TRT world forum 2019

Closed Session

The Future of the Global Liberal Order: Challenges and Prospects

Assoc. Prof. Şener Aktürk

TRT WORLD research centre

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The TRT World Forum 2019, recognised as one of the most significant political events of the year, took place from October 21st- 22th at the Istanbul Congress Center with over one thousand esteemed guests and panellists. Consisting of nine keynote speeches and exclusive talks, 12 public sessions, and 15 closed sessions this year's Forum succeeded in providing a platform for serious engagement with the most pressing challenges of our time. The themes of the sessions ranged from the rise of far-right terrorism, populism and nationalism, environmental issues, the future of the Middle East, trade wars, the future of the European Union and cooperation of emerging powers. Uniting all of these themes was a focus on the fragmented state of today's world and a sincere desire to offer meaningful solutions.

This roundtable meeting was held in English under the Chatham House Rule. This rule stipulates that 'when a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.'

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ASSOC. PROF. ŞENER AKTÜRK

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researchcentre.trtworld.com

Assoc. Prof. Şener Aktürk,

Şener Aktürk is an Associate Professor at Koç University in Istanbul. He received his B.A. and M.A. from the University of Chicago, and his Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of California, Berkeley. He was a post-doctoral fellow in the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, and a visiting lecturer in the Department of Government, both at Harvard University. His book, Regimes of Ethnicity and Nationhood in Germany, Russia, and Turkey (Cambridge University Press, 2012) received the 2013 Joseph Rothschild book prize from the Association for the Study of Nationalities and the Harriman Institute at Columbia University. His articles were published in World Politics, Post-Soviet Affairs, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, Social Science Quarterly, European Journal of Sociology, Turkish Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, Osteuropa, Nationalities Papers, Theoria, Ab Imperio, All Azimuth, Insight Turkey, Turkish Policy Quarterly and Central Eurasian Studies Review, among others.

Background and Introduction

Origins of the Global Liberal Order and Its Crisis

The meeting was attended by high-ranking politicians, diplomats, academics, lawyers, either as panelists or as members of the audience. During the introduction to the session, it was remarked that the European liberals are prone to forgetting their history, including the origins of European and global liberal order. One of the speakers, an active politician, reminded the audience that if it had not been for the United States, and in particular the vision of President Harry Truman, there would be no European Union, the key pillar of the global liberal order. In this context, it was also critically noted that countries can rewrite their own histories, but they cannot rewrite their geographies; therefore, the role of geopolitical location is intrinsic to the understanding of the origins, prospects and challenges of the global liberal order.

Renegotiating Global Liberal Order: Multilateralism, Non-Intervention and Equal Status

The current global order was founded after the Second World War by the five great powers, the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). At age 70, the global order has become quite aged, as one of the participants commented. He also critically noted that the founding of the UNSC was not based upon equality, even among the great powers, as the United States spearheaded this coalition. One premise of the UNSC was the assurance of US supremacy, and for this reason, among others, many predict and expect the death of the global liberal order, anthropomorphically described by one participant as an 'old man'. It was argued that US supremacy was consistent with the relative size of the country's economy and technological leadership. However, underlying conditions, both material and ideational, have changed significantly since 1945, and the ability of the United States to maintain postwar peace from a position of military and economic supremacy has declined over time.

First of all, the global liberal order is no longer functional in terms of serving the international economic interests of the United States. Therefore, one obvious

solution or policy that the United States might pursue would be to undo the global liberal economic order; according to one of the participants, this is precisely what the current US President Donald Trump is seeking to do. There are many indicators which may be cited in support of this claim: President Trump has attempted to alter the structure of global trade through tariffs and other non-tariffs barriers, ostensibly to protect American economic interests, which are in fact reminiscent of 19th century mercantilism. The looming 'trade war' between China and the United States is another noticeable symptom of this development with global repercussions. In short, national protectionism, whether in economy, culture or politics, challenges the global liberal order. As even the founder and leader of the global liberal order, the United States, has recently resorted to protectionism, it is somewhat unsurprising that other, less powerful and smaller nation-states have followed suit.

