Resilient or Obsolete? Reflections on the Liberal World Order and its Crisis

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Of the many crises that have traversed the international system in the last twenty years (economic, political, social), that of the Liberal World Order (LWO) is the most profound and structural. Inspired by the cardinal principles of the Enlightenment tradition, the liberal order has progressively taken shape since the first postwar period and fully established itself in the aftermath of the Second World War (WWII). Under the international leadership of the United States, and with the invaluable contribution of western democracies, between 1949 and 1989 the LWO unfolded and spread in the form of a dense network of international norms and institutions, the spread of democracy within states, trade liberalization and the affirmation of multilateralism as the desirable practice of interaction and long-term cooperation among states (Ikenberry 2011, 2020; Lucarelli 2020; Parsi 2018). The separation between domestic and international politics has increasingly narrowed and a close relation has been established between Western democratic countries and the LWO. Although never fully achieved (never global and never completely realized even in the West), the liberal order has contributed more than any other previous order to defining principles, norms and institutions with a global reach, embodied in international law, in international organizations, in the practice of multilateralism and in global support for democracy and human rights.

However, precisely at the moment in which its global expansion became possible, at the end of the Cold War, the liberal order began to show signs of

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crisis: a slow, inexorable crisis that took the form of the rise of illiberal powers, infringements of multilateralism, illiberal tendencies in consolidated democracies, the scaling back of Enlightenment-inspired confidence in the possibility of human-made progress, the de-legitimization of international institutions, and the crisis of the liberal economic model. The period following the economic crisis of 2007/8ff has particularly highlighted the structural weaknesses of the liberal order and the progressive growth of non-liberal powers. Paradoxically, some of the actors and processes empowered by the LWO then turned against it. An uncontrolled form of trade liberalization created a mode of globalization which grew inequalities (Milanovic, 2016) and anti-liberal sentiments; the much-supported technological innovation paved the way to abuses of the opportunities offered by digital technologies, with shortcomings for liberal democracies (Lucarelli 2020, Ch. 6). The result is under our eyes. From tweets by populist leaders, screams from anti-globalists, discontent among the new poor who are disillusioned with neoliberal policies, to the rise of overtly illiberal powers worldwide, several observers have started to wonder if the LWO will survive at all, and what could replace it (Acharia 2014; Alcaro 2018; Flockhart 2016; Ikenberry 2020; Lucarelli 2020).

The Covid_19 pandemic (still ongoing at the time of writing) has partially muted the debate outlined above, directing attention to the global scope of the challenge, and to the need for strong and efficient institutions at the domestic and international level. However, renewed tension between the West on the one side, and Russia and China on the other, as well as the challenges to western democracies, remind us that the crisis of the liberal order is not over. Russia's annexation of Crimea (2014) first and the invasion of Ukraine then (February 2022), signal all the difficulties for the LWO and its rules to uphold the resurge of nationalism and the use of power politics. The latter, just occurred when closing this chapter, have all the characteristics of a watershed for the future world order, one of those historic moments that sign a turn in history.

In this chapter I briefly analyze the historical evolution of the LWO and then turn the attention to some of the elements that have led to the profound crisis of the liberal model—at a domestic and international level -showing how structural factors and specific crises have interacted. A brief reflection on three crucial challenges (economic, normative and technological) and the opportunities for resilience of the order will conclude the chapter.

1. The liberal order: the rise of a project

At first glance it is difficult to understand how international politics over the past fifty years could be described as embedded in any form of "order". Cold and hot wars have been fought, transnational criminality and terrorism have claimed many victims, and the international system continues to lack that overarching authority that could impose a hierarchical order. Yet there are features of the system that can be called upon to respond to an international order if by international order we mean *a set of principles, values, norms and institutions (formal*

and informal) that govern the practices of the main players on the international scene and their relations, wrapped in a common narrative.

A few preliminary remarks are necessary. In the first place, this definition of order is 'demanding' as it implies that the 'actors of the international scene' are linked by relationships that are not only systemic but also properly "social" (are part of an 'international society' *à la* Bull – 1977).

