Debate: Reply and Response to Jahn’s ‘Tragedy of Liberal Diplomacy’

The Complexity of Western Diplomacy: A Reply to Beate Jahn

Oisín Tansey

Beate Jahn’s recent articles, ‘The Tragedy of Liberal Diplomacy: Democratization, Intervention and Statebuilding (Parts I and II)’, present a comprehensive critique of twentieth century Western policy, tracing the cumulative failures of modernization policies, democracy promotion, intervention and statebuilding. Jahn contends that despite successive failures (of modernization in the Cold War era first, and then subsequently of democracy promotion and statebuilding in the post-Cold War period), Western powers have consistently failed to acknowledge the flaws of their own policies and have insisted instead on renewed international intervention in the domestic policies of developing states. While the author recounts many distinct episodes of Western diplomatic failure, especially in the foreign policy of the United States, her primary target is not the particular governments or leaders who initiated botched interventions, but rather the political ideology that inspired them, which, according to Jahn, is that of liberalism.

In an impressive sweep of the history of liberal thought and action, Jahn takes us from the late seventeenth-century foundational writings of John Locke and draws us right up to the recent Western actions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Jahn argues that the core claims of liberalism, as set out by Locke, entail a constitutive relationship between market economics, democracy and security. The concern with security is crucial, as it leads to a desire on behalf of liberal states to promote liberalism abroad in order to protect the liberal order at home. In fact, Jahn identifies this liberal impetus as at the root of almost all Western interventionism in the twentieth century, and goes further by also identifying it as the causal explanation for the failures of these policies. According to Jahn, these interventionist foreign policies:
[B]ring the most basic contradiction of liberal international theory into stark relief: the tension between the ideal claim that all people can govern themselves and the assumption based on the liberal philosophy of history that, in reality, only those who endorse the market democracy model demonstrate sufficiently mature reason to be endowed with the right to self-determination. (Jahn 2007, p.102)

So modernization policies deny local self-determination by bypassing the public to focus on pro-Western elites, and thus ferment radicalization and make enemies of those intended to be friends. More recently, policies of intervention and statebuilding are said to result in a similar denial of local self-determination and democracy, rather than any positive process of democratization, as Western powers create rather than solve problems and respond to initial failures with renewed efforts and even greater levels of intervention.

The narrative is compelling, as it presents a coherent and parsimonious theoretical framework for understanding not only the origins of Western policies in the twentieth century, but also the evidence that exists to suggest that such policies have more often than not failed to achieve their stated goals. Yet as attractive as this account appears, the very elements that make it appealing – its parsimony, its scope – also represent the elements that make it profoundly problematic. In short, by explaining so much with so little, Jahn runs the risk of explaining very little at all. I outline here four central problems with Jahn’s account that suggest it cannot form the basis of an explanation for the sources and effects of both Cold War and post-Cold War Western foreign policy.

First, by defining liberalism in the way that she does, Jahn makes it all-encompassing, with the result that it both subsumes other potential ideological roots of foreign policy (most notably realism) and also papers over variation within liberal thought itself.

Second, Jahn presents a view of the ‘democracy transition paradigm’ that suggests a single body of thought where, in fact, no neat consensus has existed.

Third, the empirical record presented in the articles suggests much more variation in the effects of foreign policy than Jahn seems willing to acknowledge, making it difficult to see how it can all be explained with reference to essentially one independent variable (the liberal nature of international policy).

Finally, even if we were to accept the view that liberalism is the root of the international interventionist practices Jahn identifies, the absence of any systematic discussion of domestic actors and contexts, and the ways in which they mediate international influences, suggests an overly international focus in explaining political developments that ultimately take place at the domestic level.