Second, alternatives to US-led globalisation have emerged over time, posing both material and ideational challenges. The internal problems of democratic polities have also contributed to the crisis. Citizens are in general dissatisfied. This general unhappiness is to a great degree due to unequal distribution of wealth, argued one of the participants. This leads to widespread resentment, which is then successfully politicised in the form of rising populism and radical nationalism.

In short, national protectionism, whether in economy, culture or politics, challenges the global liberal order.

Third, many formerly underdeveloped non-Western countries, most notably the People's Republic of China (PRC), have achieved exponential economic growth over the last two decades, and they no longer wish to be on the 'second row' of global governance. Russia, China, and other so-called 'Asian Tigers' all demand equality in global governance. The non-Western polities' aspiration for equal status with Western nation-states is a defining feature of the current crisis of the global liberal order.

Can the United States and other Western countries stop the rise of the non-Western powers? The answer is 'no'; the current status quo is unsustainable. As an instrument to impede the rise of non-Western powers, war is too expensive, not to mention catastrophic from a humanitarian point of view, as one of the participants averred. A renegotiation of the global liberal order using compromise and wisdom is necessary, and the future of the global liberal order cannot be unilateral. Moreover, military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and other locations did not improve the situation. Therefore, extraordinary care must be taken. In short, a renegotiation of the global liberal order must be based on the principles of multilateralism and non-intervention, and equal status of the various states in the international system is required.

The Need for a Muscular Liberalism for the Rule of Law, Democracy and the Supremacy of the Parliament

There is a disagreement as to whether the global liberal order is young or old, as one participant explicitly argued that the global liberal order should be considered a very young experiment from the perspective of human history at large. There are different approaches and frames from which the global liberal order can be evaluated, for example in terms of law, business or security. We must also consider what were the alternatives to the global liberal order in the past as well as the present.

Firstly, business at large has become global. We must consider the duties of nation states to guarantee that vulnerable nations are also protected in the otherwise globally competitive environment. Secondly, a rules-based system which the global liberal order implies or presupposes is important not only for global trade; more generally, we must also consider which system is most effective in diffusing threats to our societal and individual well-being. Thirdly, how can individual nation states ensure that future generations will achieve and maintain an increasingly higher standard of living within the global liberal order?

Fourthly, how will we manage the challenges that go beyond the nation-state within the framework of the global liberal order?

A common theme among the speakers was the role of the P5, the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, in the present and future reform of the global liberal order. All the speakers recognized the founding role of the P5, while often also noting the leading role of the United States among the P5. Most speakers also emphasised the need to reform the global order in a way to include states beyond the P5 in a reformed global governance structure, especially the newly rising non-Western powers.

Even in the absence of a constitution, what do nations believe in, and what holds particular political communities together? For example, the United Kingdom is an almost post-multicultural political environment with 'muscular liberalism', British values, democracy, supremacy of parliament and the rule of law ostensibly holding the political community together. But what is remarkable is the fact that often what has been depicted as liberalism consists of those things that the British majority or mainstream have thought of as the norm in their society, qualities which they think others should also adopt. As such, the instrumentalisation of a particular and implicitly particularistic definition of liberalism, at least in the British context, has been a strategy for maintaining the status quo through a process of ideological assimilation of newcomers and/or the societal periphery. Such a strategy is not at all specific to the British context, but rather observable in and generalisable to other Western and even non-Western contexts in relation to discussions around liberalism. Moreover, as it was observable in the British context, such an articulation of political liberalism and British values was in great part motivated by the need to combat an ideological rival that was perceived as threatening British society, namely a particular form of Islamic fundamentalism often associated with and attributed to Saudi Arabia, as one of the participants argued.

