Is Liberal Hypocrisy Causing Political Disengagement?
By James Lees

In January 1918, ten months before the end of the First World War, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson delivered his famous Fourteen Points speech. In his remarks, President Wilson outlined his vision for post-war peace, with order and justice for all states, no matter how small. This speech laid the foundations for the "idealist" world that many statesmen would fight for in subsequent years. Tenets of liberalism are still foundational in our society today: self-determination, protection of civil liberties, free trade, open treaties, and democratic governance. Yet, its development up to and through the 21st century has been marred by a lack of cohesion between domestic and international ideology. During the golden age of liberalism, while international relations were often conducted on a liberal basis, states were largely inadequate in their protection of domestic individual rights. Conversely, following the Second World War, liberalism ascended in the domestic sphere, while international society became far more realist. These two seemingly paradoxical trends were witnessed in both the United States and throughout Western Europe. Through historical review of such trends, this paper examines the contemporary political dissatisfaction that has manifested in the West, and the underlying forces that have contributed to citizens' discontent with and distrust in their respective political systems.

The ideas contained within the Fourteen Points were fundamental in shaping international society after the end of the First World War, and are best exemplified through an emphasis on self-determination and the creation of the League of Nations. A precursory institution to the United Nations, the League was established to provide collective security for the allied powers and to prevent another world war. It intended to "guarantee […] territorial integrity to great and small states alike."[1] Its design, based on "Wilsonian idealism," stressed equal rights for all sovereign nations. Yet, a voiced respect for equal rights was not reflected in the implementation of domestic policy of *any* Western powers; and this is especially true for the United States. The Wilson administration oversaw an expansion of blatant institutional segregation,[2] as well as the passing of legislation such as the Oriental Exclusion Act of 1924, which denied rights to many foreign and domestic minority groups.[3] Concurrently, while allied powers in Europe echoed the sentiments of Wilson's Fourteen Points, these states still held

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[1] Woodrow Wilson, "Speech on the Fourteen Points," *Congressional Record*, 65th Congress 2nd Session, 1918, 680681.
[2] Ronald Pestritto, *Woodrow Wilson and the Roots of Modern Liberalism,* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005) 41-45.
[3] William Easterly, *The Tyranny of Experts: Economists, Dictators, and the forgotten rights of the poor* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 51.

tightly to their colonies, exploiting local resources and labor to support their domestic economies.

There is a reasonable explanation to this apparent paradox. The disparity between international liberalism and domestic oppression in fact benefitted Western powers, both politically and economically. By declaring and maintaining sovereign rights for all nations, the most powerful states believed they could maintain stability and peace. By denying domestic liberalism through suppression of individual rights, particularly for minority groups, they could ensure that their economies remained profitable and powerful; and retain majority political support for their respective regimes.

However, even the "idealist" system at the international level was not as it seemed. While states had supposedly committed to liberalism internationally, they instead continued to put their national interest first and did not act with "unselfish sympathy," as Wilson had called for. Even between the allied powers France, Britain and the U.S., relations in the inter-war years were described by Robert Boyce as being in "a state of virtual war, wherein mutual incomprehension fuelled a downward spiral"[4] and ensured a breakdown in trust between the three. In fact, the U.S. had failed to even join the League of Nations, despite its formation only taking place due to Wilsonian idealism. The onset of the Second World War ultimately ended the failed experiment in international liberalism.

The ideas espoused in the interwar years would then migrate into domestic issues. The Allied powers needed vast resources for the war effort, seeking troops and materials from the colonies. As William Easterly notes, to ensure they could count on the support of their subjects, the colonial powers needed to convince their colonized that it was better to stay on side. He quotes one official as stating, "Colonial subjects might be tempted to say that they have not much freedom to defend."[5] Consequently, this supported a shift, albeit slight, towards the acceptance of racial equality, which would in turn culminate in swift and marked decolonization in the post-war years. Hendrik Spruyt suggests that after the war there was a shift in the receptivity of elite groups in the West to ideas of racial equality,.[6] an idea that has been significantly explored by Ikenberry and Kupchan.[7] This would not only lead to decolonization,

[4] Robert Boyce, "World Depression, World War: Some Economic Origins of the Second World War", in *Paths to War: New Essays on the Origins of the Second World War*, eds. Robert Boyce and Esmonde Robertson, (St. Martins Press, 1989), 88.
[5] William Easterly. *The Tyranny of Experts,* 81.
[6] Hendrik Spruyt, "The end of empire and the extension of the Westphalian system: the normative basis of the modern state order", *International Studies* Review, (2000)*:* 65-92, 88.
[7] John Ikenberry and Charles Kupchan, "Socialization and hegemonic power", *International Organization* 44: 03 (1990): 283-315.

but would also bring about a rise in support for civil rights movements. As domestic liberalism increased, a movement emerged in the West towards universal equality, which included universal human rights. This movement was embodied in the end of segregation, the rise of feminism, the LGBT movement, and secularization (to name but a few); Wilson's legacy had accordingly moved from the international to the domestic sphere.