The Breadth of Liberalism

The first problem of Jahn’s articles is the manner in which they present a conception of liberalism that would seem to leave little room for alternative ideological positions. There are two issues here – first, that her definition of liberalism is so broad that it almost seems to replace rather than supplement
other ideological positions such as realism, and second, that liberalism is defined in a way that papers over significant differences within recent liberal thought itself. The initial problem arises from the definition of liberal ideology in the articles, which according to Jahn entails a ‘unity’ of politics, economics and security. The core claims of liberalism entail ‘a dynamic, constitutive relationship between market economy and government by consent’, and an imperative to protect these economic and political freedoms at home by protecting them from potential security threats abroad. When non-liberals exist abroad, ‘there may be a strong incentive to protect the image and integrity of the liberal model by more active and “expansive” policies, particularly against open and taunting challenges from non-liberal “rogue states”’ (Jahn 2007, p.93). There is thus a ‘liberal conception of security’ that drives foreign policy, one which equates national interests with universal interests, and has a difficulty in distinguishing defensive and offensive foreign policies.

Defined in this way, Jahn uses liberalism to account for the interventionist policies of the West, as it strives to make political and economic freedoms secure in the non-liberal world. Jahn argues explicitly against viewing foreign policy with reference variously to its predominant economic, political or security goals, as radicals, liberals and realists might do respectively. According to Jahn: ‘Liberalism, in other words, is not just one among a number of contesting positions in contemporary debates on US foreign policy. It is the enduring, underlying premise of that policy’, and ‘it is incorrect, then, to describe [the Cold War] era of American foreign policy as “realist”’ (Jahn 2007a, p.102). Consequently, conventional distinctions between realist and liberal foreign policy are collapsed, and we are left with a perspective that can accommodate a wide variety of foreign policy motivations within this broad conception of liberalism. For example, US Cold War foreign policies generally associated with the realist goal of containment (Gaddis 2005), such as covert interventions in Iran and Guatemala in the 1950s to overthrow unfavoured regimes, are presented here as liberal objectives. Modernization rather than containment is said to be the goal, and while security may be a motive, it is a ‘liberal conception of security’, one related to protecting market democracy at home by advancing it abroad.

The problem with this approach, however, is the clear risk of conceptual stretching (Sartori 1970), where the inclusion of such a wide range of foreign policy motivations and activities under the liberal rubric makes the very idea of a particularly liberal foreign policy hard to specify. Liberal ideology is identified as the inspiration for policies not only of successive US administrations through different stages of the Cold War and after, but also of liberal states more generally, as well as international organizations such as the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and also many non-governmental organizations. Liberal foreign policy in turn is pursued through a wide range of different strategies, from economic and security aid, to democracy assistance, to counter-insurgency programmes, efforts to ‘remake society’, peacebuilding, military intervention and statebuilding.
The cases included in Jahn’s framework thus include those as different as the American interventions in Iran and Guatemala in the 1950s, the activities of the US Peace Corps, the US-led interventions in Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq, and UN multilateral operations, of various shapes and sizes, in cases as diverse as Rwanda, Cambodia, Croatia and Mozambique. With such a broad conception of liberalism, incorporating security as well as political and economic concerns, it is difficult to think of any Western foreign policy since the end of World War II that Jahn could not plausibly fit into her argument. It would have been helpful here if Jahn had clearly outlined the limits of her conceptions of liberalism and liberal foreign policy, and specified what a non-liberal foreign policy might look like. There would then be greater clarity regarding which types of intervention are covered by the argument, and which lie beyond its scope. As it stands, the concept of liberalism presented in the articles seems so broad and all-inclusive as to be of very little use for providing analytic purchase on such a variety of international practices.

The second problem concerning the definition of liberalism is that Jahn discusses it in a way that suggests there is a cohesive and consensus-based liberal position in contemporary politics, despite the fact that contemporary liberal thinking is actually quite diverse. This can most clearly be seen in Jahn’s discussion of democracy promotion through statebuilding, where she suggests that present-day liberals prioritize the development of state capacity over the promotion of liberalization. According to Jahn, ‘this translates into the recommendation to delay elections, to limit political freedoms... until the government is stable and the outcome of elections and other forms of liberalization is secure’ (2007, p.223). This point is explicitly based on the views of Roland Paris, who in recent years has carved out an influential furrow within liberal internationalist thought by arguing strongly for ‘institutionalization before liberalization’, which entails the postponement of democracy until international actors can ensure local institutions are strong enough to support the uncertainties of open political competition (Paris 2004). Yet while the Paris thesis has been widely discussed, it far from represents any new consensus in liberal thought, and again Jahn runs the risk of papering over complexity and variety in an effort to present a tight-knit narrative of a cohesive and damaging strand of liberal thought and foreign policy.

