International Progress, International Order, and the Liberal International Order

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Abstract

Most explanations for the crisis of the liberal order revolve around geopolitics, globalization, economic resentment fueling new forms of populism and nationalism, and Western states following their interests away from liberal values and institutions of their creation. But international orders are produced and legitimated by both material and spiritual forces. The spirit in liberalism is moral progress defined by practices of humanity. If the Liberal International Order (LIO) is in decline, then perhaps we should consider its moral foundations. Section “Introduction” briefly introduces the question of international order, categorizes international relations theories according to the mixture of consent and coercion, and how legitimacy often refers not only to the existing order but a vision of progress. This is particularly true of the liberal international order. Section “International Order, Legitimacy, and Progress” turns to the liberal international order, progress, and the possible spiritual decline of the liberal international order. After briefly considering the liberal in international liberalism and the late 20th-century emergence of the liberal international order, I argue that one reason for its declining moral foundations is because of the pronounced individualism that resides at the heart of the contemporary international order. In other words, the sources of decline are not exogenous but rather part of liberalism. The Conclusion asks: what is next? The conjunction of the decline of the LIO and COVID-19 has complicated the debate about the future international order, and much of the conversation hinges on whether and how the United States can recover from its self-destructive tendencies and China’s intentions. But where is the spirit of moral progress and humanity in this discussion?

Introduction

The current global zeitgeist is that

things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and
everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned.¹

William Butler Yeats penned these words in 1919 in his classic “The Second Coming.” For Yeats, the center was both political and spiritual, and its unraveling was leading to an anarchy loosed on the world. In his second and final stanza, he reflected that the repair of the center would require both political and spiritual renewal, but dwelled on the paucity of the spiritual. If there was going to be a resurrection it would require a “second coming,” but all Yeats could imagine were rough beasts slouching toward Bethlehem. Yeats was not alone in his despair, for many poets, artists, intellectuals, and politicians during and following World War One shared his sense of desolation. Europe, which only a few years before, had been supremely confident in its civilizational superiority and belief in progress, was now engulfed by various forms of pessimism and fears of moral decline. Yeats could only see rough beasts on the horizon. He had no idea.

Compare the commentary unleashed by World War One with that accompanying the rumored decline of the LIO. Whereas the former debated the relationship between the material and the spiritual, the latter is all material. Most explanations for the crisis of the liberal order revolve around geopolitics, globalization, economic resentment fueling new forms of populism and nationalism, and Western states following their interests away from liberal values and institutions of their creation.² If there is a spiritual dimension, a thoroughly secularized

¹ W. B. Yeats, The Second Coming, 1919, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43290/the-second-coming.
² G. John Ikenberry, “The End of Liberal International Order?,” International Affairs, Vol. 94, No. 1 (2018), pp. 7–23; Robert Kagan, The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World (New York: Vintage, 2019); Joseph Nye Jr., “Will the Liberal Order Survive?The History of an Idea,” Foreign Affairs, Vol. 96, No. 1 (2017), pp. 10–6; G. John Ikenberry, “The Plot Against American Foreign Policy: Can the Liberal Order Survive?,” Foreign Affairs, Vol. 96, No. 3 (2017), pp. 2–9; Niall Ferguson and Fareed Zakaria, The End of the Liberal Order? (London: Oneworld Publications, 2017); Constance Duncombe and Tim Dunne, “After Liberal World Order,” International Affairs, Vol. 94, No. 1 (2018), pp. 25–42; Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, “Liberal World: The Resilient Order,” Foreign Affairs, Vol. 97, No. 4 (2018), pp. 16–24; Riccardo Alcaro, “The Liberal Order and Its Contestations: A Conceptual Framework,” International Spectator, Vol. 53, No. 1 (2018), pp. 1–10; John Mearsheimer, “Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order,” International Security, Vol. 43, No. 4 (2019), pp. 7–50; Charles Glaser, “A Flawed Framework: Why the Liberal International Order Concept Is Misguided,” International Security, Vol. 43, No. 4 (2019), pp. 51–87; Edward Luce, The Retreat of Western Liberalism (New York: First Atlantic Grove, 2017); Ziya Önis, “The Age of Anxiety: The Crisis of Liberal Democracy in a Post-Hegemonic Global Order,” International Spectator, Vol. 52, No. 3 (2017), pp. 18–35; David Grewal, “Three Theses on the Current Crisis of International Liberalism,” Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies, Vol. 25, No. 2 (2018), pp. 595–621.
international relations discipline is unable to detect or even imagine it. If all international orders have something of a spiritual dimension, what is the LIO’s? Progress. Progress has two dimensions, the material and the moral. The material includes such things as living longer and having healthier lives, rising incomes, and increasing socio-economic opportunities. The moral includes the quality of human relations, including the felt obligations and duties to distant strangers, the sense of compassion for the suffering, and the willingness to engage in acts of care. In other words, the moral dimension is bound up with feelings and practices of humanity. And it is potentially a demise in the belief and practice of humanity that has unsettled feelings of progress and, with it, the liberal international order.

This essay on the relationship between the liberal international order and faith in progress is organized as follows. Section “Introduction” briefly introduces the question of international order and categorizes international relations theories according to the mixture of consent and coercion that is hypothesized to produce order. Theories of international order that acknowledge the importance of consent in some form or fashion invariably incorporate the concept of legitimacy. The legitimacy of most international orders exists simultaneously in the present and the future: orders help to produce stability but often also articulate an aspirational future. In this respect, the legitimacy of an order is often yoked to a philosophy of history—that is, whether the world is believed to be in decline, is caught in endless cycles of rise and fall, or experiences progress. With the exception of realism, prevailing theories of international relations contain a notion of progress that derives directly from, or overlaps considerably with many, key liberal tenets.

Section “International Order, Legitimacy, and Progress” turns to the liberal international order, progress, and the possible spiritual decline of the liberal international order. It begins by interrogating the liberal in the liberal international order, and then claims that LIO, like many orders, is more aspiration than accomplishment. This aspirational element is constituted by an underlying faith in the possibility (and inevitability) of progress—that there is a steady rise in human betterment (material) and that humans are becoming better people, as exemplified by the expansion and deepening of humanity (moral). Whereas most statements regarding the decline of the LIO focus on the material, I introduce the additional possibility of spiritual decline. Importantly, according to many critics of liberalism, this decline is attributed not to exogenous forces but rather to liberalism’s core values. Although liberalism can be something of a shape-shifter, changing forms and articulations over time, individualism has become increasingly central to its meaning in the contemporary era. This individualism, in turn, is associated with the erosion of cosmopolitanism, a hollowing out of community, and a decreasing compassion for distant strangers. These effects, in turn, harm moral progress. The Conclusion asks: what is next? The conjunction of the decline of the LIO and COVID-19 has complicated the debate about the future international

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3 Luce, *The Retreat of Western Liberalism*, p. 11; Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), p. 3.
order, and much of the conversation hinges on whether and how the United States can recover from its self-destructive tendencies and China’s intentions. But where is the spirit of moral progress and humanity in this discussion?