Second, an international order does not need to be global. In fact, of all the historical international orders, only the LWO, after the end of the Cold War, has come closest to being a global one. As a matter of fact, the West's victory in the Cold War put an end to the existence of the two-order system that characterized the Cold War (each based on a different set of principles, values, norms, institutions and narratives) and opened the possibility for a global extension of the LWO. Yet a truly global order has never been fully realized, as the LWO entered into deep crisis before fulfilling its aspirations of universality.

Third, to claim to exist, an international order does not imply 100% adherence to its principles and values by all the members of the system, in each sphere of politics. Rather it implies relative adherence to the core principles by the main players of such order and their investment in upholding such values and principles by embedding them in their institutions. This implies, for instance, a minimum threshold of coherence and respect for the objectives of the order, below which, for example, the United States or Europe would no longer constitute agents of the LWO.

Fourth, historically, the degree of complexity and connectivity of the international system has not been constant and has indeed increased exponentially. This phenomenon, highlighted since the 1970s by authors such as Robert Keohane, Joseph Nye (1971), and John Burton (1972), has subsequently assumed unexpected dimensions by virtue of technological transformations and the use made of them.

Finally, an order arises out of a combination of continuity and ruptures ("critical junctures") in relation to previous orders, and is consolidated and transformed through the daily practices and narratives of the major players of the system—be they states, international organizations, or prominent private international actors, that have a relatively high impact at a specific historical moment.

All this applies to the LWO, which was first manifested in the European international system of the nineteenth century, gradually extended to the rest of the world after WWII, and then progressively transformed with accelerations at crucial moments. In particular, the LWO unfolded in three main forms which responded to different configurations of the international system.

An early form of the liberal proto-order developed in Europe in the nineteenth century around the role of Great Britain (Maull 2019, 8; see also Ferguson 2012). Barry Buzan and George Lawson in their *Global Transformation* (2015) theorize that it is possible to consider the nineteenth century as the time span that goes from 1776 to 1914. It was in fact during this long period that an economic, political and social transformation occurred that turned the West into the dominant political subject. Indeed, starting from what will later be identi-

fied as the 'West', the progressive expansion of three fundamental elements of the liberal order began: capitalism, the rational construction of the state, and the ideology of progress (Buzan and Lawson 2015: 30). Capitalism led to the emergence of differences between industrialized and non-industrialized countries, and between the center and the periphery of the system; the rational construction of the state pushed towards the expansion of the system of states, but also in this case with profound inequalities between dominant western states and their colonies (functional for the consolidation of the state form among the colonial powers). Faith in progress, conveyed by the expanding West, then took root in quite different ideologies: liberalism, socialism, nationalism and 'scientific racism'—which all legitimized practices of "civilizing" the barbarians (Buzan and Lawson 2015). This proto-liberal order—generally overlooked by the literature—is particularly important as it shows how the construction of the West as a political subject has gone hand in hand with the expansion of the first elements of the LWO.

However, the first full version of the LWO arose after WWI. With Woodrow Wilson's 14 points, national self-determination, democracy, open diplomacy and the principle of collective security were proposed for the first time in an authoritative and explicit manner as founding principles of a new world order. The West set the norms and principles of legitimate behavior and political regime for states worldwide. The creation of the League of Nations, albeit with known limitations, was the first concrete attempt to establish a global institution with the task of resolving disputes between states through law and arbitration. The order that emerged from the Treaty of Versailles is generally remembered above all for its overall failure, which then led to the return of power politics, the rise of Nazi and Fascist revisionism, and eventually to the Second World War. Yet despite its limitations and its failure, the legacy of the Peace of Versailles and the attempt to build a liberal international order was to have fundamental historical and political significance for international politics.

