

Interwar Internationalism: Origins and Impact of a ‘Scientific’ Approach to the Study of International Relations

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Abstract

The First World War spurred an interest among academic scholars, philanthropic foundations, and even policymakers in some countries to look for conditions which can ensure lasting world peace. This required them to adopt an ‘internationalist’ outlook in that a mere examination of domestic socio-economic and political conditions would have been myopic and would have failed to explain the persistence of conflict among nation-states. The search for peace in the interwar period was accompanied with a belief among scholars that it was the political class which was responsible for these continual conflicts. They believed that the publics of different nation-states inherently supported peace. Misplaced priorities among statesmen, to put it simply, caused wars. Consequently, the conditions for lasting peace could only be identified if we detached ourselves from pursuit of narrow interests and the concomitant ‘beggar-thy-neighbour policies’ which was characteristic of the inter-war period. Inter-war internationalism was characterized by a fundamental belief that if we studied inter-state relations, diplomacy, and statecraft *scientifically*, it would be possible to establish lasting peace i.e. it would be possible for the concerned scholars to establish and participate in transnational networks who can then guide policymakers on how to establish and maintain stable, ordered, democratic, and peaceful societies. This essay examines the origins of liberal internationalism in the interwar period which, inter alia, shaped and was shaped by transnational networks such as think tanks, academics, philanthropic foundations and so on. The impact it had on post-war period, especially with respect to the very way IR as a separate discipline of inquiry functioned, is also investigated, including discussions of how it evolved over time.

Keywords: Inter-War Internationalism, International Relations, Scientific Approach

Origins of Interwar Internationalism

The etymology of ‘internationalism’ lies in the aspiration for world peace, in the notion of world citizenship inscribed in institutions like the League of Nations (Clavin 2011, p. 5-6), says Patricia Clavin, a leading scholar on interwar internationalism. ‘Internationalism’ is understood by Skjoldager and Tønnesson as the liberal-inspired belief that it is possible to establish a legally regulated system, based on sovereign states, in which peace and security will prevail, and that this can be achieved through the development of law, organization, exchange, and communication (Skjoldager and Tønnesson 2008, p. 303).

In the 1920s, it was strongly characterized by its claims and aspirations to international democracy (Clavin 2011, p. 9). One could see a feedback mechanism of theory-practice in this context. Theoretical outlook informed institutional practices. Institutional practices, in turn, sought to reinforce theoretical outlook. For instance, it was this ‘internationalist’ outlook which inspired, inter alia, the setting up of League of Nations. In turn, the League of Nations’ claim to be some sort of international parliament, which was echoed in its structure, notably in the Assembly and Council, and which also, formed part of the institution’s public presentation of its activities, spurred internationalist scholars’

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interests and activism (Clavin 2011, p. 10). This is not to claim that a single, common position was taken by all internationalist scholars across countries. Rather, the League's structure and functions further reinforced their belief that the conditions for peace and prosperity lay in actively participating in its activities and discussions, not in isolationism, which was the majority public and governmental opinion in the United States.

The Role of Philanthropic Foundations

Several philanthropic foundations have taken upon themselves the responsibility to 'do their share' towards creating a better world. This practice continues even today with foundations such as The Gates Foundation providing grants to applied or policy-oriented research as well as action-plans in the areas of healthcare, sanitation, drinking water, education and so on. The *raison d'être* varies from case to case. In some situations, the underlying notion seems to be that there are practical limitations to what both the market and the state can do. There is an active role for the 'third sector'. In other contexts, the driving motivation seems to be that the state and market have vested interests and therefore pursue it myopically at the risk of foregoing long-term welfare.

In the interwar years, philanthropic foundations were guided by the idea that they could facilitate the creation of a peaceful international society. This, they conceived, could be done by promoting - research into international affairs, active exchange of scholars across countries, and efforts at educating the public on the major problems concerning world politics and how to resolve them (Rietzler 2011, p. 47-49). Alfred Zimmern, for instance, believed that politics and populist politicians were the enemy – if experts could educate and convince the public, a truly democratic *and* scientific sound international order was possible (Rietzler 2011, p. 50). They were also motivated by the desire to be involved and actively partake in international organizations. To quote Rietzler, "By cooperating with non-state actors and international organizations the foundations managed to put into place frameworks for the discussion of international problems by academic and social elites." (Rietzler 2011, p. 57)

One important contribution of foundation internationalism was their attempt to establish institutions and networks that sought to go beyond the barriers that the nation-state imposed. Rietzler notes that 'League historians today conclude that some of the expert personnel of the technical organizations did indeed develop a distinct identity, and that nationality played a subordinate role when it came to choosing certain policies' (Rietzler 2011, p. 50). This is extremely important and relevant to present times because we have witnessed, for the past couple of decades, similar processes at work in the EU institutions, mostly prominently in the European Commission. The 'impact' of this line of thinking is not only reflected in particular institutions such as the ones mentioned here. It has greatly influenced post-war theorizing as well. Institutionalist approaches, for example, stress the role of communicative action and norms governing behaviour within institutions and how they shape the very identities and interests of actors involved (Borzel and Risse 2000, Hall and Taylor 1996). To put it simply, the deliberative and discursive processes that take place within these institutional settings contribute to the creation of common understandings and positions (Rosamond 2013).