Three caveats before proceeding. Like a lot of the commentary about the purported decline of the liberal international order, this article is speculative. There are those who dispute whether there ever existed a liberal international order and, assuming it did, whether it is in decline or just having a bad stretch. In this respect, my claim presumes that there is a liberal international order; that because most international orders have a material and moral dimension, so, too, must the LIO; and that moral progress defined by practices of humanity is reasonable referents. Secondly, claims about progress and decline are very much like claims about the existence of God—they are sustained by faith. Each side will point to evidence in support of her claim, but ultimately ontology and metaphysics provide its ultimate defense.4 “Progress,” observed Carl Becker, “was not so much a theory to be defended as a fact to be observed.”5 Third, claims of decline have accompanied claims of progress throughout history, and they have once again become quite fashionable. They might not be so popular that theories of progress are the black sheep of the contemporary zeitgeist, as Stephen Pinker contends, but every age has its own version of decline, and many of these versions carry from one age to the next.6 Pinker might be right that bad news sells better than good news, but this does not mean that bad news is fake news.

**International Order, Legitimacy, and Progress**

International order regards how rules, institutions, law, and norms produce and maintain patterns of relating and acting. International relations theories can be categorized according to whether they conceptualize order by the relative balance of coercion and consent. Few international orders are produced solely by either one or the other, and the typical assessment is the ratio between the two. Realist theories famously place their bets on coercion and nominate hegemony and the balance of power as the mechanisms most responsible for order.7 Institutionalism and the English School acknowledge a mixture of coercion and consent. Institutionalists, as the label suggests, hold that states can build institutions that

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4 Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1994), p. 317.
5 Carl Becker, *Power and Progress* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1949), p. 5.
6 Stephen Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (New York: Vintage Press, 2018).
7 G. John Ikenberry and Daniel Nexon, “Hegemonic Studies 3.0: The Dynamics of Hegemonic Orders,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (2019), pp. 395–421; Richard Little, *The Balance of Power in International Relations: Metaphors, Myths and Models* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
can induce an equilibrium.⁸ These institutions are contracts produced voluntarily by rational actors. The assumption, in other words, is that actors are free to enter into or reject the contracts and social arrangements. Once they have formed the contract, though, they are constrained by its terms. But contracts require mechanisms to ensure compliance. Toward that end, states create institutions that are assigned various functions for the purpose of encouraging compliance and creating the conditions for long-term cooperation. Typically, institutions employ information for facilitating compliance, though occasionally they are equipped with coercive instruments. The English School offers a similar mixture of consent and coercion as it holds that states with convergent interests in security will construct an international society held together by institutions and rules such as sovereignty, diplomacy, the balance of power, and even war.⁹

Constructivist, Marxist, critical, and feminist theories have a more complicated view of the relationship between coercion and consent in the production of order, and this is partly because of the conceptual and empirical difficulty of assessing consent. These are structural theories that see agents as their effects. That is, structures constitute the subjectivities, identities, interests, social capacities, and practices of actors. This can, though need not, lead to an image of actors as “cultural dupes” and order as nearly automatic because of their thorough socialization into society. Marxists have a word for this—false consciousness. Actors might consent to a political order that, in fact, harms their objective interests and sustains their own domination. As Steven Lukes famously put it: “A may exercise power over B by getting him to do what he does not want to do, but he may also exercise power over him by shaping or determining his very wants. Indeed, is it not the supreme exercise of power to get another or others to have the desires you want them to have – that is, to secure their compliance by controlling their thoughts and desires?”¹⁰ In this picture, the notion of the sovereign agent that is capable of giving consent becomes highly questionable. Individuals acquiesce to an order not because of consent or direct and immediate coercion, but rather because, according to Lukes, of a controlling agent of sorts, or, according to discursive theories, because of a much more diffuse and indirect form of power.¹¹

Legitimacy is critical to all political orders, including international order. Legitimacy is the “generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an

⁸ Kenneth Shepsle, “Studying Institutions: Some Lessons from the Rational Choice Approach,” *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1989), pp. 131–47; Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

⁹ Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Andrew Hurrell, *On Global Order: Power, Constitution, and the Values of International Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (New York: Palgrave, 2005).

¹¹ Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, “Power in International Politics,” *International Organization*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (2005), pp. 39–75.
entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definition."\textsuperscript{12} This and other Weberian-oriented definitions of legitimacy rest on several important claims. Legitimacy is produced by social relations. It is not something possessed by an actor or order but rather something that is conferred by others.\textsuperscript{13} Because legitimacy operates in relationship to socially constructed norms, values, and beliefs, action must be justified or legitimated in relationship to them. In other words, actions that are deemed as self-serving or transactional are less likely to be conferred legitimacy. Relatedly, legitimacy will improve the likelihood of compliance with the political order and its commands. Said otherwise, legitimate orders are more likely to operate via consent and thus be less reliant on coercion. Lastly, legitimacy has two elements: decisions are perceived to have been made according to the correct process; and the decisions are perceived to be consistent with the values of the community.\textsuperscript{14} What constitutes the proper process and outcome is historically contingent; religious and secular orders will operate with different standards of legitimacy.

Most theories of international relations accept that legitimacy is critical to international order. An important exception is neorealism, which insists that order is produced by material factors alone. Yet other forms of realism, including classical realism, claim otherwise. Henry Kissinger’s masterful study of the Peace of Vienna provides a detailed historical analysis of how European leaders understood that any future order would require some degree of legitimacy.\textsuperscript{15} Institutionalists operate according to what Ian Hurd calls a folk theory of legitimacy: international institutions cannot coerce and therefore must rely on the consent of its members, which can only be earned if they have a belief in the appropriateness of the process and the outcome.\textsuperscript{16} To the extent that these international institutions are the voluntary creation of the members, such consent poses relatively little difficulty; to the extent that they are not, institutions must engage in the heavy labor of legitimation. The English School also views legitimacy as critical to international order and great power leadership and action.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{12} Mark C. Suchman, “Managing Legitimacy: Strategic and Institutional Approaches,” \textit{The Academy of Management Review}, Vol. 20, No. 3 (1995), p. 574.
\textsuperscript{13} Chris Reus-Smit, “Power, Legitimacy, and Order,” \textit{Chinese Journal of International Politics}, Vol. 7, No. 3 (2014), p. 345.
\textsuperscript{14} Suchman, “Managing Legitimacy,” p. 574.
\textsuperscript{15} Henry Kissinger, \textit{A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace, 1812-1822} (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1957).
\textsuperscript{16} Ian Hurd, “Legitimacy and Contestation in Global Governance: Revisiting the Folk Theory of International Institutions,” \textit{Review of International Organizations}, Vol. 14, No. 4 (2019), pp. 717–29. Also see Allen Buchanan and Robert Keohane, “The Legitimacy of Global Governance Institutions,” \textit{Ethics and International Affairs}, Vol. 20, No. 4 (2006), pp. 405–37; Robert Keohane, “Global Governance and Legitimacy,” \textit{Review of International Political Economy}, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2011), pp. 99–109.
\textsuperscript{17} Ian Clark, \textit{Legitimacy and International Society} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
Constructivism similarly makes legitimacy a matter of central concern, as do many critical, Marxist, and feminist theories. But legitimacy, in many of these theories, can be insidious if the dominated often confer it on an international order that works against its interests. Such claims are consistent with Gramscian approaches to international order.