Non-Western and Illiberal Perspectives on the Future of the Global Order

Liberalism is not perceived as a positive term or ideology in much of the rest of the globe, especially in the non-Western world. Nonetheless, there are other terms and similar political aspirations that correlate with and/or are consistent with a liberal political orientation domestically and internationally. In many non-Western societies, 'openness', especially 'openness' to the outside world in terms of business, trade, travel, education, and international interaction is often associated with a liberal orientation, even in the absence of liberalism as an independent or organized political force. For example, the political reforms that were initiated in the late 1980s by the last general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, were not motivated by liberalism. Gorbachev himself would never self-identify as a liberal, but rather as a true democratic socialist and even as a Leninist. His reforms were called glasnost in Russia, which can be literally translated as 'openness' or 'transparency' in English. Likewise, political actors in the present-day PRC would not self-identify as liberals, and in fact they are not at all committed to most tenets of political liberalism, such as competitive multiparty politics, freedom of religion and conscience, or freedom of association, expression or information. However, policies of economic and cultural 'openness' to the rest of the world have been pursued at least since the time of Deng Xiaoping and are often interpreted as a kind of liberalisation by Western and non-Western observers of Chinese politics.

> *China, as well as other so-called Asian Tigers, and perhaps also India, belong to a category of non-Western nations that have benefitted from economic globalisation and a measure of economic liberalism. However, these countries have rejected political liberalism in part or as a whole in terms of political globalisation.*

The PRC, although fundamentally an illiberal regime, decided to embrace aspects of economic globalisation, almost certainly because China benefitted from a global open market as the largest manufacturing power in the world. One symbolic and substantive indicator of China's orientation as such was its successful bid to enter into the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

Perhaps more surprising for a Communist one-party regime, however, was that China also sent many intellectuals, politicians and students abroad, particularly to Western countries, in order to learn from them. In the metaphorically 'roaring 90s' of the Clinton-era

United States that spearheaded 'globalisation' at both discursive and programmatic levels, China did not appear as a critic of such a development, unlike many other non-Western nations that objected even to economic globalisation. In this respect, China, as well as other so-called Asian Tigers, and perhaps also India, belong to a category of non-Western nations that have benefitted from economic globalisation and a measure of economic liberalism. However, these countries have rejected political liberalism in part or as a whole in terms of political globalisation. In contrast, for example, there are also non-Western nations that reject both economic and political globalisation and liberalism, as well as other nations that accept both. In rare cases, there are those that accept political liberalism but reject economic liberalism.

China is a particularly important case, precisely because it is universally regarded as the second superpower next to the United States, one that many predict will surpass the United Sates in the near future, at least in terms of the size of its economy. This significance is compounded by the fact that China has a political system that is almost diametrically opposed to liberal democratic principles. Therefore, many observers understandably predict and/or fear that China will exert an illiberal influence worldwide as an anti-democratic and anti-liberal role model that is nonetheless very successful economically.

Non-Western and illiberal viewpoints were also expressed in the roundtable, and these ideas posed a valuable contribution to the debate regarding the future challenges of the global liberal order. In particular, respect for national sovereignty and a commitment to non-intervention in other nations' internal affairs were emphasised in this vein through the critical comments delivered by one of the participants. Concomitant emphasis was placed on multilateral intergovernmental organisations such as the United Nations, European Union, ASEAN, IMF, World Bank, G-20 and the Arab League as the institutional mechanisms of global governance. These institutions give a voice to all countries, regardless of whether they are large or small, wealthy or poor, strong or weak. China, for example, only accepts external intervention in another country if there is an agreement in the United Nations in favor of intervention, or if the country that is the target of intervention agrees with and in effect invites international intervention to solve its problems. Perhaps the most obvious seemingly contradictory stance within China's position is its advocacy for free trade, lower taxes and a broadly liberal international trade regime, which may be and often is perceived as a deep, transformative, and often disruptive intervention in economically weaker and poorer nations' domestic affairs by economically powerful, capital abundant, and export-oriented economies.