Interwar Internationalism's Assumptions

This internationalism, while certainly not unitary in character, had several epistemological assumptions which were common to its different variants. It was and still is strongly positivist. The following is a list of the key assumptions:

- It is possible to study inter-state relations scientifically. Such a scientific study should be insulated from politics and populist pressures.
- Objectivity in an absolute sense is possible – that is why experts are needed *and* valuable – politicians are driven by short-term interests; experts analyze matters scientifically, keeping in mind the long-run impact and welfare of the public. Furthermore, experts take a macro view both spatially and temporally and are therefore not blinded by narrowly conceived interests. They investigate what is good for the world as a whole and also what is good in the long-run.

- Such an objective assessment by the experts will lead to scientific, rational policy prescriptions and outcomes.
- Politicians are the real problem who create all this conflict in pursuit of their narrow self-interests (in the name of nation-state), following beggar-thy-neighbour policies. It is possible for everyone to progress and prosper if we can identify the root causes of conflict by approaching the matter scientifically and we rectify them by implementing policies that conform to experts' advice.

In more ways than one, this ostensibly 'scientific' outlook of interwar internationalism is what contributed to the establishment of IR as a separate 'scientific' discipline. The recognition and acceptance of the need to scientifically identify the causal conditions of peace and conflict led to the constitution of International Relations as a separate field of inquiry. Prior to that, it used to be constituted as one of the sub-disciplines within political science, economics, or history. It also established the figure of IR expert.

The Importance of International Studies Conference

The International Studies Conference (organized in 1928) was the first transnational attempt which institutionalized academic cooperation in the field of international relations (Rietzler 2011, p. 57). Before 1928, there was no international platform for the exchange of ideas between institutions for research in, or teaching of, IR (ISC 2016). The ISC was supposed to be a platform where scientists, experts, organisers and statesmen could familiarise themselves with the views of their colleagues from other countries. As such, it created a new kind of 'international sociability' between IR scholars (ISC 2016).

The idea was that the ISC could choose from time to time a subject of topical research to be examined simultaneously by its members, first in written form, and then jointly at round-table and plenary study meetings. Individual governments, government organs, political parties as well as institutions that were engaged in any form of propaganda were not allowed to join (ISC 2016). Again we see this persistent tendency to insulate scientific study of international affairs from politics, the unflinching belief that a-political objective assessments are not only possible but necessary for creating conditions of peace. Zimmern contends that IR was far greater developed in the US and Great Britain than on the European continent. According to him, the difference was due to the far greater development in the Anglo-Saxon world of the academic study of the social sciences (ISC 2016).

Variants of Internationalism and their Impact

Hitherto the essay has been discussing 'internationalism' in singular. This is for simplicity's sake, not to convey that the internationalism that evolved during the interwar period was unitary in character. There were several strands of internationalism that developed, as Skjoldager and Tønnesson (2008) demonstrate in their discussion of Scandinavian internationalism. Why is this important for our discussion which is looking mainly at the impact of interwar internationalism? The existence of different variants points to the fact that no single ideology triumphed over the rest and became accepted by everybody. This is particularly important when we consider the claims made by neoliberals who claim that their world-view represents the 'natural order of things' (Schulz-Forberg 2013).

Skjoldager and Tønnesson points to two dominant strands of internationalism that emerged in this period in Scandinavian countries: liberal and social democratic. The social democratic variant different from the liberal variant in its emphasis on the basic precondition(s) for creating permanent peace – they emphasized the improvement of the social conditions of the working class whereas the liberals emphasized the role of a well-functioning market in the improvement of living conditions of everyone. However, it also shared some commonalities such with respect to international arbitration, disarmament etc. (Skjoldager & Tønnesson 2008, p. 314). At the same time, we ought to bear in mind that, on a global level the two main strands were: liberal and socialist. Socialist internationalism essentially took the view that the working classes of different countries must come together and act as one class, for the ultimate conflict is between the have-s and the have-nots, not between different

religions or nation-states. This sentiment was best exemplified by Marx and Engels' slogan in *The Communist Manifesto*. Socialist internationalism was projected as an alternative to 'bourgeois nationalism'.

