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The Ethics of Neoliberal Institutionalism

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Abstract and Keywords

Contemporary liberal institutional theory, originating in an enhanced awareness of interdependence in the 1970s, broke with earlier liberal thought in accepting some of the central assumptions of realist theory and defining itself solely in empirical terms. To the extent that normative presuppositions or implications may nonetheless be discerned, they remain implicit. This article focuses on the most prominent theoretical school, usually termed ‘neoliberal institutionalism’, which narrowed down liberalism’s traditional normative commitments no less than its empirical assumptions. This article also takes note of certain alternative formulations of institutionalist theory and of the broadening scope of institutional theorizing in the present decade, and its re-emphasis on the normative. The normative writings of Robert Keohane, the central figure in the neoliberal school, demand special attention: while in some respects quite distinctive, they may reasonably be taken as representative of a widely shared American liberal outlook. It is argued that the values endorsed by these variants of liberal institutionalism are limited by their shared perspective: that of the predominant power of the day with its distinctive political culture.

Keywords: contemporary liberal institutional theory, liberal thought, realism, normative, Robert Keohane

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(p. 223) 1 Historical Context

In response to the devastation occasioned by the First World War, liberal institutionalists pursued one overriding goal: the establishment of peace. Initially it was sought directly, through creating an institution, the League of Nations, which would embody a new liberal order in place of the discredited realist “power politics.” The League's failure to fulfil this expectation prompted a radical reformulation: a new approach, functionalism, sought to achieve the goal indirectly. A network of specialized institutions regulating specific areas of international relations would, it was maintained, foster habits of cooperation that would gradually moderate the conflicts that would otherwise lead to war. The early moves toward integration in Western Europe offered some encouragement, but in the intellectual climate of the cold war functionalism never won credibility as a general theory.

By the 1970s the increasing salience of economic interdependence prompted a further radical reformulation of institutionalism, culminating in Keohane and Joseph Nye's *Power and Interdependence* (1977), which foreshadowed core ideas of neoliberal institutionalist theory. They did not seek to replace realist theory, but to limit its scope: They saw it as valid when security concerns were uppermost, but introduced the term “complex interdependence” to identify areas of international relations governed by a different logic—namely, regulation through cooperative regimes. In a further departure from traditional institutionalist thinking, there was no explicit reference to the normative purpose, the promotion of peace. While this might remain the ultimate aim, it was no longer claimed that institutions have the system-transforming potential formerly ascribed to them.

Thus far, changes in institutionalist theory had been prompted mainly by perceived changes in “the world.” The shift to neoliberal institutionalism, it may be suggested, was mainly theory driven. The replacement of the comparative-sociological style of *Power and Interdependence* by the economics-based “rationalist” style of neoliberal institutionalism was occasioned by acceptance on the part of a group of liberal scholars of the

metatheoretical assumptions of rational choice theory and of the core realist assumptions that states remain the central actors in international politics, and that they pursue self-interested goals, in particular security and material interests. The main difference with neorealism was the claim that, nonetheless, there was far greater scope for international cooperation than neorealist theory would have it, and that institutions played an important role in facilitating this cooperation (see, e.g., Keohane 1989, 1-20, 101-31).

The critique of hegemonic stability theory offered persuasive support for this institutionalist claim. Contrary to the realist thesis that the maintenance of cooperative economic regimes requires the presence of a hegemon to enforce the system's norms, it was argued on both theoretical and empirical grounds that this is not the case: Egoistic state actors can find ways to cooperate to advance their (p. 224) shared interests (Keohane 1984; Snidal 1985). The argument was soon broadened: The same game-theoretical logic can provide a common framework of analysis for the whole of international relations—for conflict and cooperation, international security and political economy. These are not separate realms, and conflict is not always paramount (Oye 1986; Stein 1990). However, this left open the question of the scope for cooperation, and of how much institutions “matter,” relative to power capabilities—for realists the basic determinant. The debate over relative gains versus absolute gains clarified these issues up to a point, but they remain the crux of the divergence between the two theories (Keohane and Martin 2003).

During the 1990s institutionalists sought to remedy certain omissions identified by critics—notably the role of ideas and the linkage to internal politics—through rationalist analyses complementing their systemic theory (Goldstein and Keohane 1993; Keohane and Milner 1996). But, with the possible exception of the legalization project (Goldstein et al. 2000), there were no further theoretical landmarks. Moreover, the counterpart to the close engagement with neorealism was a failure to engage with other theoretical traditions, and the debate with realism appeared to have run its course. By the late 1990s Keohane was looking back to it as “yesterday's controversy,” and embarking on an agenda shaped more by perceived changes in the world than by theoretical puzzles (Keohane 2002, 27-38, 193-287).