It is in fact undisputable, that the order that emerged out of WWII owed a lot to the effort made at the end of the previous world conflict. The LWO 2.0 was the result of a series of agreements and treaties, signed between 1941 and the early 1950s. Building on Wilson's Fourteen Points, the Atlantic Charter of 1941—signed by the US and the UK—outlined principles for the future order: the prohibition of territorial expansion, the right to self-determination, peace understood as freedom from fear and need, the fight against tyranny, the renunciation of the use of force, the establishment of a system of collective security, and freedom of trade and navigation. In addition, drawing inspiration from the British-led liberal proto-order of the 1800s, the drafters of LWO 2.0 also paid significant attention to the economic dimension and the creation of an open international economic order, beneficial in the first place for capitalist countries, but eventually considered to have positive effects on all. The consolidation of the ideological-political division of the world into two spheres of influence, between 1946 and 1947, put an end to Roosevelt's aspiration to fund a *global* order and instead reverted to the coexistence of a bipolar system governed by deter-

rence, and a liberal order within the western bloc. On a global level only some elements of the liberal order planned in the Atlantic Charter were realized (first of all the creation of a collective security system embodied in the United Nations), while in the West a more complete version unfolded.

The order established during the Cold War, under the aegis of the United States, rested on five main pillars, each of which embodies shared values, norms and institutions: democracy, human rights, formal international institutions, a collective security system and an open international economy. Yet this order was tempered in its domestic effects by the welfare state ("embedded liberalism" to use the expression of John Ruggie 1992).

The supporters of the LWO 2.0 placed continuity between domestic political regimes and the international order at the center, insisting on the importance of democracy. The western world represented itself as liberal-democratic, while at the same time, in the USSR Soviet leaders planned to overcome the dictatorship of the proletariat with what they called proletarian democracy, socialist democracy or people's democracy. On a factual level, we witnessed the expansion of democracy (Huntington 1993): while in 1944 only 10% of the world's population lived in one of the 11 democracies present at the time, in 1952 34.5% of the world's population lived in a democratic regime and the number of democracies had grown to 27 and was destined to continue to grow significantly. With democracy, the recognition of rights (civil, political, but also "human rights" proclaimed by the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights) was extended. Conventions and courts for the protection of human rights would soon be added to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 (the European Court of Human Rights, 1966, the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, in the same year, and the UN conventions on civil, economic and social rights signed in the following thirty years). Furthermore, in 1975 westerners made it obligatory for signatories to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms in the final Helsinki Agreement for Cooperation and Security in Europe (Gori 1996). At the same time, global non-governmental organizations were also beginning to appear with the express purpose of protecting people's rights (Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Helsinki Watch). The third pillar of LWO 2.0 soon took the form of creating a vast network of multilateral international institutions (capable of stabilizing mutual expectations of the participants in the long term) (Cf Attinà, in this volume). From the global institutions—the United Nations—to the many regional organizations, and from formal institutions to international regimes, the international system was soon filled with a vast network of institutions in the most disparate policy areas, based on the liberal assumption that the institutionalization of cooperation would increase its scope and extent.

The fourth fundamental aspect of the LWO, an open economy, needed a multilateral system capable of governing increasingly large trade and financial flows and monetary relations, to overcome the risk of protectionist policies (Kirshner 2015). In the first phase of the LWO 2.0, up until the 1970s, the order was inspired by the fundamental principle of 'embedded liberalism' (Ruggie 1992),

that is to say, economic liberalism whose negative effects would have been mitigated by state intervention. If the process of market liberalization continued throughout the Cold War and beyond, since the 1970s 'embedded liberalism' has given way to a liberalism with effects that are less and less 'constrained' by a system of fixed exchange rates and a domestic welfare state. With the abolition of the convertibility of the dollar into gold (and therefore of the fixed rate system) and, above all, the neoliberal policies initiated by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, there was a significant downsizing of social protection mechanisms in favor of economic policies aimed primarily at maximizing growth. This was the start of the LWO 2.1. and of that neoliberal globalization that would then exhibit all its limits with the economic-financial crisis of 2008.

