A Critical Appraisal of the Liberal Tradition in Inter-war International Relations [1]

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to re-examine the deep-rooted tradition of liberal internationalism both in inter-war world order proposals and the simultaneous development of the study of International Relations (IR). The discipline's early history has long been characterised by its 'first great debate' between a 'pessimistic, security-focused' theory of Realism and an 'optimistic, freedom-oriented' theory of Idealism in the inter-war period. However, this classical debate is increasingly appraised as little more than a 'myth' and is no longer useful in clarifying the nature of the theory and practice of inter-war international relations. [2]

This paper challenges this 'myth', not by analysing the theoretical and discursive transformation of the discipline itself, but by relating it to a wider intellectual and historical context of the 1920-30s international political and economic turbulence. To highlight the predominance and crucial role of liberal internationalism in linking the world order proposals after the First World War with the development of the newly-founded discipline of IR, the paper revisits E. H. Carr's so-called 'realist' attack on the hegemonic position that nineteenth-century liberal doctrines regained in the inter-war international context. This attack actually represented his unmasking of the claim that liberal principles, regarded as absolute and universal by those who had been strongly influenced by the liberal tradition, were not genuine principles at all; but rather were the ideological reflection of a particular interest at a particular time, essentially that of the 'haves', who wished to maintain the status quo. [3] Through the re-evaluation of Carr's critical analysis of the ideological development of English-speaking liberal internationalist theory and practice, this paper illuminates one aspect of the continuing relevance of the inter-war debate – not as a 'great debate' between Idealist and Realist theories of international politics, but as a conceptual gap between a liberal political thought aiming to apply an absolute and universal standard to the conduct of international affairs and a cultural-relativist attack on its blindness to the solid political and ideological backing for supposedly disinterested and universal principles.

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[1] This paper forms a sequel to Hitomi Yamanaka, "Rethinking Nineteenth-century Liberal Internationalism in Context: From Revolutionary Thought to a Prop of the Status Quo", *NUCB Journal of Economics and Information Science*, 54:1, 2009, pp. 79-93. The subject will be further elaborated in the author's doctoral thesis.

[2] For example, see Peter Wilson, 'The Myth of the "First Great Debate"', *Review of International Studies*, 24:5, 1998, pp. 1-15; Lucian M. Ashworth, 'Did the Realist-Idealist Great Debate Really Happen?: A Revisionist History of *International Relations*', International Relations, 16:1, 2002, pp. 33-51; Joel Quirk and Darshan Vigneswaran, 'The Construction of an Edifice: The Story of a First Great Debate', *Review of International Studies*, 31:1, 2005, pp 89-107.

[3] E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* ([London: Macmillan, 1939] Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 29.

In this paper, I examine, first, the kind of liberal thinking that was dominant among inter-war world order proposals, and second, how liberal theories were transplanted into a newly established discipline of International Relations. Based on this contextualisation, the last section explores the nature of Carr's 'realist' attack and its continuing relevance to the study of practical and theoretical aspects of world politics.

1. Liberal proposals for a new world order

In the international political domain, liberal internationalism reached a peak at the end of the First World War, maintaining its position at least for the next decade. Nineteenth-century liberal principles enjoyed a resurgence as progressive discourses for Anglo-American policymaking elites, international lawyers and intellectuals – those who sought to regulate international anarchy. Many believed that restraining anarchy was the only way to prevent the recurrence of world-wide violence of the First World War. Hedley Bull illustrates the normative character of their visionary ideas:

> The distinctive characteristic of these writers was their belief in progress: the belief, in particular, that the system of international relations that had given rise to the First World War was capable of being transformed into a fundamentally more peaceful and just world order; that under the impact of the awakening of democracy, the growth of the 'international mind', the development of the League of Nations, the good works of men of peace or the enlightenment spread by their own teachings, it was in fact being transformed; and that their responsibility as students of international relations was to assist this march of progress to overcome the ignorance, the prejudices, the ill-will, and the sinister interests that stood in its way. [4]

A liberal belief in political progress formed the basis of both an actual order of, and a new academic field of international relations. This close link between practical and theoretical aspects of world politics was fairly characteristic of the inter-war period and, to a certain extent, a product of the predominance of Anglo-American liberal principles in the international domain.

