

## Democratic Liberal Peace: from peace to war

Henrique Weil Afonso\*

**Summary:** 1. Introduction; 2. The Liberal underpinnings of Democratic Peace Theory; 3. Differing aspects of Democratic Peace Theory; 4. From Democratic Peace Theory to Democratic War Theory?; 5. Conclusion; 6. References

### Abstract

Democratic Peace Theory acknowledges the spread of democratic values as a means to achieve international peace. By drawing on a comprehensive Kantian background, the theory has served as justification for the imposition of western liberal values around the globe. This article exams the theory's basic tenets and facets in order to investigate its ideological claims. It is suggested that the spread of democratic values alone cannot be granted complete success in the task of bringing about world peace and stability. Despite its supposedly peaceful ultimate intentions, the theory may also work as a domination discourse that foments war and conflict.

**Keywords:** Democratic Peace Theory; Perpetual Peace; Liberalism; War

\* Graduado em Direito pela Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora. Estudante visitante do Colorado College (EUA, 2005) e da University of Westminster (Inglaterra, 2007). Mestrando em Direito Internacional pela Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Minas Gerais.

## 1. Introduction

How do different cultures interact in the promotion of peace? What role do rich states play in this very process? Is there a single model capable of achieving world peace? The complex security challenges faced by contemporary international society, it is often argued, cannot be comprehensively dealt with by traditional crisis management strategies such as exclusively military campaigns.

Democratic Peace Theory reckons the spread of liberal democracy as a means to attain peace. However, according to our argument, there is evidence that the theory fails to highlight the role played by international institutions and economic interdependence as key factors in the peacemaking proposal. Interestingly, just as liberal democratic institutions operate favorably to the peace cause, by the very same institutions and ideology wars are often justified and fought. Lastly, we will argue that the theory is deeply set in western universalist claims that work both as an incentive to intervene and as a justification for selectively fight in a given war rather than another.

In a first moment we will give a brief account of the Liberal roots of Democratic Peace Theory. Its main features will be explored, as well as different approaches within the theory, such as the concepts of dyadic and monadic peace. A latter section will explore the limitations of Democratic Theory, more importantly the importance of international institutions and free trade, cultural relativism as opposed to universalism and then, in a final section, we will explore the existence of an indispensable normative element to the

Democratic Peace proposal. Under such a liberal democratic framework lies an often overlooked side effect of Democratic Peace Theory: the Democratic War Theory legitimizing liberal democratic belligerent states' interventionism and ideological expansionist campaigns.

## **2. The Liberal underpinnings of Democratic Peace Theory**

Jackson & Sørensen (2007) identify the concepts of human progress, human reason and cooperation as central to Liberalism conceived as a Theory of International Relations. According to Liberals, faith in human relations, development and underpinning values such as justice and progress constitute the framework for international understanding and peace. The Realist claim that war and conflict is inherently present in human nature is vehemently contested by Liberals, for there it is possible to fetch peaceful ways to settle disputes. Similarly, international institutions play a significant role in keeping world order and peace. Equality promoted by basic rights for all citizens, democratic political processes, effective law enforcement mechanisms and a market driven economy should also be highlighted as constituting the skeleton of Liberal thought (Dunne, 2005).

Once the basic tenets of Liberal thought have been outlined, one can engage in a more comprehensive analysis of Immanuel Kant's 'Perpetual Peace'. There are three essential elements in Kant's Peace Theory, and the way such elements interact renders Liberal Democracy the status of the ideal

western form of government. The first of these elements is civil liberties and legal equality of individuals, for '[...] individuals are morally autonomous in that they are free to set moral standards for their own actions' (Danilovic & Clare, 2007: 400). The second key element is the representative rule, with democracy consisting of an ideal to be pursued, even though emphasis ought to be given to the '[...] representative "spirit" of public choices, regardless of the type of the government body producing them' (Danilovic & Clare, 2007: 400). Finally, there is the separation of powers, which is combined with an efficient system of checks and balances aiming to assure a balance between the powers inside states, in the sense that no power will supercede any of the other two.

