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Mandatory reading of the West and its Crisis

Book Review: Lehti, Marko, Henna-Riikka Pennanen & Jukka Jouhki (ed.).
Contestations of Liberal Order. The West in Crisis? Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
2020. 384 pages. ISBN 978-3-030-22058-7.

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When the iron curtain collapsed at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, this was something marking the end of the Cold War. It then seemed that the liberal order represented by victors of that conflict – the USA and its generally (but not exclusively) European allies – triumphed all over the world. At the same time, this was thought to provide the ultimate pattern for the successful political, social and economic development of states and societies. Heralds of a bright future for mankind, for example Francis Fukuyama, maintained that the West, understood more as a community based on common values than as a geographical entity, set civilizational standards under the peaceful, but strong leadership of the United States. According to these heralds, the world was just a step, or in extreme cases, perhaps two, from reaching the paradise of eternal peace and prosperity. However, after September 11, 2001, the financial crisis of 2007–08, Russian aggression against the Ukraine and, last but not least, the election of Donald Trump as US President, opinions about the future of liberal order on a global scale became increasingly pessimistic.

A volume edited by Marko Lehti, Henna-Riikka Pennanen, and Jukka Jouhki, scholars representing Finnish universities in Tampere, Turku and Jyväskylä, contains a number of articles considering the problem of a possible crisis of the West and the liberal order as both a product, and equally, a pillar of western civilization. They argue that the West should be understood as a liberal empire, whose integrity and position in international relations has been protected by a number of factors. These include, not only the material (economic and military), but also the ideational and cultural hegemony of Anglo-Saxon empires (previously Great Britain, but currently the United States), allied with the mainly European nations which hold values and principles in common. The consensual legitimacy of the, thus maintained, leading position of the liberal order is equally important. Nevertheless, this hegemony has always been contested; one feature of the liberal order is its permanent crisis. Today, the US/West hegemony seems to be more endangered than ever, firstly because its non-western competitors (that is, China or Russia) are sufficiently prepared to ideologically challenge the former world order from



without. And secondly, because populism, as well as increasing disunity and ideological divisions between America and Europe, undermine hegemony from within (Johanna Vuorelma; Ville Sinkkonen and Henri Vogt).

On the other hand, debating the idea of the West (Vuorelma) and, for example, discussions focused on the concept of sovereignty or ‘non-interference’ understood as freedom of choice about available options in internal politics and international relations, which can differ for the United States and European nations (Sinkkonen and Vogt), does not equate with the decline of the West. On the contrary, crisis narratives, the ‘internal’ debate concerning the future of the western world, seem to prove that even the declinist impact of such slogans like ‘America First’ (coined by President Trump’s administration) might be evidence for resilience, rather than Western weakness. In this case, discussions concerning the liberal order prepare the West intellectually for reconceptualizing its own situation, and finding the means which allow for its leading position in the world to be maintained (Pennanen and Anna Kronlund). It co-resonates with the opinion expressed by Lehti and Pennanen that, possibly, the current Western crisis should not be perceived as something exceptional, heralding the end of its world hegemony, but rather as a kind of a propelling power which reveals its vitality and ability to negotiate the currently required transformations. Obviously, the future of the West and the liberal order is yet to be decided. Thus, declarations suggesting the collapse of the liberal order are premature.

This volume also contains several analyses concerning some specific questions connected with the cultural and political meaning of western liberalism as located in the context of concrete problems and events. Roderick McGlynn discusses how the narrative concerning western liberal attitudes towards gay rights and homosexuality has, in recent decades, been used to portray and strengthen the image of the crisis facing the West as morally superior vis-à-vis the ‘others’, namely the world of Islam branded and presented as intolerant and backward.

Ann-Judith Rabenschlag focuses her attention on reactions of the German political establishment to the terrorist attack on Berlin’s Christmas market at Breitscheidplatz in December 2016. Her principal interest is in the content of declarations from German political leaders, as well as the rhetoric from the media. Although they condemned the attack, at the same time they defined (in various configurations), who is ‘us’, and those who do not belong. That is, members of the community relying on values and principles recognized in Germany universally as ‘western’ or ‘European’, and alternatively, individuals who are ‘others’ posing threats to the (open) society. She also analyses similarities in these speeches to those of leaders from other European countries delivered during similar crises. Additionally, she examines how the 2016 attack contributed to the rise of the German New Right (*Alternative für Deutschland*; AfD), something potentially heralding the decline of the liberal order, with the West allegedly unable to defend itself in the face of an increasing wave of immigration from Muslim countries. The New Right also calls for anti-liberal group consolidation to oppose a variety of real and imagined dangers.

The next chapter, by Henna-Riikka Pennanen and Anna Kronlund, is dedicated to the problem of the image of the West as well as, at least the announced intention, in the era of President Trump's 'America first' slogan, of separating the United States from Europe. This could mean that USA might decide to abandon its international obligations, refrain from political and military support of its European allies and surrender its Western leadership. The current more self-centered approach of the American government also results in its attitude change towards the question of humanitarian engagement worldwide (Noora Kotilainen). Although the United States does not withdraw from military and civil operations which are justified in humanitarian terms, a clear shift in the general framing of the US humanitarian policy, according to illiberal elements in the tendency of the Trump's administration, have become evident. The move from universal humanitarian duties towards setting the national interest and security of US citizens as a priority provides a clear example.

Authors of the four final chapters describe how the 'others' represented by Turkey, Russia, China and India, are trying to construct politico-philosophical doctrines to build some ideological counterweight for the still powerful western concept of the liberal order, and to undermine the US/European hegemony in the world. It is interesting that proponents of all these concepts (the Chinese Tianxia theory discussed by Matti Puranen, the idea of 'New Turkey' presented by Toni Alaranta, Indian Hindutva described by Jukka Jouhki, or the radical Russian conservative ideology of Aleksandr G. Dugin examined here by Jussi Backman) do not declare open ideological war on the West. Rather, they try to propose, in the era of the universally trumpeted crisis of the liberal West, some attractive alternatives for the liberal order. In other words, they contest the western hegemony from the outside, pointing out that, in the best scenario, the liberal order is only one of the possible paradigms of the international order. According to these scholars, other holistic political ideologies can replace this order and the multipolar world can (and should) replace the west-centered model of international relations.

If there is anything missing in the volume, it is any clear definition of the West. Although readers obtain list of some 'others', the main competition to the liberal order supported by the US/European hegemony includes Islam, China, India, Russia and Turkey. But these authors only provide readers with vague explanations of the West as a community based today on common values and some common historical experience. The authors do not explain the location of the borders of the West in Europe, and some questions regarding this issue remain open here. For example, should Central European countries, member states of the European Union, which in recent years became a fertile playground for populism contesting the liberal order from within, be recognized as a part of the West? There is also nothing about extra-US and extra-European nations, which culturally or/and politically belong to the West and are strongholds of the liberal order. However, such a weakness of the volume prepared by these Finnish scholars results from the fact that the collection of chapters mirrors the research interests and preferences of their authors. This implies that only chosen problems and topics could be approached and studied.

Nevertheless, the whole volume provides readers with an excellent overview of today's theoretical approaches towards the West and the liberal order. It shows the political and ideological challenges, which western unity and hegemony face in times of their serious contestation by external competitors and often powerful internal critics. This enlightening book is mandatory reading, not only for specialists trying to describe the contemporary world or students of international relations, political science or diplomacy, but also average people who wish to both understand what is going on with humanity, and also deconstruct their own anxieties about the future in the era of globalization and postmodern uncertainty.

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