There is an inherent status quo bias in most discussions of international order and legitimacy, which is not surprising since international institutions, which are central to discussions of order and legitimacy, are designed to stabilize social relations around sets of rules, norms, and principles. But the defense of a political order and its institutions occasionally extend beyond the present arrangements to include directed change for the better. Arguably the UN’s legitimacy is dependent less on the standard measures of legitimacy and more on its symbolic standing. The UN gets low marks for consent. Its actions often track not with the values of the international community but rather with the interests of the powerful. But the UN continues to radiate hope for a more peaceful, prosperous, and just world (and especially when compared to the alternatives).

Even if this hope is delusional. Alfred Zimmern, who was deeply involved in the thinking and the building of the post-World War One institutions, caustically observed: “Those who know Geneva best can tell you how many sick souls have taken refuge there. One might rephrase an old epigram and say that Geneva has been an opiate for the disorders of the spirit.” But one person’s opiate is another person’s hope.

International orders and their institutions, understood this way, contain a philosophy of history, that is, a belief that history has a design, rhythm, movement, purpose, or direction. Philosophies of history can be categorized in various ways, though three stand out for our purposes because of their taut relationship to theories of international relations. There are theories of regress and decline which suggest that human history is descending toward moral and material collapse. And some of these theories credit the collapse to the very things that others believe is the source of progress. For instance, critical theories track how the
enlightenment and modernity, the very drivers of progress, contain the seeds of destruction. Science and technology will not save humans but rather destroy them; nuclear weapons and climate change are competing to see which one claims victory over humanity. There are cyclical theories that imagine an endless series of rises followed by declines. Oswald Spengler and Arthur Toynbee are closely associated with this line of thought.\(^{25}\) Realism has a dark view of human nature and world history. Instead of progress, there are cycles of rising and falling great powers and their international orders. Nothing built ever lasts forever and lesser powers will invariably catch greater powers. For some realists, this owes to the fact that the economic and technological foundations of Great Power diffuse and give an advantage to late adopters.\(^{26}\) For others, it is because of human folly, hubris, or tragedy.\(^{27}\)

Theories of progress highlight the upward direction of human history.\(^{28}\) “Progress, in short, is irreversible change”—and for the better.\(^{29}\) Human existence is improving and there is no going back. Most major theories of international relations are either solidly behind the idea of progress or have a friendly faction, even if they do not agree on the meaning of progress. Institutionalism, particularly its neoliberal variety, has elements of progress as it emphasizes how learning and institutions can enhance human welfare and security. The English School has a progressive tradition that imagines a world in motion from international system to international society to global society with a solidarist

\(^{24}\) Jeffrey Alexander, “Between Progress and Apocalypse: Social Theory and the Dream of Reason in the Twentieth Century,” in Jeffrey Alexander and Piotr Sztompka, eds., Rethinking Progress: Movements, Forces, And Ideas at The End of The Twentieth Century (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), pp. 15–38.

\(^{25}\) Oswald Spengler, The Decline of the West (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1959); Arthur Toynbee, The World and the West (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953). Also see Arthur Herman, The Idea of Decline in Western History (New York: Free Press, 1997).

\(^{26}\) Paul Kennedy, The Rise and Decline of the Great Powers (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

\(^{27}\) John Mearsheimer, The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

\(^{28}\) Nisbet, History of the Idea of Progress; John Bury, The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into Its Origin and Growth (North Chelmsford: Courier Corporation, 1987); Christopher Lasch, The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics (New York: Norton, 1991); Gabriel Almond, Marvin Chodorow, and Roy Harvey Pearce, eds., Progress and Its Discontents (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); Jeffrey Alexander and Piotr Sztompka, eds., Rethinking Progress: Movements, Forces, and Ideas at the End of the Twentieth Century (London: Routledge, 2002); Sidney Fay, “The Idea of Progress,” American Historical Review, Vol. 52, No. 2 (1947), pp. 231–46; Sidney Pollard, The Idea of Progress: History and Society (New York: Penguin Books, 1968); John Michael Greer, After Progress: Reason and Religion at the End of the Industrial Age (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2015), p. 10.

\(^{29}\) Charles Van Doren, The Idea of Progress (New York: Praeger Press, 1967), p. 3.
Constructivist theories have been accused of examining only “good norms,” which might have been so early on but less so today. Still, there are versions of constructivism that are implicitly and explicitly interested in using constructivism to examine a version of progress that owes considerable philosophical debts to liberalism. Most recently, Emanuel Adler has proposed a social theory of cognitive evolution that has propensities towards a progress that is “humanist because it takes values such as human life—and by extension, liberty, equality, and peaceful change—as reflecting our common humanity.” For Adler, movement in this direction constitutes progress and “better” practices that acknowledge a “common humanity” can blaze a trail in this direction. There are critical theories that imagine the possibility of cosmopolitanism and the upward movement towards genuine empowerment and emancipation. And then there are liberal theories, the most optimistic of them all.

Liberalism, the Liberal International Order, and Its Limits

The liberal view of progress is entangled with the enlightenment. Ideas of progress existed prior to the enlightenment, but they had a religious cadence in which progress did not occur on earth but rather was something that blessed individuals would enjoy in the afterlife. The Western enlightenment view of progress broke with religious views in three critical ways. First, the enlightenment eroded religion and its understanding of progress, and, in its place, created a secularized view that retained a religious quality. In short, progress became a civil religion. The surrogate God that Western civilization embraced, tentatively in the nineteenth century and with increasing conviction and passion in the twentieth, was progress. In the way of that collective decision, the omnipotence and benevolence of progress have become the core doctrines of a secular religion as broadly and unthinkingly embraced, and as central to contemporary notions of meaning and value, as Christianity was before the Age of Reason.