Yet at the same time, the international environment drifted away from liberalism. The immediate onset of the Cold War and the spread of nuclear weapons following the Second World War, rendered statecraft to be defined by rational choice and game theory. The commitment problem, that a state can never really know the true intentions of another, led to international relations representing a prisoner's dilemma, a well-known concept to political theorists, with gamesmanship becoming a defining characteristic of foreign policy, particularly in the United States vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. Now, it seemed the apparent paradox had come full circle: Liberalism became a domestic phenomenon, while international relations were far more realist.

We witness a culmination of this phenomenon today. There are myriad domestic and transnational movements calling for individual rights to be respected and enhanced, but the international order is still far more realist than it is liberal. Perhaps among the most glaring illustrations of this contradiction in its contemporary form lies in the governance and operation of the League's successor, the United Nations. While the institution and a majority of its members have professed and encouraged commitments to various dimensions of human rights and humanitarian norms, there are countless instances of the United Nations failing to uphold these declared principles. Frequently, the inaction can be attributed to the operational workings of the Security Council. The body, by design, inevitably serves the realist aims of its permanent membership. The recent revelation of the U.S. spying on Germany, one of its closest allies, demonstrates a distinct lack of trust and the absence of liberal ideology. Further, the current airstrikes against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) are motivated more by a fear of threat to Western national security than humanitarian concern for the Syrians caught up in the conflict. By and large there are few examples of genuine liberalism existing as a prevailing force in international society, despite the system being predicated on liberal democracy. Governments and their leaders profess liberalism, but they do not practice what they preach. I believe that this disparity is one of the root causes of the current disillusionment between voters and politicians.

Politics today is marred by extreme disengagement. The 2014 midterm elections in the US are only one prime example. Not only did the New York Times report that the 2014 midterm

elections produced the lowest voter turnout in more than seven decades,[8] but interest in the elections actually fell as they approached.[9] The voters are also disenchanted with political actors. Just recently, in October 2014, President Obama received his highest disapproval rating of 57%[10]. Europe faces its own share of political cynicism, as noted by Aurelien Mondon.[11] Yet, while there is clearly deep dissatisfaction in the West with the political process, there remain political issues in which people express great interest. The recent Scottish referendum on independence proves that. There was an historic voter turnout, with 84.6% of the electorate using their franchise.[12] How do we explain this seemingly incongruous relationship between political interest and political dissatisfaction? I contend that it is the political hypocrisy, steeped in historical circumstances and ideology, and demonstrated by inconsistency between what is said and what is done, which serves as the best explanation. This hypocrisy has historically been—and remains—heavily influenced by an ultimate non-belief in and apostasy of political liberalism, demonstrated by Western leaders throughout the 20th Century and into the new millennium.

The liberalism of Wilson emphasizes peace, universal rights and the "understanding of [others] needs as distinguished from [our] own interest,"[13] on an international level. Yet, as both history and contemporary politics demonstrate, it is as if liberalism retains merely a hallucinatory presence in international affairs. Liberalist ideas attract the support of the public, yet they do not provide leaders with the power and security they often seek. Thus, liberalism continues to imbue political rhetoric, yet fails to pervade political action. Perhaps the continued push for liberalist ideals in the domestic sphere could eventually translate to foreign policy. But until politicians can align the message with concerted action, it is difficult to perceive how current political dissatisfaction in the West could be alleviated.

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[8] "Worst Voter Turnout in 72 Years", *The New York Times*, Nov 11, 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/12/opinion/the-worst-voter-turnout-in-72-years.html.

[9] Chuck Todd et. al, "The Great American Tune Out", *NBC News*, Oct 15, 2014. http://www.nbcnews.com/politics/first-read/great-american-tune-out-interest-midterm-elections-drops-n226251

[10] "Presidential Approval Ratings -- Barack Obama", *Gallup*. http://www.gallup.com/poll/116479/barack-obama-presidential-job-approval.aspx.

[11] Aurelien Mondon, "Distrust of the Political System, not the Far Right, is real threat to our European future", *The Conversation*, May 14, 2014. http://theconversation.com/distrust-of-the-political-system-not-the-far-right-is-real-threat-to-our-european-future-26662.

[12] "Scottish Independence Referendum", *The Guardian*, Sep 18, 2014. http://www.theguardian.com/politics/ng-interactive/2014/sep/18/-sp-scottish-independence-referendum-results-in-full.

[13] Woodrow Wilson, "Speech on the Fourteen Points." Full speech can be viewed via the following link: http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~wggray/Teaching/His300/Handouts/Fourteen_Points.pdf

James moved to New York to study for a master's in international relations at New York University. James has a background in finance; having completed his bachelor's in economics at Bristol University, he then spent two years working for an investment bank in London. His focus is on economic and political development, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa.