

Liberal Theory and the European Union

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Abstract

Liberal theory in international relations predicts that states who are linked by trade, membership in international organizations, and shared democratic government will tend to become increasingly peaceful and cooperative. In this paper, I will examine the validity of this prediction in relation to the European Union.

Is the world really an anarchic system where powers compete in an endless struggle for dominance and survival between states, or is there more to it than that? Are states really predisposed to mistrust and even fight each other for all of the foreseeable future, or can they co-operate like their citizens do? Are there other actors whose role should not be ignored? In this paper, I will examine the liberal theory of international relations and how it explains relations between the various actors that make up the modern world. In order to best illustrate the theory's predictions and explanations, I will use Intra-European relations from 1945-present. I will endeavour to demonstrate that Europe's transition from the battleground of the two most destructive wars in recorded history to the bastion of peace it is today was due to liberal factors such as democracy, trade, and institutional co-operation. To develop this thesis, I will examine the past and present of European integration, attempt to critically evaluate its role in spreading peace and prosperity throughout the region, and evaluate competing explanations of this from other theories.

Liberalism can be seen as a re-examination of realist theory in that it accepts the latter's basic assumptions about anarchy, sovereignty, and the national interest, but adds a number of additional factors that its proponents consider to be important. While realists consider the state's power (both military and economic) relative to its peers, its alliances, and its geographical situation to be the major determinants of its actions, liberals would add that the state's level of democracy, its degree of reliance on international trade, and its membership in international organizations (IOs) other than military alliances are equally significant (Dunne et al., 2010). Liberal theorists contend that pairs of democracies linked through trade and international institutions virtually never go to war with one another (Owen, 1994).

This is illustrated in the context of the post-war Europe quite well. Pre-1945 Europe was one of the most war-torn places on the planet, and European states devoted much of their attention to devising and using newer and more deadly tactics and technologies to crush their enemies. Power changed hands regularly and violently. When the states of Europe were not at war with one another, they were using the brutally efficient military means they had practiced on one another to subjugate states overseas, to whose relatively underdeveloped armed forces they must have seemed like unstoppable juggernauts (Dyer, 2004). By the twentieth century, the three strongest states in Western Europe were the United Kingdom (UK), France, and Germany. Throughout the roughly

70 years before 1945, France and Germany fought three wars against each other, and the UK intervened on the French side during two of them. The latter two wars, now referred to as the First and Second World Wars, were so large in scale that they drew in states from all over the world, and so destructive that the survival of human civilization in the event of a third was in doubt (Dunne et al., 2010).

However, all this changed suddenly after 1945. Following the defeat of Germany and the liberation of France, the three states, as well as most of their smaller contemporaries, had become democratic. They were also all severely crippled by the war, with two of them suffering defeat and conquest, and one economic collapse. This, combined with the growing perceived threat of Soviet expansion in the east, and accompanying encouragement to oppose it coming from the United States, put the three states in a position where war was very much not in their interests (Harper, 2011). However, the patterns of history could not be ignored, and it was considered that, assuming the relationship between the three, and most importantly between France and Germany, was not dramatically altered, another war was inevitable. Several solutions were proposed to prevent this. The most obvious was to severely constrain the power of the Second World War aggressor Germany, but that had been tried following the First World War, and had clearly not worked (Dyer, 2004). Perhaps greater European integration was the answer?

The first move in the direction of economic, military, and political integration was the European Coal and Steel Community, formed in 1950. Its stated aim was to control the market for coal and steel, two vital war materials, in such a way as to make war between two European states, but most specifically France and Germany, impossible. It was, unsurprisingly, a French initiative. The French army, even with the occasional help of other European states, had been found wanting in all three of its wars against Germany, and it was clear that new methods would be needed to ensure French security (Dunne et al., 2010). It is telling, however, that Kantian methods were selected for this purpose. The French seem to have concluded that relying on *realpolitik* and the pursuit of power was no longer working.

Over the following 63 years, the organization's mandate and membership have both expanded dramatically, if not always successfully, from six states into the 27 member democratic coalition that won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012 (Dyer, 2012). The EU has unified the border security and currency of most of its members, and a combined EU government administers some of the continent's collective domestic and foreign affairs.

What is most important from a liberal perspective, however, is that all members of the EU must be democratic (Dyer, 2012), and are automatically connected by membership in a relatively binding international (supranational, technically) institution, and in most cases by a common market and currency. Liberalism predicts that these factors will lead to increasing peace and co-operation, which is exactly what we see in the EU. The EU is, essentially, one of the biggest proofs of Liberal theory, although there are alternative explanations proposed by other theories. One of the better illustrations of this is that states in the EU are today demonstrating cautious willingness to pool their sovereignty in ways that make absolutely no sense from a realist perspective.