Second, humans became responsible for progress. Whereas suffering and progress had been understood as fated, Karmic, or God’s will, with the enlightenment,

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30 Barry Buzan, *From International to World Society?* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Chris Brown, “World Society and the English School: An ‘International Society’ Perspective on World Society,” *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (2001), pp. 423–41.
31 Kathryn Sikkink, *Evidence for Hope: Making Human Rights Work in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).
32 Emanuel Adler, *World Ordering: A Social Theory of Cognitive Evolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 267.
33 *Ibid.*, p. 276.
34 Andrew Linklater, “Toward a Sociology of Global Morals with a ‘Emancipatory’ Intent,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2007), pp. 135–50.
35 Greer, *After Progress*, p. 10.
36 Becker, *Power and Progress*, p. 7.
37 Greer, *After Progress*, p. 12.
the scientific method, and naturalistic explanations, humans could uncover the causes of suffering, remedy them, and improve the human condition. For instance, while humans might not be able to prevent “acts of God” such as hurricanes or earthquakes, they could alter urban planning to construct stronger buildings and reduce urban congestion to minimize the damage and the death toll the next time God strikes. Humans became responsible for mitigating suffering and unleashing progress; and because of human ingenuity and learning is linked to innovations in science and technology, progress became inevitable and irreversible.

Third, progress had its material and moral dimensions. Material achievements typically monopolize definitions and indicators of progress. As Freud observed in his Civilization and Its Discontents, “[W]e recognize that a country has attained a high level of civilization when we find that everything in it that can be helpful in exploiting the earth for man’s benefit and in protecting him against nature – everything in short, that is useful to him – is cultivated effectively and productively.”38 The fruits of progress are everywhere to see and enjoy. Humans are living longer and healthier lives. Mothers and babies are more likely to survive birth. Poverty is declining. More of the world has running water and electricity. Education is available to more people than ever before, and girls that once were banished from schools are now enrolled.

There also is moral progress. If progress has a religious quality, then it must have a spiritual dimension. The world is not just getting better—humans are getting better. Moral progress is the belief that the “character of man . . . will change for the better, and that evolution and progress includes a humanity that will become more moral, kinder, more cooperative, and better natured.”39 The heart of moral progress is not measured by the happiness of the individual but rather by the quality of the social relations. It involves: the widening of the moral imagination and the dissolving of boundaries that once created difference; a growing concern for the suffering of distant strangers; and a consideration of how their actions might harm others.

Moral progress’s sobriquet is “humanity.” Humanity begins with the belief that all humans are equal. Prior to the enlightenment, the prevailing view was that humans were unequal because of birthright, race, religion, gender, biology, and other markers of status, difference, and inequality.40 Enlightenment principles, though, slowly degraded such beliefs in favor of the view that all humans are equal and capable of reason, are a common species, and are obligated to “treat

38 Sigmund Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents (Mansfield Centre: Martino Publishing, 2010), p. 53.
39 Pollard, The Idea of Progress, p. 12.
40 Francisco Bethencourt, “Humankind: From Division to Recomposition,” in Fabian Klose and Mirjam Thulin, eds., Humanity: A History of European Concepts in Practice from the Sixteenth Century to the Present (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2016), pp. 29–50; Paul Betts, “Universalism and Its Discontents,” in Klose and Thulin, eds., Humanity, pp. 51–72; Jeffrey Flynn, “Status and Suffering,” in Michael Barnett, ed., Human Rights and Humanitarianism: Worlds of Differences? (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 49-70.
fellow humans as family."41 Humans also became sacralized. Christianity formed an important basis for sentiments of humanity, but secularization processes shifted the sacred canopy from God to humanity and invested humanity with a quasi-religious character. As Emile Durkheim observed, the sacred migrated from deity to humanity and humans now had a sacred standing and became “the object of a sort of religion . . . a common faith.”42 As part of a common faith, humanity became part of the transcendent, enabling individuals to overcome voids of meaning, to imagine that there is something bigger than themselves, to free themselves from the particular of their own lives and to adopt a universal perspective, and to hope for human flourishing in its fullest and most expansive meaning.43 Feelings of humanity scaled upward from the local to the global, making possible new forms of cosmopolitanism, as evidenced by such 19th-century phrases as “the religion of humanity,” “cabinet of mankind,” and “citizen of the world.”

Humanity became connected to new kinds of sentiments and practices, most famously compassion. In contrast with the conventional view that the enlightenment was all cognition, calculations, and conceit, it also contained new forms of compassion, sympathy, and empathy and became signs of an enlightened character.44 Compassion was most clearly felt and exhibited during moments of suffering. The humanity of others becomes most evident when they are suffering. But compassion without action is meaningless. Humanity is not just a belief but also a practice. There develop negative duties and the obligation to avoid taking action that produces unnecessary and foreseeable harm, and positive duties to “prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found,” and “to protect life and

41 Richard Wilson and Richard Brown, “Introduction,” in Richard Wilson and Richard Brown, eds., Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 43.
42 Mark Cladis, “Introduction,” in Emile Durkheim, ed., Elementary Forms of Religious Life (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. xxviii. Also see Hans Joas, The Sacredness of the Person: A New Genealogy of Human Rights (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2013), p. 5; Giorgio Agamben, Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Daniel Levy and Natan Sznai der, “Sovereignty Transformed: A Sociology of Human Rights,” British Journal of Sociology, Vol. 57, No. 4 (2006), pp. 657–76.
43 Charles Taylor, A Secular Age (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 15–16; Mark Lilla, The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics and the Modern West (New York: Vintage Press, 2007); Moshe Halbertal, On Sacrifice (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 63; Harald Wydra, Politics and the Sacred (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 5.
44 Michael Frazer, The Enlightenment of Sympathy: Justice and Moral Sentiments in the Eighteenth Century (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Hannah Arendt, On Revolution (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), pp. 70–1; Thomas Haskell, “Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility, Part 1,” American Historical Review, Vol. 90, No. 2 (1985), pp. 339–61.
health and to ensure respect for the human being.\(^{45}\) It is by acting with compassion and care that we enact our own humanity. Conversely, the neglect, indifference, or cause of unnecessary suffering becomes a mark of one’s inhumanity. In short, compassion and care unleashed by the suffering of others dissolve barriers and create a shared humanity.\(^{46}\)

Furthermore, because humanity erases difference, it renders borders porous and philosophically arbitrary. If all humans are equal and are equally deserving of care, then it becomes morally suspect to discriminate among suffering strangers on any criteria other than need. Relatedly, spatial distance is no longer relevant for considering the welfare of others. Duties and obligations no longer stop at the border’s edge. Nationalism gives way to cosmopolitanism and peoples begin to embrace universal values and transnational solidarities.