Kant believed that the republican form of government is the only one that respects citizens' individual rights, thereby recognizing the moral status of the individual. States that share the same liberal values are expected to maintain friendly affairs, systematically reducing the chances of wars between them. On the other hand, liberal states are more prone to engage in conflict with illiberal ones. Such a differentiation in the war pattern, that is, liberal states' proneness to fight illiberal states as well as the unlikelihood of wars between liberal states is called the 'dyadic peace' (Geis et al, 2007: 158). In this sense,

*'Through their faith in the power of human reason and the capacity of human beings to realize their inner potential, [liberals] remain confident that the stain of war can be removed from human experience'. (Burchill, 2005: 58)*

On the other end of the spectrum lies an alternative approach towards the Liberal Peace Theory: the ‘monadic peace’ (Danilovic & Clare, 2007). According to this view, liberal states are less likely to go to war than the so-called illiberal states. This is to assert that liberal states hold human life and individual rights in an elevated esteem. Moreover, the belief that reasonable beings are inclined to condemn war is also central in Liberal Peace Theory. The adoption of a monadic perspective facilitates the acknowledgement that liberal states are less prone to go to war than illiberal ones, and are more inclined to adopt negotiation as a means to prevent conflicts (Geis et al, 2007). Nonetheless, according to monadic peace theory, the possibility of military encounters is not discarded, yet significantly reduced.

Theories aimed at explaining Democratic Peace can be classified as structural and normative. As for the structural accounts, democratic peace is believed to be the result of institutional constraints within democratic states. Differently, normative theories ‘locate the causes of democratic peace in the ideas or norms held by democracies’ (Owen, 1994). The latter asserts that democracies share a core of values, including harmonic decision making processes, that curbs statesmen willingness to start wars. However, Owen (1994) highlights an often overlooked feature of both structural and normative approaches: states have differing perceptions regarding peer states as being liberals or not. Such perceptions, when acknowledged by statesmen, may lead to relativist accounts on any given state as being liberal or despotic. Finally, the author asserts that the notion of ‘perceptions’ and its potential to examine states’ behavior has been mostly disregarded in International Relations literature.

Sørensen (2007), referring to the concept of individual liberty, concedes the division of the Liberal Theory in two major branches. At this point, it is important to understand that liberal liberty is often classified as negative liberty (referring to individual autonomy and right to self-determination) and positive liberty (relating to the creation of a specific framework for the development of human potential and individualities). The quest to secure the latter often requires states to adopt a true interventionist stand, thus named Liberalism of Imposition. Some would go as far as to suggest the existence of a duty to intervene whenever liberal values are in peril, as opposed to the Realist claim of unconditional adherence to the principles of state sovereignty and right to self-determination. On the other hand, should states be willing to uphold negative liberties, a completely different approach is desired: for negative liberties call for independence, it is advisable to '[...] leave people (and states) alone; let them choose their own path; their liberty should be one of self-determination, and that requires a policy of non-intervention' (Sørensen, 2007: 367). The latter is called Liberalism of Restraint. As a result, one is inclined to believe that Democratic Peace Theory is sympathetic to the tenets underlying Liberalism of Imposition, and the consequences of such identification (amongst others) shall be dealt with in the following section.

In short, Kantian Democratic Peace Theory lies firmly in authentic Liberal accounts of human nature and International Relations. Political mechanisms devised to express people's will combined with an increasing awareness of what constitutes the interests of the population and its expression are features that render democracy a prominent role in addressing war issues. Furthermore, 'because they share the enlightened ends of self-preservation,

material well-being and liberty, liberal democracies are seen as trustworthy and pacific' (Owen, 1994: 103).

Once the basic principles and lines of thought have been briefly examined, we shall proceed critically towards Democratic Peace Theory and its possibilities of bringing about world peace.

### **3. Differing aspects of Democratic Peace Theory**

How does democracy promote peace? Can it be held as a sufficient condition for Kant's Perpetual Peace? We will begin this section by stating that democracy, conceived as the sole potentially adequate element to produce a more secure world, is grounded in deep liberal roots, which in its turn is responsible for preventing democratic states from going to war. International institutions and capitalism, we will state, cannot be dissociated from the democratization process. Latter, we will discuss the question of cultural relativism and its implications to the disputable ongoing process of implementation of a democratic regime in Iraq. Furthermore, it is also worth mentioning the debate between universalism as opposed to relativism and how their interaction with Democratic Peace Theory.

Liberal thought, it is alleged, builds the framework in which liberal democratic institutions exist alongside liberal ideology (Owen, 1994). Democratic institutions promote reasonable grounds for political debates where both government and opposition are confronted with the increasingly important

part played by public opinion. Whenever illiberal elites seek war with a liberal state, resistance in the form of institutional constraints, the fear of electoral punishment combined with overwhelming popular disapproval become conspicuous, thereby halting illiberal elites from starting a war.

Conversely, Owen (1994) acknowledges that a different pattern comes into being when liberal elites campaign in favor of a given conflict. Such elites will make use of the very same mechanisms originally created to prevent wars, yet with different motivations. Thus, the abovementioned notion of states' differing perceptions over other states democratic status turns useful at this very moment, once 'liberals may agitate [a state's war machinery] in favor of war if they believe it would serve liberal ends' (Owen, 1994: 103). Hence, democratic structures and norms work in tandem in order to provide democratic peace theory with enforcement mechanisms that, as we have seen, are systematically vulnerable to political manipulation.