One example is a recent proposal by France to combine British and French nuclear second strike capabilities. Both states currently keep one ballistic missile

submarine at sea at all times in order to deter nuclear attacks on their territory, and France proposed that instead, the two states should alternate, having only one submarine at sea at a time to act as the deterrence for both (Dyer, 2010). This is a terrible idea for any state that expects to actually need to use its nuclear deterrence. Even for states as close as Britain and France, the idea of putting one's own people at risk of nuclear attack by retaliating for an attack on a foreign power is probably fantastical. It only really makes sense as an exercise in international co-operation. Of course, the proposal was never adopted (Dyer, 2010), and neither were repeated calls for a combined European army, while plans for a shared Anglo-French aircraft carrier are encountering problem after problem ("New aircraft carrier plans hit by further delays", 2012) but these failures have not prevented the continuing resurgence of similar proposals. Despite the problems with Europe's common currency, the Union has made large financial commitments to preserve the integrity of the Euro. For better or for worse, it seems that the leaderships of European states have come to view European unity as a vital, combined interest.

The continuing creep of European integration on the sovereignty of European states is illustrative of another Liberal prediction: the self-perpetuation of systemic elements that favour peace (Dunne et al., 2010). Co-operation in coal and steel led to co-operation in trade in general, then to a common market, and finally even to a common currency. Economic co-operation demanded political co-operation to regulate trade, which resulted in the political union of Europe through institutions such as the European Parliament. Since the organization's founders, believing dictatorship to be at least partly responsible for both world wars, made democracy and respect for human rights prerequisites for membership (Dunne et al., 2010), any state wishing to join had to first become democratic and start respecting human rights. And join they did; from its initial membership of six states in 1950-1951, EU membership has now swelled to 27, with Croatia set to soon become the 28th (Dyer, 2012). Many of these states, and others whose applications for memberships have not yet been approved, arguably felt huge pressure to reform their societies to conform to entry requirements, making the EU one of the modern world's biggest promoters of democracy and human rights, hence the Nobel Peace Prize (Dyer, 2012). Thus, the financial and political regulations enshrined within the EU and its predecessors naturally expanded the organization's ideals.

Of course, any objective analyst must admit to any imperfections he or she finds, and there are certainly imperfections in a liberal analysis of European integration. These concerns include the idea that the EU was and is irrelevant to regional peace due to the Cold War and the power of the United States, the fact that EU states, though peaceful towards one another, are still quite prone to violence against non-members, complaints of a 'democratic deficit' in Brussels, and of course the economic difficulties relating to the Euro in Greece, Italy, and Spain.

First, though the idea of EU states fighting one another is virtually unthinkable, that does not stop individual EU states, or coalitions thereof, from involving themselves in military adventures all over the globe. From the French intervention in Mali to the British participation in the invasion of Iraq to the NATO occupation of Afghanistan, EU states big and small have had their share of war. Of course, this would hardly be the first piece of evidence to emerge that challenged the idea that liberal democracies were peaceful in general (Dunne et al., 2010); the fact remains that they are still very peaceful towards one another.

Though all EU member states must be democratic, the EU itself is less so. For example, many key members of the European government, including the President, are unelected (Waterfield, 2012). As well, the organization puts its policies up for vote or referendum by member states only begrudgingly, and is not above attempting to force the outcome when it decides to do so. This has been argued with regards to ratification of the Lisbon treaty, which established the office of the President and abolished unanimity requirements for EU legislation in 2009 (Dyer, 2009). Critics pointed out that the ratification process was handled in such a way as to encourage national voting along party lines and avoid national referendums. When the vote was required to pass a referendum, the EU's political elites simply kept repackaging it until voters 'got it right' (Dyer, 2009). Thus, the further the EU travels towards federation, the closer it gets to autocracy, at least under its current institutional framework.

Finally, the common European currency has deprived EU members of control over their own national currencies, with disastrous effects for the Union's least developed economies. The economic crises in Greece, Italy, and Spain have left them economically at the mercy of France and Germany, the two largest continental economies (Dyer, 2011). Thus, a realist could argue that co-operation within the EU seems to have produced little more than Franco-German economic hegemony. Indeed, realists readily accept the idea that power differentials, be they economic or military (both of which exist in this case) can reduce the likelihood of war (Dunne et al., 2010); it could be seen that Europe's half century of peace has only been achieved by the dominance of a great power. The US would have fulfilled this role during the Cold War, and now France and Germany have taken over and can be seen as cooperating to maintain shared dominance over Europe.

These concerns should illustrate that the EU model is hardly the solution to all humanity's earthly problems, and does not fully prove the validity of Kantian liberalism. It does, however, further strengthen the correlation between international trade, IOs, and shared liberal-democratic norms, and peace. The origin of the European Coal and Steel Community marks a near-complete break with previous European behaviour patterns, and Liberalism does have convincing arguments as to why this is so. When European leaders realized that they had to avoid war, they did so using the promotion of democracy and economic integration through an international organization, just as Kantian liberalism prescribes. Though European power politics has not gone away, and economic power continues to be exercised by stronger EU members over weaker ones, they have become nonviolent in nature, and are being matched with patterns of co-operation that far exceed any historical precedent.

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