Liberal political theory and practice are bound up with the enlightenment, views of moral progress, and discourses of humanity. Liberalism led to: the belief that all individuals are humans and all humans are equal and of equal worth; the enshrinement of individual liberty and autonomy; the end to monarchy, aristocracy, and other status categories; the growth of all forms of freedom and liberty, including religion, belief, and speech; and the development of principles of equality and tolerance.\(^{47}\) These liberties and freedoms require security and protection, which ultimately means some form of centralized authority—but authority created and maintained through a social contract and the consent of the people. The state’s primary goal is to provide security and maintain these freedoms, which can be best advanced through private property, human rights, and democracy. However, a state that has the authority and power to protect society might soon become a threat; the concentration of power that is needed to protect members of society also can lead to abuse, tyranny, and violations of liberty. Toward that end, liberalism recommends various institutional arrangements, including checks and balances, distributed authority, oversight mechanisms, and elections.

These liberties and institutions create the conditions for human creativity that is the engine of material and moral progress. I want to by-pass the debates regarding the relationship between liberalism and material well-being and proceed directly to the ambivalent relationship between liberalism and moral progress. The

\(^{45}\) Jean Pictet, *The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross: Commentary* (Geneva: ICRC, 1979), https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/misc/fundamental-principles-commentary-010179.htm.

\(^{46}\) Lynn Festa, “Humanity Without Feathers,” *Humanity*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2010), p. 6, 7; Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of Suffering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

\(^{47}\) Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*; Duncan Bell, “What Is Liberalism?,” *Political Theory*, Vol. 42, No. 6 (2014), pp. 682–715; Michael Freeden, *Liberalism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Helena Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); John Gray, *Enlightenment’s Wake* (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 200–1.
claim that liberalism will lead to peace, prosperity, and progress is nearly gospel in the liberal tradition and is a core feature of liberal international relations theory. The link between liberalism and these outcomes, according to many, is produced not only by enlightened self-interest but also by the widening of the moral imagination and responsibility, cosmopolitanism, and a borderless world. Yet the liberalism that is postulated to cause these developments and aspirations is not necessarily the liberalism that exists today. The liberalism that once emphasized a society that had webs of obligations has given way to a contractual view: individuals are separate from society and society is intended to serve individual needs, no matter how gluttonous. Tolerance now means little more than a mutual acceptance of each other’s strange and nasty habits, customs, and ways of life; it does demand obligations or duties to others when they are in need. Humanity becomes dragged down by the weight of individualism.

Liberal International Order
Liberalism has been part of the international order for over two centuries, but at some unspecified moment after the end of the Cold War, the Western international order became the Liberal International Order—both in orientation and in name. There is a long history building to this moment. There is the 19th-century version of liberal internationalism, in which Britain ruled the world through coercion, free trade imperialism, and a white man’s burden, the United States pursued manifest destiny, and France advanced a civilizing mission. These imperial and colonial projects contained ideologies that justified their domination on the basis of their ability to improve the lives of the uncivilized by transforming them into replicas of these liberal powers. There was no pretense that the ruled consented to their domination, in part because of a discourse that constructed them as less than fully human peoples that still needed to develop the reason and rationality to know what was in their best interests. This was classic paternalism, colonial-style. The legitimation of international liberalism took one step forward after World War One with the rise of national self-determination and the League of Nations and another after World War Two with the United Nations, the demise of empires and the rise of sovereign equality, and liberal-sounding norms and visions best exemplified by

48 Jean-Claude Michéa, *The Realm of the Lesser Evil* (Boston: Polity Press, 2009), p. 88. Also see note 51.
49 Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, p. 122; Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, p. xviii.
50 Robert Keohane, “Twenty Years of Institutional Liberalism,” *International Relations*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (2012), pp. 125–38; Beate Jahn, “Liberal Internationalism: From Ideology to Empirical Theory—And Back Again,” *International Theory*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (2009), pp. 409–38; Diana Panke and Thomas Risse, “Liberalism,” in Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith, eds., *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); James L. Richardson, “Contending Liberalisms: Past and Present,” *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (1997), pp. 5–34; Beate Jahn, “Liberal Internationalism: Historical Trajectory and Current Prospects,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 1 (2018), pp. 43–61.
the rise of human rights and democracy promotion. But these were baby steps, blocked by a decaying imperial order, the Cold War, racism, socialist alternatives led by the Soviet Union, and a decolonizing world that had little stomach for former colonial empires, responsible for millions of dead, now lecturing them on the virtues of markets, democracy, and human rights.

Yet this also is the period when the Western order became a cornerstone of the international order. This story has been expertly told by John Ikenberry, who emphasizes how the United States assembled a coalition of liberal democratic states that were a mutual support group that contained the Soviet Union. The United States was not adverse to using sticks to maintain the order, but Ikenberry persuasively argues that membership was largely consensual and the United States provided various carrots (often in the form of free-riding) for the benefit of other liberal democracies. As he puts it, the United States was a liberal leviathan. Once established, the Western order became further institutionalized as a consequence of path dependence and increasing returns. Under American leadership, the West established various institutions designed to solidify their alliance, deepen interdependence, and create something akin to a security community. The United States and its Western allies worked to create a more open global political economy through the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, GATT, and informal groupings like the G-7.

The double shock of the collapse of the Cold War and the Soviet Union created the conditions for the Western order to become the LIO. The West attributed its victory to its superiority. Indeed, in the minds of many in the West, the victory was nearly inevitable, representing a natural unfolding—and quite possibly the end—of history. The liberal principles of markets, democracy, and rights had no rival, and their world-wide acceptance would lead to peace and prosperity. Those who had once counted themselves as nonaligned or aligned with the Soviet Union now queued up for admission to the liberal club. Global institutions such as the United Nations, which once labored to navigate between the opposing ideologies, now became major players and instruments in the attempted spread of liberalism. Various commissions and reports, including the Agenda for Peace and the Commission on Global Governance, drew up ambitious agendas that

51 G. John Ikenberry, After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).
52 G. John Ikenberry, Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis and the Transformation of the American World Order (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).
53 Orfeo Fioretos, “The Syncopated History of the Liberal International Order,” British Journal of Politics and International Relations, Vol. 21, No. 1 (2019), pp. 20–8.
54 Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?, The National Interest, No. 16 (1989), pp. 3–18.
55 John Oneal and Bruce Russett, Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations (New York: Norton, 2001).
56 Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore, “The Power of Liberal International Organizations,” in Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, eds., Power in Global Governance (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 161–84; Beth Simmons, Frank Dobbin, and
were informed by, articulated, and legitimated liberal principles and values. Peacekeeping turned into liberal peacekeeping. As the United Nations began to think about post-conflict reconstruction, and what sort of society would best aid the cause of peace, it followed the blueprint of liberal democracy. An emerging transnational civil society became an actor in world affairs. Partly because of their efforts and those of sympathetic liberal states, human rights ascended and women’s rights and security became top agenda items. The legalization of world affairs invested liberal principles with objectivity and impartiality. By the end turn of the century the 1990s, the Western order had become the liberal international order.