Keohane's subsequent institutional studies are so wide-ranging as to raise the question whether there is continuity with neoliberal institutionalism or an entirely new departure. Again in collaboration with Nye, he returns to a sociological style of analysis, seeking to define the nature and extent of changes in the international system: state actors remain important, but theory also needs to take account of new actors and the significance of networks. Normative issues relating to democratic accountability now figure prominently (Keohane 2002, 193-244). In addressing a major new issue, “governance in a partially

globalized world,” Keohane (2002, 245–71) retains rational choice theory, but now combined with other approaches— sociological, historical, and normative. He retains major elements of neoliberal institutionalism, but has moved beyond its confines.

Certain other theorists offer a wholly different conception of liberal institutionalism—as a theory not of cooperation or of institutions in general, but rather of the character of the contemporary institutional order. Two are especially notable: John Ruggie, moving toward constructivism; and John Ikenberry, drawing on rational choice theory along with other approaches.

Ruggie's contribution is mainly conceptual. His starting point is not a world of egoistic state actors but a historically grounded conception of state—society relations. An international order and its major institutions are not simply a function of the power of the leading actor, but result from “a fusion of power with legitimate social purpose” (Ruggie 1982, 382). Since 1945 the United States, the leading actor (but not the hegemon as usually understood), has promoted an institutional order consistent with its normative identity. This has a certain “architectural form,” (p. 225) multilateralism, defined in terms of principles of nondiscrimination, indivisibility, and diffuse reciprocity (Ruggie 1993, 8–16). Similarly the US-inspired post- 1945 economic order had a distinctive normative character, “embedded liberalism” (economic liberalism qualified by certain overarching political goals), whose subsequent disembedding raised major concerns (Ruggie 1982; 1996, 135–56).

Ikenberry (2001) identifies a historical trend, the creation of increasingly institutionalized international orders by the victors in hegemonic wars, but his main concern is to examine and explain the order constructed by the United States after the Second World War, and still providing the framework for international politics. He sees this order as part-hegemonic, but in view of the nature of this particular hegemon, it is a liberal, constitutional order: Power is exercised through rules and institutions, the hegemon accepts binding institutional restraints, its decision-making is relatively open, thus its junior partners enjoy access and “voice” opportunities. These liberal characteristics explain the persistence and relative stability of the order after the cold war, and indeed the further institutionalization in this period: the extension of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the establishment of the World Trade Organization, the North American Free Trade Agreement, and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation.

2 The Ethical Dimension

Neoliberal institutional theorists did not question the prevailing assumption that value judgments have no place in the social sciences—even though they might provide the motive for a scholar's choice of subject matter. This assumption, never uncontested, is now widely questioned, but there is no new consensus on the role of value judgments. This section inquires to what extent implicit normative commitments—judgments about what is good, desirable, legitimate, obligatory, and so forth—are entailed in contemporary institutionalism, and what are these commitments? Are they indeed liberal, and in what sense of that term? While the focus is on the neoliberal school, inclusion of the alternative theories permits a more differentiated response.

There is no canonical method for teasing out implicit value commitments, but several aspects of the theories will be examined: the use of evaluative language; values implicit in the conceptual framework, or excluded by it; the research agenda; silences; and finally, the question whether a pattern can be discerned, and to what extent it is liberal. No more than a provisional sketch can be completed within the space available, hopefully in a way that invites further inquiry.

Some empirical concepts have evident normative connotations: Negative terms such as genocide, terrorism, or totalitarianism provide clear examples, but the (p. 226) positive connotations of peace, security, or order equally convey taken-for-granted value judgments (see, e.g., Putnam 2002). Cooperation is one such concept. Even though Keohane (1984) insists that it is not necessarily benign, but can be exploitative, it is often used with positive connotations, as when Arthur Stein (1990, ix) writes of “an era of hope, of the promise of international cooperation” or Keohane (1989, 160) himself contrasts “fragile cooperation” with “persistent zero-sum conflict and warfare.” And the regimes studied by the neoliberal school are normally assumed to be welfare promoting, not exploitative.

Even the realist theory of hegemonic stability is not value free, but claims that the hegemon provides highly valued public goods, essential for maintaining a liberal international economic order. The attraction of *After Hegemony* is its persuasive argument that these public goods can be achieved through nonhegemonic regimes. Such evaluative concepts, like “reciprocity” with its connotation of equal exchanges, are very general expressions of commendation. More specific values are signaled in the language on the functioning of regimes: providing reliable information, deterring cheating, providing focal points for coordination, or reducing transaction costs (more generally, “efficiency”). These suggest a managerial orientation, an economist's view of administration.