1.1　'Wilsonian Idealism'

One of the consequences of the experience of the First World War (1914-1918) was a tendency among the commentators on international affairs to support the replacement of the old balance of power by a system of collective security maintained by international organisation. The most famous critic of the notion of the Concert of Europe and a European balance of power was the US President, Woodrow Wilson, a strong supporter of liberal idealism. In the United States, liberal idealist thinking not only survived but also remained important because both the Democrats and the Republicans restrained the

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[4] Hedley Bull, 'The Theory of International Politics, 1919-1969', in Brian Porter ed., *The Aberystwyth Papers: International Politics 1919-1969* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 34. This is one of the most cited passages in the literature of the history of IR because it provides a concise description of inter-war international thought and of the first approach to the discipline.

challenges to liberalism; the political and economic elite embraced liberal idealism and shaped it into a programme of internationalism during the push for American entry into the war and, subsequently, into the League of Nations. [5]

Wilson's 'Fourteen Points' defended the ideas of free trade and liberalised markets as a basis for peace and proclaimed the doctrine of national self-determination; 'to each nation a state'. 'Wilsonian idealism', based largely on nineteenth-century liberal internationalism, was a reflection of his conviction that 'a general association of nations must be formed under specific covenants for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity of great and small nations alike'. International institutions were believed to promote peaceful cooperation among democratic states, in each of which nationalism was fostered to contribute to the development of internationalism under the slogan of the international harmony of national interests. [6]

It has recently been argued that Wilson's 'Fourteen Points' contained not only a visionary 'idealism' but also a stark 'realism', reflecting the political context of the time. Some commentators claim that the liberal principles in the 'Fourteen Points' were applied strategically by the United States to supersede Bolshevism and win America friends in east and central Europe after the collapse of the remaining empires on the Continent. [7] Exploring this 'realist' aspect of Wilson's 'idealist' thought is beyond the scope of this enquiry, but it is true that the rapid spread of 'Wilsonian idealism' went hand-in-hand with the tactical expansion of American influence over Europe.

America's participation in the Great War played a decisive role in post-war global politics and economics. In addition, in terms of political ideas, the US entry into and the Soviet exit from the war was crucial for inter-war 'idealists' who were wishing to universalise the principles of liberal democracy. Their approach rested on the premise that the new order resulting from the victory of the democratic allies (i.e. US, France and Britain) should embody their vision of a liberal free-market world order. Dismissing the autocracy and militarism of the 'anti-democratic' centralised powers i.e. Germany, Turkey and Austria, and, outdistancing Bolshevism in the Soviet Union, the liberal way of thinking was championed by 'Wilsonian idealism', which became the dominant ideology in bringing about a structural change of the international balance of power. [8]

1.2   The rule of law

The vision of the rule of law was also at a peak in the international domain during the 1920s. The idea was not exactly a product of the Great War; it was an extension of previous centuries' constitutionalism and the liberal conception of peace through law, developed especially in the last decades of the nineteenth century with the gradual progress of international law and organisation to

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[5] David Steigerwald, *Wilsonian Idealism in America* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 8.

[6] Woodrow Wilson, 'Addresses to Congress Asking for Declaration of War', 1917, quoted in John A. Vasquez, *Classics of International Relations*, 3rd edition, (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1996), p. 40.

[7] For example, Michael Cox, G. J. Ikenberry and Takeshi Inoguchi eds., *American Democracy Promotions: Impulses, Strategies and Impacts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 6-7.

[8] Therefore the strongest political opposition to the Wilsonian world order came from the Continental proponents of old, aristocratic orders. This can be viewed as a continuing Continental philosophical challenge to the Western liberal faith. Trobjørn L. Knutsen, *A History of International Relations Theory* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), pp. 209-10.

regulate the international sphere.

At the turn of the century, many international lawyers contributed (with an optimistic belief in the outcomes) to a gradualist enhancement of the rule of law through the Hague Peace Conferences of 1899 and 1907. [9] These Conferences produced several conventions and declarations, and established a Permanent Court of Arbitration to cope with international disputes. Philip Noel-Baker, who attended the 1907 conference in pursuit of the creation of the Permanent Court of International Justice, described the key concept of the rule of law as follows:

> In every scheme for the abolition of war which had been devised by thinkers and statesmen, some form of judicial tribunal had been included. It was recognized in them all that the ideal to which they should tend was the establishment of a system under which disputes between states should be settled by judicial processes in accordance with legal rules, exactly as disputes between individual citizens within a state are settled; so that the last resort between states should be not war but law. [10]

Resting on the domestic analogy, inter-war 'idealists' sought to nurture and institutionalise the rule of law in the international domain. Their idea could claim notable successes in the 1920s: the Covenant of the League of Nations put relations between states on a firmer legal foundation, calling for the peaceful settlement of disputes by arbitration, and the Kellogg-Briand pact of 1928, an international agreement for the renunciation of war as an instrument of national policy, was signed by nearly all countries and contributed to the further developments of international law. Derived originally from a liberal view of the rational nature of human beings and, human society, which was believed to make it possible to establish peaceful relations between states, the vision of the international rule of law became dominant in the first decade of the inter-war period.