There remains considerable debate regarding whether the LIO was anything more than sugar on self-interest and what about the liberal international order is liberal. Assuming it exists, its distinguishing features include the following. A cornerstone is the idea of individual liberty and rights, which, in turn, help to constitute markets, democracy, and human rights. These freedoms, liberties, and rights promote greater interaction within and across borders, leading to improved welfare, growing knowledge of others, awareness of their circumstances and experiences, and a sense of we-feeling and solidarity. In order to nurture and protect these connections, states and their societies develop organizations, institutions, and laws. These developments lead to a better world, aided by the ability of humans to learn from their mistakes. Liberal states and a growing bevvy of liberal-oriented nongovernmental organizations attempt to protect liberal values

Geoffrey Garrett, “Introduction: The International Diffusion of Liberalism,” International Organization, Vol. 60, No. 4, pp. 781–810.

Barnett, “Bringing in the New World Order.”

Roland Paris, At War’s End: Building Peace after Civil Conflict (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

For critiques of the LIO, see Patrick Porter, “A World Imagined: Nostalgia and Liberal Order,” The Cato Institute Policy Analysis No. 843 (2018); Amitav Acharya, The End of the American World Order (New York: Polity, 2018); Grewal, “Three Theses on the Current Crisis of International Liberalism,” pp. 595–621; Glaser, “A Flawed Framework,” pp. 51–87; Mearsheimer, “Bound to Fail,” pp. 7–50.

Anne Marie Slaughter, “International Law in a World of Liberal States,” European Journal of International Law, Vol. 6, No. 4 (1995), pp. 503–39; Barry Buzan, “Economic Structure and International Security: The Limits of the Liberal Case,” International Organization, Vol. 38, No. 4 (1984), pp. 223–54; G. John Ikenberry, “The Liberal International Order and Its Discontents,” Millennium, Vol. 38, No. 3 (2010), pp. 509–21; Brian C. Rathbun, “Is Anybody Not an (International Relations) Liberal?,” Security Studies, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2010), pp. 2–25; Michael W. Doyle, “Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs,” Philosophy and Public Affairs, Vol. 12, No. 3 (1983), pp. 205–35, 325–53; Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, “The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order,” Review of International Studies, Vol. 25, No. 2 (1999), pp. 179–96; Mark Zacher and Richard Matthews, “Liberal International Theory: Common Threads, Divergent Strands,” in Charles Kegley, ed., Controversies in International Relations Theory (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), pp. 107–50.

G. John Ikenberry, “The End of the Liberal International Order?,” International Affairs, Vol. 94, No. 1 (2018), pp. 7–23.
where they are weak and promote them where they are nonexistent. The growth of liberalism will lead to peace, prosperity, and material and moral progress. At least this was the theory and the hope.

At least if the number of articles, books, and blog posts is any indicator, the liberal international order is in decline. Most explanations lean on material changes such as shifting geopolitics, economic stagnation and growing income inequality, changing demographics, and migration, and most of these explanations are exogenous to the liberal order. But there is a coterie of commentators who argue that the source of the problem resides in liberalism itself, and that its excesses are eroding its moral foundations. Much of the critique focuses on liberalism’s contemporary form and emphasis on individualism. Liberalism is not a thing but rather an ever-changing assortment and configuration of values. The liberalism of the 18th century bears a family resemblance to today’s, but they are positioned in different places in the family tree. One of the important distinctions between these liberalisms is the relationship between the individual and society. The 18th century’s liberalism had elements of sympathy and community, and the 19th century’s liberalism developed a welfare profile. But the late 20th century’s liberalism became more individualistic. This individualism contracts the space for practices of humanity. I illustrate this possibility in the realm of cosmopolitanism and moral economy.

The Liberal Limits of the Liberal International Order
As previously discussed, many students of the LIO anticipated that the spread of liberalism would lead to a growing global community and felt obligations. And, while there is a debate on the role played by liberal values, various scholars do credit liberalism with the growth of an “international community” and shared humanity over the last century. But to what extent do these cosmopolitan-oriented feelings and orientations generate deeply felt attachments? Is this borderless world emotionally fulfilling? And do such attachments and emotions lead to practices of care? Commentators suggest that cosmopolitanism and a borderless world has been overvalued. Humanity can have an emptiness. It is not possible to touch, converse with, share a joke, or give a hug to humanity. One cannot love humanity as one loves a good friend or relative. Also, as I have argued elsewhere, contemporary notions of cosmopolitanism are built on suffering. It is suffering that creates connections between people. But suffering does not lead to forms of equality. It is a cosmopolitanism based on two kinds of people: those in need and those who can give. This is a cosmopolitanism of pity and not of genuinely shared humanity.

62 Deneen, Why Liberalism Failed, p. xvii.
63 George Orwell, “Reflections on Gandhi,” Partisan Review, Vol. 16, No. 1 (1949), pp. 85–92, http://www.orwell.ru/library/reviews/gandhi/english/e_gandhi.
64 Michael Barnett, Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).
Because the global is a poor substitute for the local, populations have returned to the nation. The local and the national provide feelings of home, comfort, identity, and belonging. And the return to the local heightens the difference between “us” and “them.” Difference need not lead to chauvinism or xenophobia, but it can. Relatedly, the global and those who come from the outside can now appear to be a threat to the extent that it challenges the “home.” The contemporary period, in this regard, resembles the late nineteenth century when nationalism treated cosmopolitanism and rootless others such as the Jews as a virus.

The other core commitment of liberalism that heightens individualism is the market. According to liberal thought, the economy works best when individuals are able to pursue their self-interest without undue interference from the state or moral considerations. Such arrangements not only promote individual welfare but also collective welfare, leading to prosperity and progress. Consequently, liberalism as an economic ideology, and particularly the more recent version of neoliberalism, works to limit the state’s involvement in the economy and allows the hidden hand to do its work. In short, “human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.” Although early liberals aspired to improve the quality of character of the human, contemporary liberals extol that principles of justice, fairness, and other moral considerations should not interfere with economic decisions and arrangements. Markets and morals should maintain a separate existence. But, historically speaking, they have a mutually constitutive relationship. The market can become an ethic in itself, shape what is valued, and define fair, just, and equitable. Markets even assign value to living and life.