The post-war creation of the liberal order also had an important regional dimension, positioning itself first and foremost in the heart of Western Europe, and taking shape in the 1950s with the start of the European integration process.

From a liberal point of view democracy, human rights, international institutions, an open economy and regionalism were strongly interconnected and functional to the creation of an order that offered more security and well-being. The narrative was that of a liberal-democratic order that would bring peace and well-being to those who embraced it. Yet this aspiration was never completely satisfied: LWO 2.0 coexisted with practices inconsistent with its principles, such as colonialism, or non-liberal policies promoted in the name of anti-communism and the containment of the Soviet Union. Moreover, since the 1980s, the welfare state has been reduced in several countries (particularly the US and the UK) and the "un-embeddedness" of liberalism has encouraged a backlash in the weaker parts of society as reflected in rising inequality and discontent. Despite all this, during the Cold War, democracy spread, international institutions rose in number and size, the European integration process deepened, international law developed and global connectivity grew. The LWO, in other words, despite its limits, was on a rise and seemed to be constrained in its global aspirations only by the bipolar structure of the international system.

2. After victory: crisis and decline of an order

If the LWO was geographically limited during the Cold War, the end of bipolarism offered the opportunity for global expansion. In the enthusiastic mood of the victory of liberalism over socialism, the expectation was one of a LWO 3.0, renewed, broader and deeper. Yet a 'New World Order' based on international law—to quote George Bush Sr.—was far from being achieved. Appalling (frequently civil) wars erupted in Europe (the Balkans) and in several other parts of the world (e.g. Rwanda, Somalia, Nagorno Karabakh, Yemen, Chechnya, Abkhazia, Eritrea and Congo) showing the limits of the relaunched UN Collective Security system as well as regional security organizations.

The terrorist attacks of September 2001 further revealed the vulnerability of the West, a wounded and incredulous giant. Furthermore, international in-

terventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the inability to respond effectively to the destabilization generated by such interventions negatively affected the image of a liberal order that had promised to bring peace, while reinforcing the image of a dangerous western 'hegemonic liberalism'. In its hegemonic nature, liberalism put an end to the compromise historically reached between imperialist impulses (such as those of the nineteenth-century liberal proto-order) and the aspiration of the institutional creation of peace. Moreover, the terrorist attacks also contributed to worsening relations across the Atlantic, widening the gap between Europe and the United States. Thus, in the early 2000s, the idea emerged that Europe and the United States were not only momentarily in disagreement, but embodied different types of political orders and different visions of the 'just' international order (Kagan 2003).

While the immediate response to the end of the Cold War included the consolidation and relaunch of some international regimes (e.g. the GATT become WTO; the CSCE become OSCE) and institutions (the European Union, NATO), in a decade it had become clear that the expansion of (and socialization around) liberal-democratic norms was more difficult than initially expected. The eastward enlargement of the EU and NATO as instruments of stabilization and long-term transformation of part of the former Soviet bloc was soon to show its limits. A reinforced Russia, under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, relaunched the idea of a Russian neighborhood (*Russkiy mir*) to protect against western influence. Its Asian neighbor, China, rose ever more powerful and began to be perceived as a threat by a declining United States (Ikenberry et al. 2022). Russia and China's challenge of the LWO became explicit in both the actions (Russia's intervention in support of Georgia's independent republics of in 2008; the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and eventually the war against Ukraine in 2022; China's challenges to the autonomy of Hong Kong and the threat to violate Taiwan's sovereignty, let alone the severe violations of human rights in both countries) and the discourses of the leaders (Clunan 2018; Kanet 2018; Zhao 2018).