This widespread acceptance of the settlement of international disputes by judicial means was backed by relative international stability during the 1920s. This stability was ensured by the predominance of the democratic powers after their victory in the First World War. For those powers that hoped to keep the international environment unchallenged in order to retain their predominance, it was highly beneficial to accept the rule of law system. Generally, in the 1920s, there was a fair political wind that was increasing the importance of constitutional constraints on war.

According to Lorna Lloyd, in discussing Noel-Baker's peace campaign, the spirit of the Hague Conferences and the peace through law approach was pursued even more vigorously after the First World War for three principal reasons: first, there was a rapid growth in peace societies and peace movements, which spread the message that the rule of law would contribute to overcoming the painful experience of war; secondly, the British Labour Party began to pay attention to international legal obligations because the party was gradually turning to a pro-League foreign policy in which the peace-

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[9] Hidemi Suganami, *The Domestic Analogy and World Order Proposals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), Chap. 4.

[10] P. J. Noel-Baker, 'The Permanent Court of International Justice' in H. V. Temperley ed., *A History of the Peace Conference of Paris* (London: H. Frowde, and Hodder & Stoughton, 1924), p. 482.

building aspects of the League were strongly emphasised; and, thirdly, a considerable number of League members, many of which were small states that had at last gained a louder voice at the League Assembly, became legally self-conscious and took a legalist approach to international relations. [11]

As was the case with 'Wilsonian idealism', an attempt to universalise the rule of law system could be observed not only in terms of politics but also of ideology. Politically speaking, the Anglo-American victory over Germany resulted in the dominance of Britain and America in constructing a new world order and maintaining international peace and security. In ideological terms, on the other hand, the victory of 'democratic and constitutional' states over 'autocratic and militaristic' powers was decisive enough to revitalise traditional Anglo-American constitutionalism and its essential backbone, the rule of law, in the international domain.

Thus, the achievements of Western liberal democracy and constitutionalism had emerged 'victorious' over traditional German political ideas as a result of Germany's 'defeat' in the war. In particular, lawyers and political scientists of the period came to claim that the former was irreconcilable with the latter. Lassa Oppenheim, one of the most prominent international lawyers of his generation, argued that '[t]he Prussian conception of the State as an end in itself and of the authority of the State as something above everything else and divine – a conception which found support in the philosophy of Hegel and his followers – is adverse to the ideal of democracy and constitutional government'. [12] He thus defended the idea of the League against the German conception of the state as a supreme institution, dismissing the latter as having led to the disastrous consequence of war.

1.3 Collective security and coercive force

IR scholarship has generally taken the view that in the immediate post-war years many 'utopian' thinkers of international relations strongly advocated the legitimacy of the League of Nations and that these 'utopians' ceased to be influential when the political 'realists' criticised the League for being dysfunctional. Against this, recent literature argues that the debates on the League did not necessarily dominate inter-war international thought or divide into two mutually exclusive groups of 'idealist' and 'realist'. [13] These studies, based on a close examination of the writings of inter-war intellectuals, reveal that those who are pejoratively called 'utopians' were not divorced from 'reality' but made practical suggestions, just like 'realists', in order to mitigate the international anarchy that they recognised as one of the fundamental causes of the First World War. Although intellectuals of the earlier period did emphasise the study of international organisation while those of the latter years of the inter-war era focused on international politics, the concepts of anarchy and sovereignty were consistently at the core of their thought. [14] It would be fair to say, therefore, that most writers who had experienced the catastrophic world war had no choice but to face the reality of the anarchy/sovereignty problematic and

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[11] Lorna Lloyd, 'Philip Noel-Baker and Peace Through Law', in David Long and Peter Wilson eds., *Thinkers of the Twenty Years' Crisis: Inter-war Idealism Reassessed* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 31-3.

[12] L. Oppenheim, *The League of Nations and Its Problems* (London: Longman Green, 1919), pp. 75-6.

