

Book Review

A World Safe for Democracy: Liberal Internationalism and the Crises of Global Order by John Ikenberry. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020. 432 pages. ISBN: 9780300230987

In the evolution of liberal democracy since the late eighteenth century, its values and institutions have been entangled with capitalism, empire, hegemony, and racism. Yet although it has been compromised by its historical association with these forces, the matrix of liberal democracy and liberal internationalism has always shown a capability of being “disembedded” from such phenomena. This has been the source of its dynamism, which offers a better way of organizing relations within states and among states.

Disembeddedness can, however, never be complete, for the liberal democratic/liberal internationalist matrix cannot escape power relations. Liberal internationalism’s mix of universalist values and great power hegemony may be hypocritical, but it is the best we can hope. A world order based only on norms and institutions of liberty, justice, and equality would be utopian (xii–xiii, 6–12). This, in a nutshell, is the argument that John Ikenberry, a pillar of the liberal internationalist ideological establishment, advances in *A World Safe for Democracy*.

That liberal world order underpinned by American hegemony is now in crisis, and Ikenberry’s latest work seeks to unravel its sources, dynamics, and consequences.

The thirty-year period from 1991 to 2021 will long evoke puzzlement from historians and other analysts. Why did the liberal international order—that fused U.S. political/military hegemony with global capitalist supremacy under a canopy of multilateral institutions and triumphalist liberal ideology—descend from its moment of triumph with the collapse of the socialist bloc to Donald Trump’s

wrecking-ball attempt to smash it and embark on an America-First, unilateralist path?

One of the reasons was the loss of a restraining force on the United States, which the Soviet Union provided during the Cold War. This absence later encouraged Washington to its disastrous policy of forcing regime change, particularly in the Middle East. Ikenberry (257–58) mentions this but only in passing.

Another was the mistaken calculation that integrating China into the global economy would lead to prosperity, which in turn would ultimately transform Beijing into a partner in upholding the U.S.-led multilateral order and make it more liberal democratic in the American image (263–64).

A third was US capitalism's thirst for profitability. It was allowed to destroy the social contract assuring the subordinate classes of the United States and other countries in the West a degree of economic security. That is, it eroded what Ikenberry (282) calls the "social purposes" of liberal democracy and the liberal internationalist order. This contributed centrally to the Trumpian backlash against the liberal domestic and international underpinnings of the system.

Though Ikenberry acknowledges the deep contradiction between the racist undercurrents of the American liberal democratic order and its ideology of universal rights beyond color or creed, he does not appear to rate this as an important reason for the erosion of the liberal international order. The reality is, however, that more than class politics, it is white supremacy or Trumpism that is choking American democracy. If the center of the liberal universe cannot hold, the broader liberal international system will not either.

Disconcertingly, the book ends with a Fukuyaman leap of faith: that with all its problems, the liberal international order will survive. "The current political backlash is both inevitable and bound to fail," Ikenberry (285) writes. He then continues, "There is no escape. Liberal democracies will find themselves doing what they have always done in moments of crisis—searching for ways to reestablish and reinforce the political foundations for liberal capitalist democracy."

The problem with this perspective, like that of liberalism generally, is that it lacks reflexivity: the ability to see that the combination of unrestrained capitalism—that has become a massive threat to the planet and the informal racial civil war in the American center of the international liberal international system, where white supremacist forces have the upper hand—is the main force unraveling that very system. It fails to see that the solution is the transcendence of capitalism, which is now on a purely destructive path, and of the liberal capitalist political order, whose comprehensive failure has unleashed racist demons that have long yearned to be free of their flimsy constraints.

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