The foregoing might be termed “cool” evaluations, compared with the relative warmth of the language with which Ruggie and Ikenberry characterize their favored ideal-types, evoking a richer mix of liberal values. This is heightened by the contrast with negative ideal-types: for Ruggie, the kind of world order envisaged by Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union; for Ikenberry, the balance of power or hegemony.

While evaluative language can suggest no more than a general orientation, a theory's conceptual framework can have stronger implications for values promoted or excluded. As Charles Taylor expresses it, a framework “secretes a certain value position:” it charts the geography of the phenomena in question, the range of possible variation. “A given map will have ... its own built-in value-slope.” Certain outcomes being ruled out, the framework “will usually determine for itself” what is the best possible state of affairs (Taylor 1973, 153-4).²

Utilitarianism, as employed in neoliberal institutional theory, may be construed in this light. It is not the utilitarian framework as such that predetermines the valued outcome—for actors determine their own utilities—but rather its use together with the assumption that states, the relevant actors, are necessarily egoistic and define their individual self-interest in material terms.³ If this is how the world is, the most that is achievable is that states cooperate to pursue their interests in an enlightened manner—to maximize gains and minimize losses. No other ethical framework seems relevant. Within this general framework, the economists' concept (p. 227) of Pareto optimality—referring to situations in which no actor's welfare can be increased except at the expense of that of other actors—offers a sharper illustration. If institutions are seen as enabling actors to reach the “Pareto frontier” or to choose among “Pareto-optimal equilibria,” a high level of welfare is being presupposed. More importantly, this particular concept of welfare excludes by definition the question of redistribution, since this would leave some individual actors worse off.⁴ Elsewhere, Keohane allows that liberalism can make for a tendency to accommodate dominant interests and to adopt the perspective of governments, not of the disadvantaged (1990, 192-3) and, in a telling aside, dubs the present institutions “of the privileged, by the privileged and for the privileged” (2002, 256).

The neoliberal institutionalists' treatment of distributive issues offers a striking illustration of the way in which the framework narrowed down the normative agenda. In the initial phase of regime theorizing in the 1970s, “distribution” could refer to the larger, societal consequences of regimes: for example, in Raymond Hopkins and Donald J. Puchala's study of the international food regime, its effects on “wealth, power, autonomy, community, nutritional well-being ... and sometimes physical survival,” leading to the conclusion that in this regime there were “broad and endemic inadequacies” (cited in Martin and Simmons 1998, 737). In neoliberal institutional theory, regimes came to be

evaluated, rather, as “efficient or efficiency- improving:” distributional issues were understood as conflicts over the allocation of gains and costs through bargaining among the state actors (Martin and Simmons 1998, 744–6).

The game-theoretic framework opened up an agenda for explaining significant aspects of institutions previously neglected or passed over lightly—questions relating to information, incentives, commitment, and compliance. But what was excluded from the research agenda was no less striking. A framework premised on bargaining on (more or less) equal terms is not conducive to the study of relations characterized by extreme inequalities such as those encountered in “North— South” relations, nor of hierarchical institutions such as those in the international financial domain, controlled by the major Western governments. Not surprisingly, the typical examples chosen by the neoliberal institutionalists are of bargaining among relative equals: the European Union and the international trade regime, the latter viewed from the perspective of its leading members. Keohane's suggestion (1984, 7) that the analysis might be extended to include North—South relations was not followed up; and indeed this must have created difficulties for applying the framework, or have led to questioning its generality.

The framework makes for a further silence, whose normative consequences are more difficult to discern. Can the United States really be regarded as just one actor like the others? Is the basic model of egoistic state actors, fundamentally alike, a (p. 228) valid starting point for theory in the present international system? The United States may not be hegemonic, but it is preponderant, its influence not just greater than that of others, but different in kind; the theory has no place for such an actor. The question of the normative consequences of the invisibility of the United States is taken up below.

Keohane's normative discussion of regimes adds a further dimension to the foregoing. It stands apart from his empirical theory—a commentary interrogating the theory from a different perspective (Keohane 1984, 10–11, 247–57). He by no means offers a robust defence of cooperative regimes. Rather, with reference to utilitarian and Rawlsian theory, he finds existing regimes seriously deficient, insufficiently responsive to the needs of the least well off. Nonetheless, he argues that they are superior to the politically feasible alternatives: Those disadvantaged under the present regimes would be even worse off if the powerful were not constrained by their rules. The analysis is searching, the conclusion unsatisfying: He does not acknowledge the problematic character of the politically feasible, nor allow for potential alternatives between the ideal world and the actual regimes. Indeed, his conclusion is at odds with the conception of liberalism that he outlines a few years later, as a gradualist striving for improvement (Keohane 1990, 194).