[13] To cite a few, Lucian M. Ashworth, 'Where Are the Idealists in Interwar International Relations?', *Review of International Studies*, 32:2, 2006, pp. 291-308: Brian C. Schmidt, *The Political Discourse of Anarchy: A Disciplinary History of International Relations* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998).

[14] Schmidt, *op. cit.*, Chap. 6.

the international organisation of existing states, whether they were for or against it.

One of the inter-war responses to international anarchy was to embrace a system of collective security, in which states transferred domestic concepts and practices to the international domain. The system was backed by contemporary liberal international thinking, which explored the possibility of regulating anarchy by a broader solidarity and consensus among nations and the introduction of the element of coercion into the international system for the settlement of disputes. [15] To ensure collective security, it was a pre-condition that states recognise the interests of the international community as a whole. This would involve the effective implementation of concepts of just and unjust war, or, of measures short of war to deal with problems that the collectivity of states confronts. Liberals consequently came to the view that the use of force or engagement in a just war for their mutual defence should be legitimised for the collective representative of international society.

This view was reinforced, at least partly, by the harsh realities of international politics of the 1930s. While his most famous argument revolves around the futility of war, Norman Angell defended the use of force as a 'lesser evil' in the organised community of states. [16] He eventually reached a 'practical political conclusion' that 'the force be transferred to the law, be organised as an instrument of the community; and that the organisation be based upon clear political and diplomatic obligation'. [17] Or, to take a more radical example, David Davies advocated the enforcement of peace by an international executive with as powerful a police force as the one in the domestic sphere. He wrote:

> for the first time in history it is possible to differentiate between those weapons which should be allocated to an international force and those which should be retained by each individual nation. ... [I]f there really exists the combined will to peace... let it be expressed through the scientific organisation of an international police force based upon the voluntary assent of all those nations which participate in the scheme'. [18]

In the view of the 'idealists', a resort to armed force in order to impose one's will upon neighbours should not be allowed, but would only be legitimate under the aegis of the League of Nations, machinery intended to support the renunciation of war based on pacific internationalism and pooled security. To get this machinery to work properly, according to Leonard Woolf, the increasing violence and openness of attacks upon the League, which were responsible for seriously lessening its influence, should be contained by using all necessary measures. As well as defending the League for its peaceful settlement of international disputes, Woolf supported the League's collective containment:

> The weakness of the League is not in the League system, but in the hypocrisy of keeping states which are opposed to the system in the League. A League, purged of militarist and

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[15] Suganami, *op. cit*., pp. 79-82.

[16] Norman Angell, 'Weak Points of Pacifist Propaganda', in G. P. Gooch ed., *In Pursuit of Peace* (London: Methuen, 1933), pp. 28-44.

[17] Norman Angell, *Great Illusion 1933* (London: Heinemann, 1933), p. 370.

[18] David Davies, *The Problem of the Twentieth Century* (London: Earnest Benn, 1934), p. 56.

fascist states, composed of democratic and socialist governments, determined by every means in their power to prevent war, would be a much stronger instrument for peace and civilisation than the half-sham League which we have today. [19]

Faced by the Abyssinian crisis of 1935, Woolf attacked 'the 100 per cent. pacifist position which maintains that the use of force, and, therefore, the application of sanctions by a Government, should never be supported in international affairs'. [20]

Thus, in the 1930s, a period marked by fascist expansionism and militarism, more 'idealists' came to assert the need for coercive force in the international sphere in order to defend the system of peace and security against possible violations and attacks. Consequently, their increased support for containment, including military sanctions, distanced them from those who held the '100 per cent. pacifist position', which repudiated collective security for its requirement of rearmament. [21]

As we have seen, early inter-war world order proposals coloured by liberal internationalist thought became predominant through the spread of 'Wilsonian idealism', the rule of law and the collective security system. It is no wonder that they appealed to the public as an almost 'revolutionary' approach to the problem of international anarchy. In a practical sense, however, they functioned as a political faction advocating the defence of the post-Versailles international order, protecting the status-quo powers from attacks by those who were opposed to it and demanded a 'revolutionary' change of the system. This is one of the characteristic features of nineteenth-century liberal doctrines that Carr identified in inter-war world order proposals. He also discovered other features, as we shall presently see, in the early development of the discipline of IR.