65 Deneen, Why Liberalism Failed, p. 32.
66 Walter Russell Mead, “The Jacksonian Revolt: American Populism and the Liberal Order,” Foreign Affairs, Vol. 96, No. 2 (2017), pp. 2–7; Eric Posner, “Liberal Internationalism and the Populist Backlash,” University of Chicago Public Law & Legal Theory Paper Series No. 606 (2017); Francis Fukuyama, Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2018).
67 Yael Tamir, Why Nationalism? (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).
68 Nisbet, History of the Idea of Progress, p. 299.
69 David Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 2.
70 Jeremy Adelman, “Introduction: The Moral Economy, the Careers of a Concept,” Humanity, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2020), p. 191. For these early liberal formulations, see Rosenblatt, The Lost History of Liberalism.
71 Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism; Quinn Slobodian, The Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019); Fred Block and Margaret Somers, The Power of Market Fundamentalism: Karl Polanyi’s Critique (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014); Marion Fourcade and Kieran Healy, “Moral Views of Market Society,” Annual Review of Sociology, Vol. 33 (2007), pp. 285–311.
These more contemporary forms of liberalism hollow out the community. Liberalism, in its original meaning, did contain an idea of community bound by moral values and a sense of we-ness. But not contemporary liberalism, which is not about the “us” but the “I.” This is a community that is produced by voluntary, self-interested, exchanges. As Margaret Thatcher famously observed:

There is no such thing as a society. There is a living tapestry of men and women and ... the quality of our lives will depend on how much each of us is prepared to take responsibility for ourselves ... [W]ho is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first. It is our duty to look after ourselves and then also to help look after our neighbor ....

The only barriers to success and fortune are personal, and those in need have only themselves to blame and should either live with the consequences of their choices or rely on charity. In other words, the idea that community contains a form of belonging and mutual obligations to each other during times of hardship is intentionally scuttled.

The relationship between markets, moral, and the value of life is captured by the concept of the moral economy. The concept of the moral economy has many meanings, but a prevailing tradition concerns whether, when, and how vulnerable populations are helped by others, including the state, through reciprocal expectations to acquire basic subsistence goods during crises. During emergencies and situations of widespread hardship, goods are scarce and often priced beyond the reach of vulnerable populations. Many societies have what James Scott calls social insurance that kicks in at such moments; this insurance is provided by a web of reciprocal obligations among those in the community and supported by patrimonial relations with political and economic elites, and the state. These are obligations that tap into deeply held beliefs about what is fair and just.

Moral economists are particularly attentive to moments when these obligations disintegrate, which can occur for various reasons, but most important are changes in market relations and economic ideologies. E. P. Thompson examined the imposition of the corn laws and the end of patrimonial relations between

72 Rosenblatt, The Lost History of Liberalism, p. 32.
73 Margaret Thatcher, “Interview with Woman’s Own,” 23 September, 2007, https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689. Also see Slobidian, The Globalists; Rosenblatt, The Lost History of Liberalism, p. 260.
74 E. P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” Past and Present, No. 50 (1971), pp. 76–136; E. P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy Reviewed,” in E. P. Thompson, Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture (London: Merlin, 1991), pp. 259–351; James Scott, The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in South East Asia (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976); Karl Polanyi, The Great Transformation (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).
75 James Scott, “Afterword to ‘Moral Economies, State Spaces, and Categorical Violence’,” American Anthropologist, Vol. 107, No. 3 (2005), p. 397.
peasants and landowners. From this moment on British governments responded to widespread hunger and famine with laissez-faire policies. Although Adam Smith is often cited as something of a bleeding-heart liberal because of his writing on moral sentiments, his heart turned to stone during periods of mass misery. As a fierce advocate of free trade, Smith opposed regulation, including paternalistic protections. He wanted to “demoralize” the market, by which he meant divesting it of intrusive moral imperatives that might interfere with prices and incentives. During the debate over the corn laws in the early 1770s, he acknowledged that laissez-faire policies might cause starvation in the short run. But he opposed “moral” interventions as he argued that introducing regulation and placing a ceiling on corn prices would only cause speculation, black markets, disincentives to produce, retard long-run growth, and increase the risk of future famines. James Scott argued that the introduction of colonialism and the transition to capitalist agriculture in Vietnam and Burma caused landowners to increase their rate of exploitation of increasingly commodified labor and shredding the existing safety net.

Karl Polanyi famously proposed the distinction between embedded and disembedded economies. Embedded economies “submerge production and exchange to the purposes and practices of far more significant social, political, or religious institutions.” Disembedded economies, on the other hand, have wrenched the market from social relations and institutions and have an autonomy of their own and shape what counts as moral, just, and fair. As Polanyi famously described, this change led to a “double movement” that created left- and right-wing movements in Europe and the United States. Following World War Two, Western policymakers deliberately created global and national institutions that could expand economic interdependence while protecting their populations from economic downturns. Conversely, the rise of global neoliberalism beginning in the 1980s helped to dismantle embedded liberalism’s moral economy and the obligations of the state for the welfare of its population during economic contractions. A neoliberal economic ideology helped to fuel rising income inequality alongside the state’s dismantling of the welfare state, leaving many individuals and families without any protection when hardship hit. The idea that a society is “in this together” retreats in the face of a market-fueled individualism.

Liberalism has had many distinct faces over the centuries, with its various principles and commitments organized and emphasized in different ways. Liberal internationalism and the order of its creation is not a singular thing but a variable. The really, existing liberal international order does possess various liberal qualities, but most of them are designed to maintain an order that will deliver material progress. Moral progress is a secondary concern. But international orders require

76 Thompson, “The Moral Economy Reviewed,” pp. 200–7.
77 Thomas Arnold, “Rethinking Moral Economy,” American Political Science Review, Vol. 95, No. 1 (2001), p. 86.
78 William Davies, “The New Neoliberalism,” New Left Review, No. 101 (2016), pp. 121–34.
79 Luce, “The Retreat of Western Liberalism,” p. 14.
both a material and a moral basis. Although many defenders of the liberal international order presumed that liberal values would help moral progress keep up with material progress, they have not fully recognized that the individualism that is at the heart of liberalism can shred any idea of moral progress based on a genuine sense of a shared humanity. And, it appears that when practitioners of liberal internationalism rank material and moral progress, it is the former that gets most of the attention.

**Conclusion: Order Without Progress?**

What does the future hold for international order? There is always the possibility that the liberal international order will survive. Perhaps the United States will cease to be a fallen liberal and return to the fold, even more passionate than before. Perhaps liberalism is bigger than the United States and has been sufficiently institutionalized that it will continue but without its sheen. A related possibility is that liberalism will continue down the road of a hyperindividualism, which would then change what is meant and expected of a liberal international order. What is emerging, in other words, is just the most recent incarnation. Others speak of the emergence of a rule-based order. But all orders are rule-based and the question is not whether the order has rules but what the rules are, and most discussions emphasize various tenets that arguably liberal and illiberal states can support: sovereignty, international law, diplomacy, various forms of multilateralism and principles of nondiscrimination, peaceful settlement of disputes. Missing, though, are values that might border on a shared humanity.  

Scholars and policymakers agree that China will play a defining role in the future international order, but are divided on whether China’s global orientation is driven solely by self-interest, includes a mixture of self-interest and collective interest, or contains elements of what are considered to be universal values.