The Roland Paris view, for example, has been challenged both within academic circles and also by recent political developments. His recommendation for a specific sequencing of international involvement in institutionalization and state capacity before democratic freedoms are introduced has not met with universal acceptance among liberally-minded writers, and the idea that democracy can or should be put on the back-burner while international actors or local autocrats get on with the task of statebuilding is anathema to many (Carothers 2000; Ahmed 2005). Similarly, the idea has not been universally embraced in the policy community, and recent cases suggest that elections and democracy are still viewed, rightly or wrongly, as important early objectives. In Iraq, for example, elections were prioritized as early milestones and the experience clearly shows
that ‘institutionalization before liberalization’ was not the guiding strategy. Contemporary liberal thought and activity have thus not evolved in a singular linear fashion, but are rather marked by levels of disagreement and variation that pose problems for Jahn’s parsimonious account.

The Straw Man of the Democratic Transition Paradigm

A separate but related problem beyond the definition of liberalism concerns Jahn’s discussion of the ‘democracy transition paradigm’ and its corrosive influence on post-Cold War liberal policy. Jahn suggests that this paradigm, again said to be based on the core assumptions of liberal thought, holds that democracy promotion and elections will automatically lead to a process of self-perpetuating democratization. Yet while the thesis that there has often been excessive optimism concerning the impact of international democracy assistance is well supported, the extent to which these views can be viewed as representing a dominant ‘paradigm’ regarding democratic transition is much more problematic. In particular, the argument conflates writings within the academic literature on democratic transition, which have been more measured in their predictions about the transformative role of democracy promotion, and the views of the policy community of active democracy promoters. Furthermore, it presents a picture of prevailing writing and thinking about democratization that suggests an almost universal consensus, when there has in been fact much debate within the transitions literature about these issues.

Jahn’s argument here is based upon an influential 2002 article by Thomas Carothers entitled ‘The End of the Transition Paradigm’ (Carothers 2002); it is instructive to quote from a reply to that piece by the eminent scholar of regime change, Guillermo O’Donnell. Responding with sympathy to Carothers’ concern about the existence such a narrow-minded transitions paradigm, O’Donnell nonetheless questions whether such a single ‘paradigm’ ever existed, and instead suggests that Carothers ‘lumps together, under the heading of the “transition paradigm”, a large and uneven body of work, and then proceeds to concentrate his criticisms on some of the weakest parts of it’ (O’Donnell 2002). An identical point could be made about Jahn’s discussions. There may be scholars and practitioners who think that democracy promotion and elections automatically lead to self-perpetuating democracy, and who define all instances of regime change in terms of either conforming to or deviating from some ideal path of democratization. They cannot, however, be said to represent any dominant paradigm in scholarship on regime change, and a close reading of the variety of work published over the last two decades in specialist transition studies journals such as the Journal of Democracy and Democratization will confirm this.
Causes, Effects and the Variety of Empirical Outcomes

While the comments above primarily address the conception of liberalism as presented by Jahn and the characterization of recent scholarship and policy, the final points to be addressed relate to the robustness of the theoretical argument being made; namely that it is the liberal nature of Western foreign policy that explains its pattern of failure. While Jahn seeks to present a coherent story of liberal international policy being met with similar failures in the many cases that are raised in the articles, the evidence she provides actually suggests that the outcome of these different interventions have varied significantly at the domestic level. Crucially, the single international variable of liberal foreign policy is seen to result in both stability and change at the domestic level depending on the case in question, thus raising doubts over the strength of the causal relationship.

In some of the cases raised by Jahn, international efforts to promote economic development and democracy are said simply to have failed, and resulted in little change. In others, international policies are said to have led to radicalization and the creation of enemies of the West. Elsewhere, the result is the exacerbation of local conflict, and in the most striking example, Western liberal policies are even said to have acted as a catalyst for genocide in Rwanda. Jahn is reluctant to acknowledge any success, and in those cases where international peacebuilding did lead to sustainable peace (including Mozambique and El Salvador), she identifies inequality and criminal violence as the negative legacies of liberal intervention. If, as Jahn contends, it is the inherent contradictions of liberal foreign policy that account for the failures it has met in practice, it is hard to understand why something so apparently uniform has led to so much variation in outcome. There is no doubt that much international intervention has failed to achieve its primary goals of stable democracy and peace, but when some efforts achieve much more than others, and when the nature of failure differs so much from context to context (ranging apparently from the status quo to genocide), it suggests that there is something more at play than the common ideological roots of international policy.