2. Liberal thinking in the study of international relations

It is well attested that the study of international relations as an academic discipline emerged as a consequence of the catastrophic result of the First World War and widespread hopes for the promotion of a permanent peace. In its early period, the discipline was also deeply influenced by liberal thinking, one of the foundations of which was that the growth of reasoned public opinion would be a safeguard against major disasters in the future. In addition to the reform of the international system, liberal internationalists desired the reform of education to enable the public to develop common interests in peace. It is significant that this peace education was often linked with their ambitious attempts to develop a powerful public support for the League of Nations. The world's first university chair for the systematic study of international politics was founded in 1919 in Wales, by David Davies, a Liberal MP and leading peace campaigner, who hoped that the new discipline would increase both public understanding of the League and intellectual support for the League idea. [22]

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[19] Leonard Woolf, 'Labour's Foreign Policy', *The Political Quarterly*, 4, 1933, pp. 523-4.

[20] Leonard Woolf, 'Mediation on Abyssinia', *The Political Quarterly*, 7, 1936, p. 31.

[21] For an account of the polarisation of the peace movement and public opinion over the use of force in the latter 1930s, see Martin Ceadel, *Semi-Detached Idealists: The British Peace Movement and International Relations, 1854-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), Chap 10.

[22] Brian Porter, 'David Davies and the Enforcement of Peace', in Long and Wilson eds., *op. cit*., pp. 59-60.

A liberal view of public opinion as a constructive force and of the League as a fair representation of the voice of peace-loving people was expounded by numerous inter-war 'idealist' thinkers. For example, in a lecture delivered in 1930 at the Geneva Institute of International Relations, Alfred Zimmern, an Oxford professor who had become prominent in the immediate post-First World War years, insisted on the importance of education for world citizenship. He wanted the younger generation to understand 'the achievements and aims of the League of Nations' and to be 'trained to regard international co-operation as the normal mode of carrying on human affairs'. [23] Although Zimmern acknowledged that it would be a 'farce even to dream of a world Government based on world public opinion', he believed that the promotion of an adequate world citizenship education would bring into existence a public 'capable of understanding and controlling the conditions of our time'. In his view, public focus on international organisation was crucial as it concerned 'people in almost every walk of life' who needed to co-operate 'beyond the barriers of their own parish, province, or nation'. [24] For Zimmern, the movement for the study of international relations was a liberal and enlightening endeavour, which would organise internationally a 'national and local effort to level the backward people up to foremost' and expand the network of contacts between people in 'an increasingly democratic and an increasingly decentralised world'. [25]

As Zimmern's view illustrates, democracy and decentralisation were the key issues that stimulated the development of the discipline of IR. In the early inter-war period, the centralisation of political power in the hands of the state, and exercised through the machinery of government, was held by political theorists of pluralism to be a threat to the functioning of a democratic society. [26] Among a number of different explanations for the causes of the First World War, one influential argument was that the German theory of the state, which had been advanced at least partly by German thinkers such as Hegel, Fichte, and Treitshke in opposition to the universalisation of Western liberal democracy, had helped to facilitate its outbreak. Inter-war intellectuals, who were seeking an alternative conception of state sovereignty and had accepted Oppenheim's reasoning that German political philosophy and their system of government was incompatible with liberal internationalism, argued that the former was responsible for the hostilities associated with the war due to its insistence on the unlimited and centralised authority of the state and the government's supremacy over all other institutions and associations. [27]

Thus, the early inter-war critique of the theory of absolute state sovereignty tended to claim the supremacy of liberal internationalism over the German theory of the state. Anglo-American political theorists believed the state should be subjected to some limitation on its sovereignty, and favoured the collective pooling of responsibility and authority. In Britain, Fabians and radical liberals, through bodies such as the Union for Democratic Control and the League of Nations Union, gave considerable support

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[23] A. E. Zimmern, 'Education for World Citizenship', in *Problems of Peace: Lectures Delivered at the Geneva Institute of International Relations, Fifth Series* (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), p. 304.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 306 ff.

[25] *Ibid.*, pp. 310-1.

[26] Schmidt, *op. cit.*, pp. 167-71.