This discussion redresses the silence on North—South relations but is not incorporated into subsequent institutionalist theorizing. And, although there is no reference to the role

of the United States, there is a clue as to what this omission may signify. Why is the politically feasible so circumscribed? Arguably, it was the Reagan administration's total rejection of the various North—South initiatives under discussion in the 1970s, and its subsequent imposition of the “Washington consensus,” that rendered reformist alternatives irrelevant—not any systemic constraint. Through excluding the concept of a leading actor, the theory foreclosed inquiry into the potential negative consequences of its role.

That role, as we have seen, is central in Ruggie's and Ikenberry's institutionalist theorizing. Both evaluate it positively. Ikenberry, while highly critical of the turn to unilateralism, remains close to the mainstream American foreign-policy discourse; Ruggie's focus on key concepts invites more searching questioning of the way in which the United States exercises its role. Neither engages in normative theorizing, but their explicit evaluations could serve to prompt normative debate on the American role and on the kind of institutionalization that the United States has promoted.

Do the normative commitments that have been identified in neoliberal institutionalism form a pattern, and is it a liberal one? They can be seen as relating to welfare, a very general value in liberal theory, but not exclusively liberal, and also to efficiency, highly valued in contemporary liberal economics; a certain conservatism, an orientation to the status quo, is also evident. There is no reference to the central liberal values—the freedoms and rights of the individual—but given the basic “levels of analysis” framework, this should perhaps not be expected of a theory at (p. 229) the level of the international system.⁵ Neoliberal institutionalism can be seen as an updating and synthesis of two of the main traditions in international liberal theory, commercial and regulatory liberalism, both essentially systemic (Keohane 1990), and its values are characteristic of those traditions.

International relations theory has not been much concerned with differences within liberalism—the contrasting philosophical rationales and contending political orientations uneasily constituting the liberal “tradition.”⁶ Tension between conservative and radical strands has been ever present. Neoliberal institutionalism, its perspective essentially that of the leading governments of the day, is readily located near the conservative end of the spectrum, and its restrictive concepts of welfare and distribution bear the hallmarks of the American political culture. The radical strand, now prominent in normative political theory, is under-represented in the international relations discipline.⁷

Ruggie's and Ikenberry's normative commitments fall within the same general pattern: a system (“order”)-oriented, relatively conservative, and more explicitly American liberalism. Ikenberry's constitutionalism offers some further classical liberal values such as the virtues of institutional limits on the exercise of power; and among the

institutionalists he is the most explicitly supportive of the existing order. Ruggie's societal orientation extends the framework beyond the governmental, and indeed suggests an affinity with the social liberal, not the utilitarian liberal tradition. His concern for the viability of embedded liberalism holds the potential for a more radical analysis of the political—economic order, but neither he nor other liberal institutionalists have followed this up.⁸

3 Keohane's Normative Turn

As indicated earlier, since the late 1990s Keohane has developed a broader version of liberal institutionalist theory in order to address the kinds of questions that are raised by current changes in world politics. Issues chosen for research are related to explicit, theoretically grounded normative premises derived from a distinctive view of liberalism (Keohane 1990), one that falls within what might be termed the liberal pessimist tradition of thinkers such as James Madison, Adam Smith, and Judith Shklar (Keohane 2002, 246–7).

(p. 230)

This is a cautious, wary liberalism that sees human progress as possible but by no means inevitable, and achievable only if human and social limitations are taken into account. He sees liberalism as first and foremost a theory that highlights the scope for human action and choice, but he insists that the constraints that are emphasized—indeed overemphasized—in theories such as realism and Marxism be taken very seriously. Thus, while rejecting the pursuit of impracticable ideals regardless of consequences, he endorses a gradualist reformism that, over time, can extend the limits of political choice. In terms of standard liberal assumptions his theorizing is uncomfortable: In particular, he is skeptical of the association of liberalism with peace, allowing that radical critics may be correct in claiming that the needs of the open capitalist economy make for intervention and war (Keohane 1990, 186–90). This is a sober, seemingly dispassionate liberalism, offering little orientation to those deeply concerned over human rights violations or the intolerable living conditions of those at the margins of subsistence.

Keohane's discussion of global governance brings out some of the practical implications of this general conception of liberalism. In collaboration with Nye, he presents a critique of the existing “club model” of decision-making in the major international institutions—that is, their informal control by a few key members— showing why this has become unacceptable and outlining the practical and normative issues raised by the demand for greater democratic accountability (Keohane 2002, 219–44). They seek to scale down

unrealistic expectations, looking to incremental improvements, not radical institutional restructuring.