The Second Image Reversed and Top-Down Explanations

This leads to the final point, which concerns that fact that by concentrating attention purely on the liberal nature of foreign policy as the primary explanatory variable, Jahn effectively marginalizes domestic actors and structures as bit-players and meaningless props in a drama of Western adventurism. This is particularly problematic as the very processes that these Western policies seek to promote (modernization, economic development, democratization) are fundamentally domestic processes, and their presence or absence, or success or failure, cannot fully be understood without some conception of domestic-level environments. Jahn is repeatedly sceptical of explanations that suggest domestic
variables play a role in the failure of Western policies, arguing that such accounts primarily represent efforts to shift blame for the failures of Western policies from international to domestic actors. But when it comes to the academic analysis of these dynamics, the issue is not one of blame-shifting, but rather of explanation and understanding.

In order to move beyond the international rhetoric, and truly understand how and explain why particular international practices have been received in particular domestic contexts, it is necessary to develop theoretical frameworks that incorporate considerations of both international- and domestic-level variables. And there is no shortage of such insights within international relations, especially in work carried out since Peter Gourevitch initiated a strand of ‘second-image reversed’ scholarship in 1978 (Gourevitch 1978). This tradition seeks to understand the international influences on domestic politics, and the best exponents of it manage to do so by ensuring that considerations of the impact of international-level variables are complemented by an appreciation of the mediating effects of domestic-level actors and structures (e.g. Checkel 1997). This makes it all the more remarkable that in Jahn’s broad sweep of cases, covering widely diverse settings, there is no effort to include any systematic role for domestic-level variables, and instead the pattern of domestic politics that the articles point to (which as discussed above is actually a more varied pattern than Jahn suggests) is explained entirely in terms of the nature of Western foreign policy. This suggests an almost heroic belief in the ability of international actors to shape domestic politics through intervention, for good or for bad, and also a regrettable disregard for the autonomous role of domestic actors and institutions.

International relations scholarship is increasingly exploring the role and impact of international intervention and statebuilding – the establishment of this journal is a welcome indicator of this trend. But for the effects of these international activities to be fully understood and explained, international relations scholars at times have to think like comparativists, and explore the independent role of domestic-level variables. Whether recent international interventionism in domestic politics is inspired by over-optimistic liberalism as Jahn suggests, or some other ideological inspiration altogether, it will be domestic and international interaction that determines the extent and type of international impact, and not the nature of international motives and actions alone.

Note

1 See, for example, see the article section ‘Elections without Democracy’ in Journal of democracy, 13:2 (2002).
A Liberal Vanishing Act: Response to Oisín Tansey

Beate Jahn

Oisín Tansey’s critique of ‘The Tragedy of Liberal Diplomacy’ (published in the first two issues of this journal) provides an excellent summary of the criticism my argument generally encounters and thus gives me a welcome opportunity to clarify my position. Tansey, however, follows his critique with a constructive alternative. And this alternative, I shall also argue, by rendering liberalism itself invisible as an object of analysis illustrates uncannily how the ideological dimension of the liberal tragedy plays itself out in the domain of social science.

In the broadest of terms, I have argued that ‘the real tragedy of liberal diplomacy’ lies in the repetition of failing policies (of spreading liberal institutions and practices) in spite of countervailing theoretical and practical evidence (Jahn 2007, p.227). I have located the reasons for the policy failures in the contradictions entailed in liberal ideology, and the reasons for the repetitions, in spite of these failings, in the pervasive power of that same ideology. Tansey agrees that ‘there is no doubt that much international intervention has failed to achieve its primary goals of stable democracy and peace’.