[27] *Ibid.*, pp. 163-71.

to this argument. [28] Although later as disillusioned with liberalism as his contemporaries had been in the 1930s, Harold Laski, who had considerable influence in both Britain and America, had been one of those advocates, arguing that 'the monistic theory of the State', springing from the German doctrine of the unity of the state, 'runs counter to some of the deepest convictions that we could possess'. [29]

The attack on the juristic theory of sovereignty that was occurring within political science was also widely shared by international legal scholars. They regarded state sovereignty as an obstacle to establishing the legal basis of international law; in short, they also viewed the German theory of state and sovereignty as a threat. [30] Considering that the discussions in both the fields of international law and political science had profound implications for the early stage of the study of international relations, it is no wonder that their common thesis – i.e. liberal internationalism on a constitutionalist basis in opposition to the German theory of the state – formed the first dominant academic theory of IR. Just as in the case of the world order proposals at the time, the early development of the new discipline was fully supported by the 'dominant' theory of liberal internationalism in the English-speaking world. The Anglo-American lead in the growth of this new thinking can be explained in part by the fact that their national powers were less devastated than others by the First World War. In addition, it can also be argued that the critique of the anarchic nature and unprincipled power politics of pre-1914 international relations appealed to those who had been educated under the influence of the liberal traditions of the English-speaking world. [31]

Consequently, in its early years IR upheld the supremacy of Anglo-American liberal principles, championing 'democratic civilisation' against 'autocratic and authoritarian statism', and declaring policies such as the balance of power, secret diplomacy, and military alliances to be outdated and likely to provoke another world war. As is well known, the creation and initial course of IR was directed by a passionate desire to prevent war; yet it also reflected the affective dominance of liberal thinking and practices as they related to post-Great War world politics.

3. Carr's 'Realist' attack?

A series of critiques that Carr presented immediately before the Second World War have become known as the 'realist' attack upon the 'utopians', who are often assumed to have failed to recognise power as an essential element of politics. However, focusing on the question of whether or not the element of power was acknowledged does not help us to understand the broader scope of Carr's critique of the prevailing international institutional structures and the early consensus about the nature of the IR discipline. As seen in the preceding sections, deep-rooted liberal traditions were dominant both in the post-Versailles world order proposals and the foundational normative assumptions of the fledgling discipline of IR. Facing the solid liberal internationalist link between those two, Carr sought to reveal the ideological and political character of these approaches to the theory and practice of international

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[28] Chris Brown, *Understanding International Relations* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 21.

[29] Harold Laski, *Studies in the Problem of Sovereignty.* ([New Haven: Yale University Press, 1917] Kitchener: Batoche Books, 1999), p. 17.

[30] Schmidt, *op. cit.*, pp. 177-8.

[31] Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

relations.

3.1 World order proposals

The first focus is Carr's attitude towards the practical aspect of establishing a new international order in the post-First World War era. Carr denounced an outdated belief in nineteenth-century liberalism as providing the status quo powers with an ideological basis for a new order that was almost exclusively beneficial to them, and, for being ahistorical in applying in the twentieth-century international domain ideas outside of their context of time and place. In his view, the failure to create a lasting peace after the First World War was attributable not to the lack of power politics but to the misapplication of the idea of nineteenth-century liberal democracy [32]

Carr's notion that the hegemonic discourses of the previous century were no longer valid in different historical conditions corresponded with the view of another 'realist', Morgenthau, who argued that nineteenth-century concepts of law, sovereignty and peace could not be universal as they were indissolubly linked to a certain political situation at a specific time. [33] Thus Carr and Morgenthau had similar intentions: to relativise the liberal principles of an Anglo-American-led world order. This is what came to be perceived as their 'realist' attack.

Among numerous inter-war proposals, that of outlawing war under the rule of law had an important role in terms of the stability of international relations. To Carr, however, the rule-of-law system appeared to serve as 'a bulwark of the existing order', which denounced those who wanted important changes in the existing order as disturbers of the peace and enemies of the law; after all, '[t]he essence of law is to promote stability and maintain the existing framework of society', not to embrace some eternal ethical principles that were believed by nineteenth-century liberal thinkers. [34] In Carr's view, the emphasis on the relativity of law and its ethical basis, and the focus on law's reflection of the interests and policy of the 'haves' in a given place and time, was one of the principal contribution of Marxist thinking. [35] He also introduced Lenin's view of law as 'an expression of the will of the ruling class', and Laski's notion that legal rules were always seeking to accomplish an end deemed desirable by some group of people. [36] Carr presented their views as the 'realist' questioning of the ideal of law.

Moreover, his 'realist' argument against an inclination to treat law as something independent of, and ethically superior to, politics coexisted with his normative, even 'pacifist', approach. If resort to war for the purpose of altering the status quo was condemned as illegal, Carr argued, there must be effective machinery instituted for bringing about changes by peaceful means. [37] While attacking the rule-of-law international system for being a tool in the hands of the defenders of the status quo, Carr did acknowledge the necessity of international law as 'a function of the political community of nations' that would work for those changes. [38] 'Respect for law and treaties will be maintained', he wrote, 'only in so

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[32] Carr, *Crisis*, p. 29.