His presidential address to the American Political Science Association proposes a general framework for such inquiries into the problems of “governance in a partially globalized world.” The goals are defined normatively and he draws on several kinds of empirical theory—rational choice theory perhaps *primus inter pares*—to guide research into how they might be realized in institutional practice (Keohane 2002, 245–71). He refers to Amartya Sen's concept of enhancing human capabilities and to John Rawls's concept of justice, but his immediate discussion limits itself to issues raised by democratic legitimacy: accountability, participation, and persuasion. Even so, the project outlined here involves a major expansion of the institutional research agenda, and the inclusion of the issues raised by Sen and the Rawlsian debates would require an even more radical expansion. From a perspective outside the United States, however, the discussion reads as quintessentially Western: a response to the concerns of Western publics and nongovernmental organizations. There is no reference to non-Western perspectives on governance: for example, to the issue of greater representativeness, whether of states or of peoples.

The Western—and sometimes distinctively American—perspective is even more evident in certain of Keohane's other recent papers, such as his argument for “unbundling sovereignty” in the context of reconstructing political institutions after humanitarian interventions (Keohane 2003). However cogently reasoned in its own terms, the argument does not engage with the reasons why sovereignty is so highly (p. 231) valued outside the West. And the volume of which it is part, like virtually all the literature on humanitarian intervention, remains a conversation among Western scholars.

The American world view comes through most strongly in his proposal, in collaboration with Allen Buchanan, for a new institutional process to authorize the preventive use of force if the United Nations Security Council is unable to act to forestall dire threats to security or to check massive violations of human rights. Subject to carefully defined conditions, a coalition of democracies, not exclusively Western, could then authorize preventive action (Buchanan and Keohane 2004). Has the cautious reformer turned radical in his readiness to set aside long-established norms and procedures? Radical or not, the argument—and in particular the apotheosis of democracy—may be seen as representative of the liberal interventionist outlook that has become characteristic of the American foreign-policy community since the ending of the cold war. It is to be hoped that Keohane's provocative formulation of this orientation will prompt a genuinely international debate within the discipline—and one not confined to the Western scholarly community.⁹

4 Conclusion

Contemporary institutionalist theories may be located in different liberal traditions—utilitarian, social liberal, and constitutional—and Keohane has developed a version of liberalism that stands apart as something of a pessimist—realist hybrid. However, for all their diversity, the theories share a common perspective, that of America as a “leading” power with a distinctive political culture.

For all its liberal virtues, this perspective does not make for sensitivity toward the concerns of those less well placed in the international hierarchy or those with different cultures or values. In the case of “North—South” relations this raises major issues for policy but presents no new challenge for theory, where the issues date back to the late-nineteenth-century debates over social liberalism (Richardson 2001). Far more intractable issues are raised by relations between Western and non-Western (more precisely, nonliberal) societies: the tension between liberal norms of universalism versus respect for diversity and self-determination (e.g. Gray 2000) may prove unresolvable. These issues are subject to lively debate among political theorists but remain at the margins of international relations theory.

The trend towards normative explicitness, here exemplified by Keohane, holds much promise for the discipline. Normative reasoning is surely preferable to assumption in guiding research. And, if it tends initially to bring out national (p. 232) perspectives underlying contemporary international relations scholarship, it may subsequently lead to a certain distancing from the assumptions of one's own political culture, and serve as a catalyst for debate that could overcome the invisible barriers that separate national scholarly communities.

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Notes:

(1) Institutional theory outside the United States, notably in Germany, has been strongly influenced by American theorists; for reasons of space it is not discussed here.

(2) Taylor refers to well-known studies by Seymour Martin Lipset, Harold Lasswell, and Gabriel Almond.

(3) While Keohane (1984, 125) allows for explanation other than in terms of “narrowly defined self-interest,” he sees this as limited to “relatively small spheres of activity.”

(4) For the Pareto formula see, e.g., Martin and Simmons (1998, 744-5), referring *inter alia* to Krasner (1991).

(5) For a comprehensive normative critique of neoliberal institutionalism that does not make this concession, see Long (1995).

(6) On differences within liberalism, see, e.g., Gray (2000); Richardson (2001).

(7) There are important exceptions, such as Richard Falk (1999).

(8) Steffek (2006) brings out embedded liberalism's underlying conservatism, oriented to the needs and interests of relatively well-off Western societies, not to those of the disadvantaged.

(9) Such a debate may be foreshadowed in Reus-Smit (2005).

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