Internationalism also varied from region to region. The advocacy of foundation internationalism, for example, was markedly different from Scandinavian liberal internationalism. In the latter case, it was primarily a foreign policy ideology which aimed at safeguarding the security and interests of the small Scandinavian states, to secure a role for them in a post-war settlement (Skjoldager & Tønnesson 2008, p. 315). This is in marked contrast to the US which did not have such concerns (given that it was a large economic and military power). Plus, the mainstream governmental and public opinion was aligned in favour of isolationism over interventionism. Liberal internationalism in the US was primarily the result of a minority composed of academics and philanthropic foundations who, inter alia, tried to ensure American influence on the world stage.

Although arguably the liberal variant had a lot more influence in its neoliberal avatar on the world as a whole in the post-war scenario, the social democratic variant did not wither away. It is the social democratic variant which influenced in the formation of post-war welfare states across Europe, for example. It is only by the 1980s and 1990s that the liberal variant resurfaced as the dominant ideology (famously expressed by the Washington Consensus). At the same time, however, it is imperative for us to remember that the present monetarist and libertarian connotations that neoliberalism possesses did not always exist (Schulz-Forberg, p. 246). Neoliberalism was not conceived so in the interwar years.

Liberalism came increasingly under attack in the interwar years. The Soviet mode of planned economy had become an attractive alternative. The liberal economies were reeling under the Great Depression and the Soviets were doing well with their famous Five Year Plans. That state intervention could improve human conditions was an anathema to liberal thought. Humans were fallacious, having limited cognitive abilities. The market was perfect because it was a key element of the *natural* order (emphasis added, Schulz-Forberg 2013, p. 238-39). While some argued for a strong, authoritarian state to ensure that the market functioned properly, others such as Lippmann vehemently opposed it on the grounds that a strong state was just another form of planned economy. They believed that the roots of human progress were to be found in the operation of rule of law, respect for individual and property rights, and free trade. The *raison d'être* for the state's existence was to maintain law and order and ensure that the markets functioned efficiently. Ludwig von Mises conceived the liberal frame of eternal world peace as based on free trade and the rule of law (Schulz-Forberg 2013, p. 251). Walter Eucken saw global trade and nation-building as processes that go hand-in-hand (Schulz-Forberg 2013, p. 259).

While the strong-state variant withered in Europe after the rise of Nazism in Germany in the 1930s, one could argue that it did survive the Second World War, for we see elements of this line of reasoning in the post-war period in the so-called 'developmental states' of East Asia such as Japan, South Korea, and Singapore. They all had strong, authoritarian states, which intervened in the markets as and when they deemed necessary and played an active role in promoting specific policies for economic growth and development. Outside of East Asia, however, we do not see states being influenced by this strand of thinking. Most states, at least by the '80s, had adopted the view that the state as an obstacle, a nuisance which inhibited the otherwise natural evolution of the market-society (Schulz-Forberg 2013, p. 242). The infamous 'shock-therapy' policies implemented in Latin America were the result of this line of thinking.

Concluding Remarks

The technocratic side of the interwar internationalism – exemplified by the League's focus on healthcare, labour conventions, co-ordination of transportation and energy networks and so on – survived WW II largely intact, says Clavin (Clavin 2011, p. 10-11). This is true in that, although the League is considered largely a failure, it still did provide the framework for post-war settlement in terms of the establishment of the United Nations, its structure and functions, its various organs, and so

on. The interwar internationalist outlook (especially the liberal variant) did not just influence the UN but is also clearly exemplified in other post-war institutions such as IMF, World Bank, and GATT/WTO. Both the economic and socio-political aspects of liberal internationalism have left their imprint on these institutions.

On a theoretical level, liberal internationalism arguably spurred the growth of the field of International Relations. Its claims and aspirations to eternal world peace were considered ‘idealistic’ and impractical by scholars such as E H Carr, who in contrast proposed a ‘realistic’ view of international affairs, one based on an essentially pessimistic view of human nature, as opposed to liberal internationalists who saw human nature as essentially benign (although not flawless). However, on a more fundamental level, it is the positivistic approach to knowledge and reality that has had a more lasting impact on the very discipline of IR. For instance, while realist scholars claimed that they portrayed the international system ‘as it is’ instead of ‘as it ought to be’ i.e. realistically without any normative pretensions, they still retained the positivism of liberal internationalism. They still do. The same goes for behaviourists who were prominent in the late ‘50s and ‘60s. While specific assumptions or claims may have been rejected or reformulated, the positivism of liberal internationalism remains very much alive in these dominant theoretical paradigms, challenged only recently (since ‘90s) by the so-called ‘reflectivist’ paradigms such as constructivism and institutionalism. Economics, however, still remains very much positivistic, both in theory and practice. It is not just the burgeoning of neoliberal economics, but the very epistemic foundation upon which such formulations are based where we see the Enlightenment-inspired internationalism has had a lasting impact.

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