[33] Morgenthau, *op. cit*., part V.

[34] Carr, *Crisis*, p. 175.

[35] *Ibid*., p. 164.

[36] *Ibid*.

[37] *Ibid*., p. 176.

[38] *Ibid*., p. 165.

far as the law recognizes effective political machinery through which it can itself be modified and superseded'. [39]

As well as the rule of law, the system of collective security was another bulwark, according to Carr, for the 'haves' to prevent the 'have-nots' from attempting to challenge and modify the existing order; the system would serve only to enable the dominant powers to identify their own interests with those of the world as a whole. According to liberal internationalist thinking, it was the League of Nations that should provide a guarantee of security based on the collective will of nations. In Carr's view, on the other hand, the League, whose core idea derived from Lockeian liberalism and which was formulated according to the doctrines of nineteenth-century liberal democracy, could be effective 'only in so far as it was an instrument of the national policy of its most powerful members', for only those states shared liberal doctrines. [40] Thus, the League of Nations was supported mainly by those who hoped to maintain the existing order; in Britain, for example, the League was embraced even by 'what might be called the nationalist wing of the Conservative Party'. [41]

Carr highlighted what he saw as several fallacies in the League's system of collective security. [42] The first was the illusion that 'an arrangement whose basis was necessarily the preservation of the status quo could ever be universal'. The second was 'to suppose that the criterion of "aggression" was either equitably applicable or morally valid'. The third, and practical fallacy of the League's system was that it ignored the fact that modern warfare required long-term preparation, that the member states who collaborated in war must concert their preparations in advance, and that it is impossible, particularly for a small country, to wait until an 'act of aggression' has brought about a state of war before deciding to fight. In Carr's eyes, therefore, the doctrine of collective security embodied in the League Covenant was 'already bankrupt' prior to its inclusion. [43]

Nonetheless, Carr did express a hope for international cooperation under 'a consultative League which will once more depend not on force, but on moral suasion'. [44] In order to transform the function of the League of Nations from a protector of vested interests in the status quo into an effective machinery providing a forum for peaceful change, Carr suggested the activation of Article XIX of the Covenant, which allowed the Assembly to advise on the reconsideration of treaties and other conditions that were antagonistic to peace. [45] Disproportionate attention to Carr's emphasis upon the element of power in international politics leads to missing this significant normative element in his approach to the League as a consultative forum, one which did not presuppose a measure of compulsion to enforce strict control over the challenges to the existing international order. In Carr's view, any attempt by Anglo-American liberal internationalists to justify and monopolise such enforcement under the League system was no less utopian than their fundamental belief that the establishment of the League of Nations would

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[39] *Ibid*., p. 176.

[40] *Ibid*., p. 126.

[41] *Ibid*.

[42] Carr, *Conditions of Peace* (London: Macmillan, 1942), p. 52.

[43] *Ibid*., p. 53.

[44] Carr, 'The Future of the League', *Fortnightly*, October 1936, pp. 391-2.

[45] *Ibid*., p. 395.

lead to the elimination of power from international relations.

3.2   Developing IR

The second point to be discussed is Carr's critique of the developing academic discipline of international relations, the intellectual foundation of which was the liberal internationalism then dominant in the English-speaking world. Although welcoming the new study of IR born in response to a popular demand for openness of information about international affairs, Carr questioned the deep-rooted liberal tradition that it embraced for being monopolised by the 'haves'. As is widely agreed, the initial central impulse of IR practitioners was a passionate desire to prevent war. This desire dominated and inspired many inter-war intellectuals; consequently, according to Carr, the new subject was stuck at the 'utopian stage of development' in which 'wishing prevails over thinking, generalization over observation, and in which little attempt is made at a critical analysis of existing facts or available means'. [46]

What was characteristic about Carr's analysis of 'utopian' IR was his argument that the 'Anglo-Saxon origin' of IR's basic assumption was that 'every nation has an identical interest in peace' and that 'any nation which desires to disturb the peace is therefore both irrational and immoral'. [47] 'Wilsonian idealism', the rule of law and collective security all had this origin. As for 'Wilsonian idealism', according to Carr, it transplanted the ideas of nineteenth-century rationalism, e.g. utilitarianism and laissez-faire principles, to the new field of international relations, and brought those ideas back to Europe where they were born; thus, '[n]early all popular theories of international politics between the two world wars were reflexions, seen in an American mirror, of nineteenth-century liberal thought'. [48]