Yet, the crisis of LWO 3.0 is due not only to the presence of powerful external challengers (as had been the case during the Cold War), but to a deep crisis of liberalism *within* the West. Contestation of neoliberalism grew with the economic crisis of 2007/8, with a disruptive effect as exhibited by widespread questioning of the benefits of neoliberal economic globalization. The economic crisis exacerbated the long-term shortcomings of economic globalization (the rise of domestic inequality and the socio-economic transformation of the labor market), de-legitimizing a world order that had made economic liberalization its most popularly known flag. The domino effect also affected the other pillar of liberalism: liberal democracy (*Fitzi* and Mackert 2018). Already under pressure from the difficulty of adapting to a changing society, representative democracy has been de-legitimized by its inability to provide the promised well-being and security. Trust in representatives has undergone an unprecedented collapse in countries with consolidated democracies, in which populist forces have been able to ride out widespread popular discontent, standing up for the voice of the stereotypical 'people' (Mudde 2004). The political effect has been significant

in those parts of the West where socio-economic inequality has become more intolerable, e.g. in the United States and the United Kingdom. In 2016, Donald Trump's election to the US presidency and the referendum for the UK's exit from the EU marked key moments not only in these two countries' national politics, but for international politics in general. In both cases, pillars of the liberal order were called into question: Trump conducted a largely anti-globalist electoral campaign and foreign policy; and Brexit represented the first step backwards in the most advanced liberal regional integration process in the world.

The so-called migrant crisis of 2015/16 (mainly in Europe) further damaged western liberal forces, opposed by sovereign populist forces, mostly Eurosceptics. In the most extreme cases, these are forces that support illiberal forms of democracy (assuming the oxymoron makes sense). All are skeptical of multilateral international cooperation and promote the centrality of an indistinct 'people' over the individual citizen of the liberal tradition (Mudde 2004, 2013). Furthermore, the crisis of liberal democracy and liberalism in general in the West is occurring simultaneously with the rise of illiberal international powers (Russia, China) and intertwined with it. Illiberal international powers use, foster and sometimes directly support internal contestation of the LWO. The means used are now well known and assume the form of disinformation campaigns, direct economic support to illiberal or anti-systemic forces, attempts at using dependencies and vulnerabilities to divide liberal states (within the European Union and NATO). Eventually, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (which just occurred at the time of writing) represents the most severe breach of international law and the most significant threat to global peace since WWII. Even in the rosiest of circumstances, this is going to be a turning point for the destiny of the LWO. Its direction, however, depends both on today's responses and yesterday's legacies. It is therefore important to explore some of the processes that have triggered or enhanced the crisis of the LWO, in order to identify its vulnerabilities, but also its resources of resilience.

3. Hyperglobalization, the digital revolution and the challenge of rights: a kaleidoscope of challenges

A diachronic recollection of the ups and downs of the LWO as done above fails to identify the core elements of a crisis which only partially depends on contingent factors and is actually more assignable to structural elements of liberalism in the area of economic well-being and recognition of rights, in the context of a society in a fast technological transformation.

3.1 Hyperglobalization

Economic liberalism, as we have seen, is a structural factor of the LWO and has enabled economic globalization. The latter has had very beneficial effects on the economies of countries and people around the world, reducing poverty and inequality between countries (Baldwin 2016; Milanovic 2016). However,

that same globalization has transformed the labor market within industrialized countries, delocalizing it. The affirmation of long value chains and transformation of our economies mainly into providers of services (rather than goods) has contributed to changing not only the labor market, but also the social stratification and self-identification of individuals in social classes characterized by a commonality of interests and objectives. Historically, one's social role has been significantly correlated to one's placement in the labor market. Hence job volatility brings social consequences also in terms of one's sense of social stratification and class belonging, not to mention the role of intermediate bodies (trade unions and political parties). This has had important consequences for representative democracies, of which intermediate bodies are a vital component. Moreover, economic globalization has become increasingly freed from political control. In the absence of strong social safety nets, it has produced inequalities that have nourished discontent, in turn de-legitimizing the liberal order. On the international level, it has allowed the rise of illiberal powers such as China, capable of questioning the link between democracies and participation in global capitalism.