Critics point out that the success of the implementation of democracy in any given state is highly dependent upon the context in which it is implemented. As Weede (2007) asserts, it is often suggested in International Relations literature that democratic peace is 'merely one leg of a triad – together with peace by trade and peace by co-operation in international organizations' (2007: 225). Despite the author's skepticism concerning the weight of international organizations, one should extol the increasingly important part played by them, and the efforts held by the African Union in trying to halt genocide in Darfur as well as aid agencies' contribution to the humanitarian cause constitute remarkable accounts of the potential of such institutions (The New York Times, 2007).



At this stage it is worth examining the second pillar suggested above by Weede (2007): free trade as a key feature of world peace and security. Liberals believe that free trade is just one of a more comprehensive concept of economic freedom. Additionally to free trade, economic freedom encompasses safe property rights, limited government and macro-economic stability. 'The promotion of economic freedom might be more effective than democratization, for the more economic freedom prevails in a country, the less likely it is to be involved in war' (Weede, 2007: 226). Such a proposal indeed sounds very appealing at first sight. Nonetheless, what one might reckon particularly puzzling about the idea of capitalism acting as a global pacifier is the question related to what stand developed states ought to adopt when engaging in such an endeavor. The aforementioned author suggests that rich countries should serve as examples, and despotic states should be let free to decide the pace of events. Therefore, economic interdependence rises as a complementary strategy that, combined with both democratic institutions as well as international institutions, have the potential to bring an end to war.

It would not be absurd to assert that the very notion of the spread of democracy as a means to achieve world peace is embedded in a normative argument, as stated above. 'Dominant ideological models of the Cold War period were usually posited in a universalist form and were therefore assumed to be more or less culturally neutral in the sense that any society could construct a viable political system around them' (Lawson, 2000: 72). In this sense, the debate between the concepts of cultural universalism as opposed to cultural relativism must be understood if one is willing to recognize the underlying discourse of Democratic Peace Theory. Cultural relativism

repudiates the idea of the predominance of one form of ethical plurality as a substitute for a given cultural representation. On the other end of the spectrum one can identify the universalist claim of the existence of transcendental ethical principles which go beyond geographical borders and provide 'a moral basis for a world order' (Lawson, 2000: 73). Consequently, it would seem plausible to reckon that Democratic Peace Theory is firmly attached to a western cultural base, a western liberal cultural base we would suggest. Consequently, there is a claim that democracy, if implemented outside the West, must undergo a process of modification to suit local demands (Lawson, 2000).

A brief analysis of current democratization process in Iraq might assist us in the task of understanding the role performed by cultural and ethnical heterogeneity in a 'forging' democracy as well the complications rising within this process. History acknowledges Middle East's proneness to engage in conflict, and the reasons for that are anything but simplistic, though we shall not engage in this very discussion. Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that the country's communal problems might jeopardize the implementation of democratic institutions. As Weede (2007: 222) stresses, 'the project of democratization in Iraq runs into further complications because of the communal tensions across ethnic and sectarian divides, between Arabs and Kurds, and between Sunnis and Shias'. Consequently, the implementation of democracy may not be a priority in the country's agenda, for the settlement of the country's communal security issues is a key engine to the whole process, should democracy be willing to emerge. The enhancement of violent reactions contrary to the US-led military campaign is also regarded as a symptom of a forced democratization proposal. Finally, and assuming a successful

implementation of democratic institutions, how could one expect Iraq, a 'new born' democracy, to spread democratic values to numerous despotic neighboring states? This implies that '[...] if the risk of war between democracies and authorities is higher than between two democracies, then inserting a democracy into a solidly autocratic region does not improve the prospect of peace' (Weede, 2007: 222). In short, the practical application of Democratic Peace Theory is subject to cultural and historical variants that require the establishment of minimal common normative grounds for the sake of the success of any democratization project.

The success of democratic institutions within states is dictated by the existence of what Lawson (2000) calls 'cultural homogeneity'. The emergence of long-lasting ethnic conflicts in the post-Cold War Era testifies in favor of such a claim: democracy does not adequately deal with fierce local cultural heterogeneity. Similarly, critics suggest that democracy does not properly adjudicate the claims of long-standing ethnic communities living within multi-ethnic societies (Fukuyama, 1991).

