more inclusive purposes than the egotistical “realist” state would admit (DUNNE; McDONALD, 2013). Consequently, liberal internationalists have to escape the need to engage with realism in its own specific terms as if it was the credential for being relevant to IR. In this sense, the very idea of idealism, should have its worthiness reverted to signify something definitely more desirable. Koselleck (2004) had pointed that historically, thinkers associated with the negative side of an asymmetrical counter-conceptual semantic structure have tried to revert the asymmetry in their favor in the political battles they were fighting. Just as Ken Booth (1991) proposed the idea of an utopian realism, where power should be decentralized from states towards a global community of civil society communities, a worldview closer to medieval political organization than to a realist Westphalian one. As the idea he brings from Oscar Wilde, “A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not even worth glancing at.”

References


