Chapter 4

Theory in practice: A Liberal Studying the World

We want to study some aspect of the real world of international relations using liberal theory. How do we go about doing that? First, we need a research question suitable for the employment of liberal theory. By now, we are familiar with basic liberal assumptions about the process of modernization, the development of the modern, liberal state, and the belief in human reason and human progress. We are also familiar with a series of more concrete liberal theories, including sociological liberalism, interdependence liberalism, institutional liberalism, and republican liberalism. It is rarely possible to address all aspects of a theory tradition within the framework of one study, so it is necessary to pick out one of those more concrete liberal theories and to formulate our research question on the basis of that theory.

Research questions emerge in many ways of course. They can be inspired by developments in the real world, such as the process of democratization after the end of the Cold War, or the development of regional cooperation in Europe and elsewhere, or the seemingly increasing interdependence between countries. Research questions can also be inspired by theoretical issues: how to best define the concept of interdependence, how to establish the link between the growth of democracy and peace, and so on.

Before settling on a specific research question it is always useful to consult the scholarly debate - in professional journals and books - about the issues we want to study. That is because the scholarly debate is focused on those research questions that the overall community of scholars active in the issue area find important. Furthermore, the debate tells us about interesting research questions that have already been addressed; in that way the debate can also give good cues to interesting questions that have not been addressed at all, or have been insufficiently addressed.

In consulting the debate it can often be helpful to think of the existing contributions in terms of 'friends' and 'foes': Who do you disagree with? Who do you support? By thinking in that way it is easier to formulate what kind of contribution you want to make yourself. It is always helpful to think of one's own research project as a further addition to the scholarly debate, something that should be interesting for other scholars to read.

So we consult the liberal debate about democratic peace. And we know about the conditions of peace among liberal democracies spelled out in Figure 4.5. We also know that early processes of democratization often have led to more rather than less conflict. Many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere are examples of that. Liberal theorists of the democratic peace are not overly disturbed by this. They maintain that democratic norms must be ingrained before the domestic basis of the democratic peace will be secure, and such development of the political culture usually takes a long time.

We are now approaching a very interesting research question as seen from the debate about liberal democratic peace. When has there been enough democratic consolidation for the democratic peace to occur? Additional questions immediately lurk behind that: what does is mean that democratic norms are 'ingrained' and how can such a state be appropriately defined? What are the factors and processes leading to the consolidation of democracy in the first place? We can learn about possible answers to these questions by

studying the literature on democratization and democratic consolidation. We can also study previous attempts to make general measures of democracy's progress, such as the Freedom House Index (www.worldaudit.org).

So there are already a cluster of possible research questions about the democratic peace to choose from. Assume we stay with the first choice: When has there been enough democratic consolidation for the democratic peace to occur? We now need to formulate a research design. There are many possibilities here. We could make an analysis of the characteristics of consolidated democracies of the Western liberal order compared with the characteristics of 'new democracies' in the Third World and spell out the major differences. We could study a cluster of countries in a region, such as Sub-Saharan Africa, and examine the obstacles to democratic consolidation and the occurrence of violent conflict in context of democratization. We could study a single case, such as the Sudan, as track the ways in which early democratization has led to more conflict.

Suppose we choose the second option. Our study would then spell out the problems and barriers facing democratic consolidation in Sub-Saharan Africa and the concrete relationships between democratization and violent conflict. We can proudly say that we have contributed both empirically and theoretically to the liberal research project. Empirically, we would be doing this by providing knowledge of concrete barriers to democratization in Sub-Saharan Africa. Theoretically, this would be by clarifying why early democratization in Sub-Saharan African need not lead to democratic peace.

Such a study would not provide a full answer to our research question about the link between democratic consolidation and peace. Much work remains to answer that. But we have given a small contribution to some part of the answer. This small contribution is one part of the big jigsaw puzzle that is the complete answer. Other researchers can build on our insight in their own endeavours to gain knowledge about the relationship between democracy and peace. Social science research, of which international relations forms a part, does not come up with single studies that change the foundation of the entire discipline. The natural sciences are better suited for that; think, for example, of Einstein's theory of relativity or Bohr's quantum theory. In social science and IR, we have to settle for less: small contributions to big questions that are rarely ever answered in full at all. That is because changes in the real world and new rankings of our values and priorities will always produce competing sets of theories about IR.

Assignments

1. Evaluate the prospects for democratic peace in a region of your choice, based on the empirical information you are able to retrieve.

2. Try to formulate other case-studies based on liberalism.

Case Study: The Nobel Peace Prize

The 2014 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the young Pakistani schoolgirl, Malala Yousafzai and Indian children's rights activist, Kailash Satyarthi.

Malala Yousafzai and Kailash Satyarthi win Nobel Peace prize:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=88rvzrufM3A

Watch the video and discuss the following points:

- How is a child's – and a girl's' in particular – right to education related to progress and peace? Will better access to education lead to a qualitative change of the international system? Why?

- Which (if any) of the strands of liberalism – sociological, interdependence, institutional or republican – provides the best framework for understanding and explaining the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Ms Yousafzai and Mr Satyarthi?

- Do you agree with the claim that education, development, and human rights are completely irrelevant factors in a neorealist framework? Why?