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80 Foreign Ministry of the People’s Republic of China, 2017.
81 For the first, see Nadage Rolland, “China’s Vision for a New World Order,” NBR Special Report No. 83 (2020). For the second, see Deborah Larson, “Will China Be a New Type of Great Power?,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (2015), pp. 323–48; David Lake, “Domination, Authority, and the Forms of Chinese Power,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (2017), pp. 357–82; Yongjin Zhang, “China and the Struggle for Legitimacy of a Rising Power,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (2015), pp. 301–22. For the third, see Anna Caffarena, “Diversity Management in World Politics: Reformist China and the Future of the (Liberal) Order,” *International Spectator*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (2017), pp. 1–17; Nana De Graff and Bastiaan Van Apeldoorn, “US-China Relations and the Liberal World Order: Contending Elites, Colliding Visions?,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 1 (2018), 113–31; Shiping Tang, “China and the Future International Order(s),” *Ethics & International Affairs*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (2018), pp. 31–43; Pak Lee, Anisa Heritage, and Zhouchen Mao, “Contesting Liberal Internationalism: China’s Renegotiation of World Order,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2020), pp. 1–9; De Graff and Van Apeldoorn, “US–China Relations and the Liberal World Order”; Yongjin Zhang,
Can China develop a leadership and promote a vision that incorporates both material and moral progress?\textsuperscript{82} As China debates different ideas of the relationship between values and international order, two dominant discourses have widely circulated as candidates, “moral” leadership and “humane” society. Both concepts are an important part of Yan Xuetong’s important \textit{Leadership and the Rise of the Great Powers}.\textsuperscript{83} Moral leadership resembles realism’s observation that power must be wrapped in a patina of morality to become leadership that is followed for its legitimacy and not because of fear. The realist-based interpretation of the relationship between power and morality has a long lineage, but its approach rarely permits a morality that is independent of, and not instrumentalized by, power-seeking states.\textsuperscript{84} This view also overlaps considerably with the English School’s view of the role of great power leadership in international society, which concerns how great powers play a role in maintaining the international order that sustains the primary security and survival needs of its members. Leadership, in other words, is demonstrating a sense of responsibility to the primary and secondary institutions of international society.\textsuperscript{85} But Great Power leadership rarely extends from interests to include the values of global society.

The second is “humane authority,” which Yan develops in association with moral realism. Humane authority is, according to him, the highest form of international leadership. It is authority to the extent that it is conferred on the leader because it can be trusted. But authority is based on the more than trust. It is trust that the leader will engage in actions and structure relations in a way that produces mutual benefits. In this regard, Yan’s description of humane authority resembles Ikenberry’s interpretation of American leadership after World War Two, where the United States committed to a foreign policy that would improve the condition of states, societies, and peoples (Not that it always or mostly did).

But do discourses of moral realism, humane authority, a “shared future of mankind,” “tinxia,” and other related expressions provide an adequate basis for

\textit{“China and Liberal Hierarchies in Global International Society: Power and Negotiation for Normative Change,” International Affairs,} Vol. 92, No. 4 (2016), pp. 795–816.

\textsuperscript{82} For a related exposition, see Bentley Allan, Srdjan Vucetic, and Ted Hopf, “The Distribution of Identity and the Future of International Order: China’s Hegemonic Prospects,” \textit{International Organization,} Vol. 72, No. 4 (2018), pp. 839–69.

\textsuperscript{83} Yan Xuetong, \textit{Leadership and the Rise of the Great Powers} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018). Also see Deborah Welch Larson, “Can China Change the International System? The Role of Moral Leadership,” \textit{Chinese Journal of International Politics,} Vol. 13, No. 2 (2020), pp. 163–86.

\textsuperscript{84} Jannika Brostrom, “Morality and the National Interest: Toward a ‘Moral Realist’ Research Agenda,” \textit{Cambridge Review of International Affairs,} Vol. 29, No. 4 (2016), pp. 1624–39.

\textsuperscript{85} Ian Clark, “International Society and China: The Power of Norms and the Norms of Power,” \textit{Chinese Journal of International Politics,} Vol. 7, No. 3 (2014), pp. 315–40; Mlada Bukovanksy et al., \textit{Special Responsibilities: Global Problems and American Power} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Pichamon Yeophantong, “Governing the World: China’s Evolving Conceptions of Responsibility,” \textit{Chinese Journal of International Politics,} Vol. 6, No. 4 (2013), pp. 329–64.
moral progress? One measure is to ask: how do these concepts relate to practices of humanity? Although the concept of humanity first emerged in Europe, the practices of humanity that orbit around compassion to distant strangers exist in nearly every culture and religion, and across time and space. In other words, the test is not whether China’s words measure up to a Western-born universalism; instead, it is whether its actions track with compassion to distant strangers. China’s socialist history included a strong sense of protection of the emerging Third World. Over the last decades, China has demonstrated a greater willingness to participate in various global initiatives and mechanisms designed to bring assistance to vulnerable and marginalized populations around the world. There are certainly moments when China’s sensitivity to breaches of sovereignty has caused it to balk to humanitarian action, such as in Syria. But much of the time humanitarian aid does not override sovereignty because the assistance is requested by the state and society. China is beginning to show more interest in global humanitarianism, but remains very much on the sidelines and shown little interest in playing a leadership role. But it is not enough to provide more leadership and resources; it must demonstrate a commitment to impartiality and aid based on need. The Western states that have provided the foundation for the humanitarian sector have not been a role model in this respect.

And, what about its role in COVID-19? China has played an increasingly important role in global health, and, according to many, its record is mixed with contributions and harms. COVID-19 will provide another test regarding the relationship between state interests and humanitarian sentiments; and not just for China but for all those countries that have the capacity to discover, mass-produce, and distribute a vaccine. Like many other states, currently, China is insisting that any vaccine belongs to humanity and must be globally distributed according to principles of equality and fairness. But underneath such lofty values are state interests, most prominently with the rise of vaccine nationalism. Can China adopt a vision of “humane authority” that overlaps with practices of humanity? COVID-19 will be one of many tests for China’s audition for global leadership with humanitarian characters.

86 Miwa Hirono, “Three Legacies of Humanitarianism in China,” Disasters, Vol. 37, No. 2 (2013), pp. 202–20. Pichamon Teophantong, “China and Disaster Governance: Assessing the Domestic Sources of Global Responsibility,” Journal of Chinese Political Science, Vol. 21, No. 2 (2016), pp. 241–55; Amy Lieberman, “China Emerges as a Serious Player in Humanitarian Aid,” Devex, 7 February, 2018; Hanna Krebs, “Responsibility, Legitimacy, Morality: Chinese Humanitarianism in Historical Perspective,” HPG Working Paper, September 2014; Miwa Hirono, “Exploring the Links Between Chinese Foreign Policy and Humanitarian Action: Multiple Interests, Processes, and Actors,” HPG Working Paper, January 2018; Denghua Zhang, “Working With China on Humanitarian Aid in the Pacific,” East Asia Forum, 26 July, 2019, https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/07/26/working-with-china-on-humanitarian-aid-in-the-pacific/.