3.2 The web

Both the political forces riding the waves of discontent in western democracies and rising illiberal powers have been able to fully exploit the opportunities offered by the digital revolution. The populist leader uses the communicative disintermediation made available to the network and speaks directly to the 'people', often disseminating inaccurate, if not false, news. China and Russia are accused of hacking and interfering in the public debates and electoral mechanisms of western democracies (Giusti and Piras 2020). The disinformation conveyed by the web and reproduced carelessly by the traditional media pollutes the vital strata of democracy (cf. Gori 2018). What is more, even democratic governments give in to the temptation of the web to violate the privacy of their own or other citizens, as the Snowden and Cambridge Analytica cases show. The network also changes the relationship between citizens and the public space, fragmenting the latter into a plurality of tribal communication spaces within which the typical mechanisms of interaction in small groups take place, reducing pluralism and increasing external opposition. A great opportunity, the network also presents a plurality of challenges that liberal democracies will have to face in order to be resilient. At an international level, the global governance of the network sees the competition between different models (American and Chinese *in primis*), with the risk of producing a new division of the world into spheres of influence, this time digital.

3.3 Rights and cultural pluralism

The liberal order struggles also to keep up with its promises to fund a rules-based order. Ever searching for a balance between security and freedom, the

liberal order struggles to find this balance when it faces international terrorism or other global challenges (in some cases even the Covid pandemic has led to a reduction in individual freedoms). But the terrain on which more careful reflection is needed is that of the relationship between liberalism and cultural pluralism. Multiculturalism—meant as the coexistence of different cultures—creates significant challenges to the international liberal order and the national order (Lucarelli 2020, Ch. 7). At the international level, the universal aspirations of liberalism, obscure cultural differences that frequently clash with liberal principles. The very idea of human rights has been criticized by more communitarian societies that refuse the idea to recognize more relevance to individual than collective rights. At the domestic level, multiculturalism has largely failed anywhere, as the leaders of France, Germany and the UK openly admitted in 2010-11 (Weaver 2010; *The Telegraph* 2011). Making a multicultural democracy work is indeed challenging and Western democracies are still struggling to make this happen. Moreover, migratory pressure has again highlighted the tension that exists in liberal democracies between the centrality of human rights and concern for the maintenance of conditions perceived as necessary in order to guarantee the very maintenance of democracies and the welfare state (adherence to common values, common language, and a sense of belonging to the political community). In the name of concerns about the preservation of the welfare state, cultural homogeneity or the maintenance of public order, liberal Europe has agreed to enter into agreements with third countries with dubious liberal credentials in order to stop the influx of migrants to European countries (Ceccorulli and Fassi 2021), effectively legitimizing significant violations of human rights (just think of what happens in detention camps in Libya). In the same way. the US, under the administration of Donald Trump, has discriminated migrants on the basis of their culture (then corrected into country of origin) and neglected the rights of irregular migrants.

This brief analysis shows that there are some key features of liberalism—its historically unfolded approach to economic liberalism and the unresolved relationship between universality (or rights and principles) and particularity (of cultures)—which delegitimize it internally and externally. Moreover, such weaknesses have been further enhanced by a rapid technological revolution which has had both material effects (on job relocalization for instance) and effects on communication in the public space (a vital component of democracies). Both weaknesses, then, have been instrumentalized by illiberal forces at the domestic and international level.

4. Resilient or obsolete? Concluding remarks on the LWO

Contestation is not new to the LWO and has been present since its beginning: conservative protectionist forces opposed the creation of an international trade organization in the Bretton Woods negotiations, while years later forces from the left opposed the World Trade Organization and protested in Seattle. However, the crisis that the LWO is facing today is unprecedented in several respects.

In the first place, the current crisis is challenging *all* the pillars of the LWO at the same time. Liberal democracy, multilateralism, free trade, and the rules-based order are all challenged features of the current order. Moreover, the crisis of one pillar triggers and perpetuates the crisis of another. The failure of the liberal order to keep its promises of generalized well-being and security has challenged faith in liberal democratic institutions at the domestic level, and of multilateralism and free trade at the international level. Political liberalism has been challenged by the failure of economic hyperliberalism.