Probably, the myth of the first 'great debate' – that the 'utopian' theory of international relations surrendered to the 'realist' attack, which exposed the gap between wishful thinking and the harsh reality of international politics in the late 1930s, persists. The gap Carr highlighted, however, was that between the Anglo-Saxon conception of morality, 'which has dominated political and economic thought for a century and a half' and Continental political philosophy, which regarded ethical standards not as the expression of absolute and a priori principles but as historically conditioned and products of circumstances and interests. [49]

Carr thus sought to reveal the relative and pragmatic character of liberal democratic principles, and questioned their predominance in IR by presenting the outstanding achievement of German thinkers such as Hegel, Marx and proponents of the sociology of knowledge. [50] Interestingly, Carr introduced them as 'realists' in *The Twenty Years' Crisis*. For him, it was their intellectual challenges to liberal political thought that corresponded to the 'reality' of the time; in contrast, he would argue to liberal internationalists' sticking to an 'absolute and disinterested standard for the conduct of international affairs', which tended to mask the ever changing 'reality'. [51] In this respect, Carr's 'realist' attack can be

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[46] Carr, *Crisis*, pp. 1-9.

[47] *Ibid.*, p. 50.

[48] *Ibid.*, p. 29.

[49] *Ibid.*, p. 58; p. 65 ff.

[50] See Chapter 5 in Carr, *Crisis*.

[51] *Ibid.*, p. 80.

better read as a 'relativist' attack, targeted at those who attempted to apply supposedly universal and abstract principles that were in his view a 'transparent disguises of selfish vested interests', to the study of the changing conditions of international politics. [52]

Carr's critical stance on the ideological nature of IR theories did not change during his lifetime. In a letter to Stanley Hoffmann in 1977, the 85-year-old Carr, questioning his own contribution to the field of IR theory, continued to express the radical view:

> I suspect that we tried to conjure into existence an international society and a science of international relations. We failed. No international society exists, but an open club without substantive rules. No science of international relations exists. The study of international relations in English speaking countries is simply a study of the best way to run the world from positions of strength. [53]

In the history of IR, his 'realist' attack has been considered 'victorious' over the inter-war 'utopians' or 'idealists'. Carr would almost certainly have rejected this claim, however, arguing instead that it had never really succeeded; both practical and theoretical aspects of world politics were dominated by the hegemonic power(s) of the time, and as a 'policy-oriented' discipline, contemporary IR did not encourage critical reflection on this dominance but developed instead a theory of the determinants of policymaking. Since Carr's attack, the study of international relations has embraced numerous traditions and approaches to deal with a wider range of issues. However, just as when Carr wrote, the discipline remains largely a product of the developed and English-speaking world.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the impact of the deep-rooted tradition of liberal internationalism in two fields: the inter-war world order proposals and the development of the newly established study of international relations. Situated in a historical and intellectual context, Carr's critical appraisal of their close ideological link and his aim to relativise the hegemonic status of Anglo-American political culture could be read as a guiding thread in the inter-war debate on the supremacy of liberal doctrines in both the theory and practice of international politics.

His stance embraced a cultural relativism. Carr argued against the liberal orientation towards an absolute and objective standard, which, in his view, should be relativised, acknowledging the ever-changing reality of world politics, in which the relative power of states is constantly shifting. The argument here has shown that there was another strand of the inter-war debate – a realist-relativist attack, originated in Continental political philosophy, on the illusion of 'timeless' and absolute dominance of the existing liberal order and principles. Its radical attempt to expose the ever-changing political reality could never be identified as a conservative defence of the status quo, which is usually

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[52] *Ibid*.

[53] Carr to Stanley Hoffmann, 30 September 1977, quoted in R.W. Davies, 'Edward Hallett Carr', *Proceedings of International Studies*, Vol. LXIX, 1983, p. 487.

regarded as a key feature of Realist thought, nor as a fellow traveller of its counterpart, the Idealists, a group composed of a wide range of inter-war English-speaking thinkers, from the conservatives defending the liberal tradition to revolutionary ideologues wishing to remake the world based on some grand utopian vision. Reappraising the inter-war debate in a more subtle and historically sensitive way would navigate our way out of some of the sterile conceptual blind alleys that has dominated the study of international relations.