Economic and Political Contradictions of Liberalism

Members of the audience also actively participated in the discussion about the future of the global liberal order. One such participant poignantly observed that rich countries that used to propagate liberalism around the world, such as the United Kingdom and the United States, themselves are becoming illiberal. Indeed, former paragons of global liberalism such as the United Kingdom and the United States may be part of or even leading an illiberal global wave at present under the leaderships of Boris Johnson and Donald Trump, respectively. Moreover, there are numerous panels and sessions being held around the world at present, where senior and middle-aged bureaucrats and businessmen, along with academics, lament the crisis or the demise of the global liberal order. What is the broader significance of these increasingly common eulogies about the passing of the global liberal order, given by people, who could be described as the (former) elites of that very order? To what extent is this phenomenon a reaction to the passing of a

more progressive, egalitarian world order? To what extent is this phenomenon quite the opposite, namely the negative reaction of the former elites of Western states and societies to the rise of the non-Western, non-Christian-heritage nation-states and their representatives, who in turn are seeking and claiming equal status in defining and governing a new global order?

One of the Western participants poignantly noted in concluding the session that for many in the West, liberal order means 'Christian order', and for many in Northern Europe, even more specifically, this means 'Protestant (Christian) order'. The limitation of human rights to Christians only should motivate one to critically scrutinise every invocation of 'human rights' to discern whether it is only being invoked in relation to Christian-heritage individuals, groups, and their interests, or whether non-Christians such as Muslims are also being protected from harm with this discourse. The same participant also warned against the risk of liberalism leading to economic oppression instead of economic freedom. Somewhat similarly, another participant drew attention to the fact that for any politician facing a situation of active war, as many did and some even still do in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, to bring about and maintain peace is often of paramount importance. Thus, peace and security are (and/or should be) prioritised over all other in effect secondary pursuits, such as economic and/or political liberalism. Enabling the pursuit of a 'good life', which is ultimately what is expected of political and other leaderships in every society, is often only possible in a relatively peaceful environment, defined by the lack of active interstate or civil war, at a minimum. The distinction between liberalism in domestic politics and international relations was also briefly brought up during the question and answer session. These critical comments, coming at the end of the closed session, did not trigger further soul searching about the actual history and inherent contradictions of political and economic liberalism which I attempt to briefly discuss below.

According to one of the participants in this closed session, there are three basic principles of liberalism that can help one in framing the discussion of the global liberal order: individual rights, economic freedom and equality of opportunity. Such an abstract and parsimonious definition indeed focuses the discussion on a few key concepts, but it also sidesteps many other criticisms that have been levied against political and economic liberalism, some of which were already brought up by other participants.

Human Rights or Christian Rights?

Are these individuals who are entitled to rights in liberal theory and practice in fact include all human beings, or only those who are of Christian heritage, Western Christians, or even much more specifically, those of Northern European Protestant Christian heritage? Starting in the late medieval period, if not earlier, and culminating in unprecedented waves of religious sectarian mass violence and expulsions during and after the Protestant Reformation (Terpstra, 2015), the states and societies that later became the pioneers and paragons of political and economic liberalism were shaped through extraordinary levels of identity-based violence that almost completely destroyed any non-Christian religious minority. In short, empirically speaking, Western European states became liberal democratic only after their non-Christian (primarily Jewish and/or Muslim) subjects were killed, expelled or forcibly converted. Thus, the citizen/subject of non-Christian religious affiliation is an abstract postulate, a hypothesis, for much of the early centuries of Western European 'liberal' experience. Second, the immigration and citizenship regulations of dozens of European-heritage states in the Western Hemisphere, from Canada and the United States in the North, to Argentina and Chile in the southern tip of the Americas, openly discriminated against and often

entirely banned non-European and non-white people from immigration and naturalisation (FitzGerald and Cook-Martin, 2014).

In addition to the mass violence in Western Europe, the deliberately mono-religious formation of the Americas is also equally important from an empirical and historical point of view (Akturk, 2020). In fact, as David FitzGerald and David Cook-Martin have convincingly argued with voluminous evidence and examples, liberalism has, or at least historically has had an 'elective affinity' with 'racism' (FitzGerald and Cook-Martin, 2014). Thus, a reasonable litmus test is needed to determine whether current and retrospectively past practices of political liberalism have designated non-Christian human beings as individuals entitled to equal rights. One must check whether the rights of Muslim individuals or groups were successfully defended against infringement and violation by Christian-heritage individuals and groups. This is a reasonable test, as Muslims constitute by far the largest and most significant non-Christian religious minority whom most Westerners have encountered at present and for most of the historical record, as recent critical scholarship on human rights convincingly demonstrates (Moyn, 2015). However, I strongly suspect that the 'human rights' discourse in liberal democratic politics is a thinly disguised substitute for the rights of Christians only, regardless of whether they are in the majority, as in most of Europe and throughout the Americas, or in the minority, as in most of Asia and much of Africa. The religious, sectarian and/or racial limitation of ostensibly 'universal' rights is a major shortcoming of the actual practice of political liberalism, both domestically and internationally.

The religious sectarian and/or racial limitations of liberalism are abundantly observable in the history of allegedly humanitarian interventions as well, another topic that has attracted a significant amount of scholarly attention, particularly since the turn of the 21st century. Various scholars have traced the history of humanitarian interventions, focusing upon Christian European states' interventions against the Ottoman Empire on behalf of Greek, Bulgarian, Serbian and Lebanese-Syrian Christians (Bass, 2008; Rodogno, 2011), starting in earnest with the British-French-Russian joint intervention in 1827, which supported a Greek Christian rebellion in the Morea (1821-1831). This culminated in the founding of modern Greece as the first modern Christian nation-state in the Balkans in 1832. In each and every case, the 'humans' who were being protected through 'humanitarian' intervention were Christians, whereas the culprits of the alleged persecution were non-Christians, and more specifically Muslims (Bass, 2008; Rodogno, 2011). In contrast, there was no 'humanitarian intervention' by Western powers to help Muslim minorities persecuted under Christian rule, of which there were far too many. A large majority of all Muslims in the world, from India to Algeria, from Egypt to Transcaucasia, and from Nigeria to Indonesia were living under European imperial rule by the turn of the 20th century. In fact, up until the very belated and limited Western intervention after the genocide against Bosnian Muslims, which was underpinned by a very strong and overt Christian religious nationalist ideology (Sells, 1998), there has been no other humanitarian intervention of significance in support of a Muslim group facing massacre at the hands of a Christian perpetrator.

The religious, sectarian and/or racial limitation of ostensibly 'universal' rights is a major shortcoming of the actual practice of political liberalism, both domestically and internationally.

The Myth of the Self-Regulating Market, Three Fictitious Commodities and Inequality

Apart from the implicit and explicit religious sectarian bias favouring Western Christian-heritage individuals, groups and states, both in domestic (e.g. citizenship, religious liberty) and foreign (e.g. humanitarian intervention) policies of self-identified liberal democratic states, there is also a third and much more obvious, better-studied example of the contradictions and shortcomings of liberalism: This relates to the liberal conception of the markets and economic relationships in general. Economic liberalism envisions markets as self-regulating, thus generating a mythical equilibrium that is supposedly sustained by the dynamic of supply and demand in order to maintain economic life. However, as critically evaluated by Karl Polanyi among others, such a conception of the market as a self-regulating mechanism, capable of solving the most fundamental problems of economic life without societal and/or political intervention, overlooks the fact that there are key components of economic production, such as labour, land and money, which are not commodities but are treated as such in the absence of any societal intervention in the market (Polanyi, 1957 [1944]; Akturk, 2006). Therefore, if left unchecked, without any political or societal intervention, the allegedly self-regulating market does not have any mechanism of its own to automatically limit the commodification of labour. This includes the establishment of a minimum wage, minimum age requirements for employment, maximum working hours per day, mandatory holidays (such as weekends), a ban on the sale of human beings, i.e. slavery, and a prohibition of the sale of human organs, even if done on a voluntary basis. These moral limits on the commodification of 'labour' (i.e. human beings) are securely enshrined in most Western and non-Western societies through political and societal interventions that occurred during the previous 150 years. Therefore, the shortcomings of economic liberalism are no longer obvious to most commentators on the current crisis and future prospects of global liberalism.

> *The latter, at least in part, has been implicated in the global financial crisis of 2008-2009, which arguably triggered the populist-nativist-protectionist wave behind the growing debate on the crisis of liberalism.*

However, when it comes to the commodification of the other two otherwise 'fictitious commodities', as Polanyi calls them, 'land' (i.e. the environment) and 'money' (currency), we are still suffering from the fallout of profit-driven commodification and exploitation of the environment and currency speculation. The latter, at

least in part, has been implicated in the global financial crisis of 2008-2009, which arguably triggered the populist-nativist-protectionist wave behind the growing debate on the crisis of liberalism. The catastrophic consequences of the unchecked commodification of labour, land and money, which Polanyi has deftly analysed in the context of interwar global order, arguably explains similar problems of even greater magnitude with the onset of what James Mittelman (2000) has aptly discussed as 'the globalisation syndrome'.

In addition to the problem of three fictitious commodities, there is also the very prominent problem of rising inequality of income and wealth. This has paralleled deregulation of the markets and neoliberal economic reforms that have swept around the globe at least since the early 1980s, following the US decision to end the Bretton Woods system in 1971. Furthermore, as more recent scholarship has suggested, liberal democracies may indeed be particularly conducive to very high levels of economic inequality, concentration and accumulation of inherited wealth, and the formation of an 'oligarchy' (Winters, 2011). Similarly, compared to autocracies, liberal democracies may be particularly averse to substantial redistribution of wealth, especially land reform, which is often the most significant form of economic redistribution, especially in postcolonial contexts such as in Latin American and Sub-Saharan African polities (Albertus, 2015).

Deeper domestic contradictions of political liberalism include liberal democratic Western European polities' reluctance and vacillations in tolerating different conceptions of 'the good life', as evidenced most visibly in the controversies over attempts to ban Jewish and Islamic religious practices, such as ritual animal slaughter (Library of Congress, 2018) and male circumcision (Akturk, 2019). The dilemmas and vacillations in the allowance of different conceptions of 'the good life' are definitely central problems for liberalism, past and present, as they are directly related to its core principles; 'toleration', after all, is arguably the core of liberal virtue (Mearsheimer, 2018). These domestic contradictions of liberalism are amplified with far more disastrous consequences when applied to foreign policy, motivating liberal states to intervene in the affairs of other polities that they deem illiberal or anti-liberal (Mearsheimer, 2018), resulting in a series of humanitarian interventions that are perceived as discursively secularised versions of the Western Christian 'crusades' of the Middle Ages by the non-Western, and especially non-Christian states and societies. Due to these economic and political, domestic and international contradictions, the global liberal order, which can be considered as the 20th century embodiment of Western/European 'universalism' (Wallerstein, 2006), is perceived and criticised as having a Western Christian-heritage bias. It is accused of being fundamentally oppressive and exclusionary vis-à-vis non-Western peoples and non-Christian conceptions of 'the good life'. Any future (re)negotiations of the global order, liberal or not, will have to reckon with these inherent contradictions and the historical legacy of Western European universalism that has shaped the globe over the last five centuries.

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