In the second place, probably ever before has the domestic crisis of the LWO been so intertwined with its external crisis. Domestic contestation and global contestation are in close relations not only through direct external support for antagonistic forces in western societies, but also because rising illiberal powers have proven to be (or at least have conveyed the message to be) efficient (as in the case of China's fighting of Covid 19 or setting up its new imperial Silk road), able to use the economic opportunities offered by the LWO without being constrained by its political principles and values (China), and able to achieve their aims with all means possible (violation of international law as in the South China Sea or in Ukraine) without unbearable repercussions.

Third, the *domestic* crisis of the LWO—the most serious reason for concern because it is what makes the LWO less resilient—is deep and uncertain in its evolution. Indeed, the challenge to the LWO is not so much the rise of illiberal powers outside the West (Russia and China in the first place), but the crisis of liberalism in the West, in the cradle of liberal thought and the liberal planning of the global order. The inability of the liberal order to fulfill the promises of security and wellbeing has legitimized the rise of antagonistic forces that are dismantling this order domestically and internationally. The rise of illiberal powers such as China paradoxically reinforces the power of non-liberal sovereign forces within the United States, producing a boomerang effect on the maintenance of the order that the United States has created and supported over the decades. We have witnessed the weakening of democracy and human rights in the US and in various European countries, the weakening of multilateralism, the crisis of the process of European integration, the illiberal drift of emerging powers (such as Brazil) and even of European powers (Hungary, Poland), as well as the weakening and de-legitimization of international economic-financial organizations.

For all these reasons, the LWO is in an unprecedented crisis that deserves a significant effort by the liberal world to address at least four crucial issues: the rescue of democracy, the redefinition of globalization, the imperative of sustainability, and the need to be ontologically coherent.

The rescue of democracy. A long-term debate has emerged on the topic, but only recently have scholars talked of the "autocratization" or de-democratization of full-fledged democracies (Boese et al. 2021). Democracy is a process of dealing with political, economic and social decision-making in a complex society. It therefore needs to adapt its specific features to a society that has significantly evolved in terms of composition, means of communication, mechanisms of self-identification, connectivity with the outside world and expectations regarding living

standards. Rethinking democracy in such a transformed scenario is a difficult but fundamental task for the LWO not only to survive but to enter its 4.0 phase.

Rethinking globalization and connectivity. Hyper globalization and dis-embedded liberalism have brought inequalities, loss of jobs in developed countries and the risk of being penalized by long supply chains (as Covid-19 has shown). This has been the combined result of political-economic choices and fast technological developments. Connectivity is a reality that cannot be deconstructed and which has many benefits, but several aspects of the current form of globalization can and should be redesigned, also to restore credibility in a liberal economic system that has produced so many benefits.

Sustainability. The great challenge is to carry out such an economic re-design with sustainability in mind. This is clearly the plan behind the US and the EU's post-Covid recovery plans. It is also the longer-term goal of China's strategic planning, but the planet is deteriorating faster than our ability to implement green economy projects. The failure to act rapidly could further delegitimize the current domestic and international institutions.

Ontological coherence, or resilience with respect to its own values (even when facing challenges coming from illiberal states). The risk of a global return to Westphalia and power politics is very high in the face of severe challenges coming from countries like Russia, ready to use force and violate the sovereignty of neighbors. But the risk of failing to be faithful to liberal values is also high in front of issues that can be instrumentalized by domestic populist (right wing) forces, such as immigration. Liberalism is under attack from the right (nationalism) and from the left (contestants of so called neoliberism). Reforming economic and political liberalism is therefore an imperative and the LWO to survive.

Even if the LWO 4.0 sees the light, it is unlikely that it will be universal. It is more likely that it will have some global features, but will coexist with different regional orders (more or less inspired by liberal principles). This representation comes close to what Amitav Acharya has called a "multiplex" world order (2014): regional orders characterized by different political and economic modernities. Identifying a way to strike a compromise between its universal aspirations and multiculturality will therefore be necessary for the LWO both "at home and abroad".

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