At this point one might wonder what element is responsible for the success of democratization process in multi-ethnic societies. In this sense, the abovementioned author observes: [...] 'while democracy can rise under certain economic conditions, it must be desired for essentially non-economic reasons' (Fukuyama, 1991: 661). In a state where plural forms of cultural manifestations of ethnical identities coexist, the existence of a unifying element must be regarded as a sine qua non condition to the emergence of democratic institutions. Lawson (2000) rightly identifies such element as being the people's rule as the ultimate political voice, for '[...] a variety of institutional forms can

adequately accommodate democratic rule. This suggests that the normative principle remains the same despite institutional, historical, cultural and other contextual differences' (Lawson, 2000: 79). Should such an observation proceed, the so-called superiority of liberal thought, when contrasted with alternative lines of political ideals, is questioned. Consequently, and this is in accordance to what Lawson (2000) puts forward, the normative principle that catalyzes Democratic Peace is the rule of the people, who possess the ultimate political authority, regardless of cultural, ethnic and linguistic dissimilarities.

#### **4. From Democratic Peace Theory to Democratic War Theory?**

Once we have outlined some of the main criticisms surrounding the Democratic Peace Theory, a timely need emerges to explore the Theory's contribution to the spread of war and conflict. This is to testify for the existence of this often neglected Democratic Peace feature, for academically-related literature is clearly committed (and perhaps limited) to an exclusive empirical approach, as opposed to a normative-based understanding of key drawbacks (for an example of an empirical-regional approach, see Enterline & Greig: 2006).

Regarding the universalist western claim of the spread of democracy as a means to achieve peace, critics point out that '[...] since the end of the Cold War, the linking of democracy and peace has become part and parcel of official political ideology, informing the foreign policy of western

democracies' (Geis et al., 2007: 157). The US 2006 National Security Strategy consists of an account of a true liberal-expansionist policy encompassing the spread of democracy as its legitimizing feature (White House, 2006). In addition, International Law legislation provides states with a different sort of justification: Article 51, Chapter VII of the UN Charter authorizes states to engage in self-defense conflict. Such as authorization is nonetheless embedded in a 'grey area' that allows extensive interpretations, up to the extent to justify pre-emptive strikes as a self-defense strategy.

Finally, we shall discuss the question whether liberal democracy, conceived to condemn armed conflicts, might notwithstanding be producing incentives to go to war. Geis et al (2007) puts forward reasons for such an acknowledgement. First, democracies and non-democracies have similar incentives to go to war; in this sense, it would not be implausible to admit that Classical Realism comes in due time to explain such incentives, the lust for power, national interest and domestic security being their underlying tenets. Second, 'the war involvement of democracies is shaping world politics to a greater extent than the war involvement of non-democracies' (Geis et al, 2007: 160). Furthermore, war involvement may be related to particular political democratic features, for democracies wage wars on behalf of humankind. Thus, liberal democracies' reasons for going to war, it can be argued, are strongly rooted in universalist principles, such as the enforcement of international law, the struggle to stop genocide and the protection of international security.

Liberal democracies take advantage of the existence of a 'practical discretionary power' (Geis et al., 2007: 162) that broadens the possibilities of implementation of overseas democracy. On the one hand, statesmen find in

discretionary power an efficient tool for balancing differing stands on a given issue. On the other hand, should a liberal democratic state face a case that is distant from its immediate interests, the same discretionary power may work as a justification for liberal democracies selective behavior when deciding whether to intervene in a given state or not.

## **5. Conclusion**

Democratic Peace Tradition is deeply associated with western liberal values, and this very feature compromises the theory's universalist claim and scope. It is the same liberal institutions and ideology that work in tandem to curb statesmen proneness in starting wars that serve as a justification for illiberal elites to pursue partial interests. Likewise, Democratic Peace Theory over plays the role performed by domestic democratic institutions, which are subject to political manipulation.

As we have seen, international institutions and economic interdependence are conditional elements to the success of democracy as a peacemaking instrument. Furthermore, in multi-ethnic and cultural societies, the existence of common belief regarding the rule of the people as the ultimate political voice turns out to be imperative. A normative element is therefore much needed. Nonetheless, one must observe the particularities of each society in order to implement democratic regimes: a single standard model, as claimed by the West, does not comprehensively address many states' needs.

As we have seen, Democratic Peace legitimates military interventions (tradition embedded in liberalism of imposition), on the one hand, also providing justification for the cases where states choose not to intervene on the other one. Statesmen should be aware of the theory's capacity to justify differing behaviors when exercising their discretionary powers. More important for the analysis of our argument is the claim that Democratic Peace theory also produces the incentives for going to war, questioning the theories initial proposal of perpetual peace, thereby suggesting the necessity of complementary strategies. In short, Democratic Peace theory must consist of one of several mechanisms aimed at promoting peace.

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