References

And yet, he argues, my attempt to analyse the sources of these policies is methodologically misguided. At the most general level, my definition of liberalism is much too broad – failing to specify its limits (especially with regard to realism) on the one hand, and to note its internal variations on the other. He thus points to a genuine and fundamental problem: namely that historical phenomena like liberalism are, first, ‘a complex of elements’ that, second, change over time and, third, only constitute ‘a conceptual whole from the standpoint of their cultural significance’ (Weber 1984, p.47). The fluid nature of such phenomena, in other words, militates against an ‘objective’ definition. And yet, as I will suggest below, if we did not at least attempt to grasp such complex phenomena, the social sciences themselves would have to shut up shop.

Since I have provided a preliminary definition of liberalism, and since it lies in the nature of definitions to provide grounds for inclusion and exclusion (for which they are widely criticized), my supposed failure to distinguish liberalism from realism can easily be rectified: Any position which fails to subscribe to one or more of the core elements of liberal theory – the assumption of the mutually constitutive nature of private property, individual freedom, and government by consent as well as a philosophy of history which locates market democracies at the highest level of development and explains alternative forms of social and political organization with reference to cultural or political barriers to the exercise of reason (Jahn 2007, pp.90–2) – cannot be described as liberal. There is no doubt considerable overlap between ‘realists’ and ‘liberals’ as indicated by such terms as ‘national security liberalism’ (Smith 2000) or ‘liberal realists’ (Dunne 1997, p.113) – but instead of being responsible for the overlap, my definition may actually provide one way of distinguishing more clearly between them. Nevertheless, my definition, as all such definitions, has clear limitations arising from the fluid nature of the subject matter as well as from its knowledge guiding interest. And, thus, it can and should be challenged on substantive grounds.

However, Tansey also claims that I paper over differences within the liberal tradition. In fact, I have argued that ‘there are significant differences amongst liberals’ (Jahn 2007, p.92). But these differences arise largely from the absence of a clear time frame in the liberal philosophy of history – allowing for more or less optimistic assessments of the potential for development and, consequently, for a range of foreign policies: from providing a good example through the promotion of market democracy via trade, aid, cultural and political exchange (or the withdrawal of these privileges) right up to coercive intervention and statebuilding (Jahn 2007, p.92).

While there may be alternative forms of, and reasons for, differences within the liberal tradition, Tansey’s next point suggests that my hunch about the nature of these differences is not that wrong. At the level of the more policy-oriented democratic transition paradigm, I am again accused of presenting a homogenous picture which ignores internal differences. What are these differences, however? While there has been excessive optimism, Tansey claims, I overlook writings ‘which have been more measured in their predictions’. In other words, some
democracy transition authors predict a longer and more difficult process of democratization (often introduced under the heading of ‘consolidation’ (Jahn 2007, p.225f). Now, if these are the major differences within the transition debate, then they conform precisely to what I have identified as the source and form of the major differences within the liberal tradition in general.

Tansey is of course right to point out that more or less optimistic positions are taken up within the debates at any one time by different authors. But while he seems to read this fact a-historically as indicating the existence of independent and discreet positions, I suggest that individual authors as well as ‘the field’ as a whole (without obliterating internal variations) tend to move from one position to the other. By the mid-1990s, for example, disappointing data raised the question whether the third wave of democratization was over – and this triggered Larry Diamond’s move to a more pessimistic position and an extensive discussion of additional societal factors that require transformation (Diamond 1996).

The same is true for politics, as the intervention in Iraq all too clearly illustrates. The initial optimistic assumption was that the removal of Saddam Hussein and the introduction of elections would trigger the country’s development towards a market democracy. When these expectations were not met, the initial optimism was replaced by pessimistic assumptions about indigenous capabilities and consequently more interventionist policies. In sum, I suggest that such flexibilities on the part of scholars, like Diamond, or political actors, like the Bush administration, do not indicate radical shifts from one world view to another but are best analysed as shifts within the parameters of a particular world view.

The last set of complexities my argument overlooks are the empirical outcomes of liberal foreign policies. These empirical outcomes are so varied that they cannot be explained with reference to ‘something so apparently uniform’ as their ‘common ideological roots’. And hence, Tansey suggests, in order ‘for the effects of these international activities to be fully understood and explained, international relations scholars at times have to think like comparativists, and explore the independent role of domestic-level variables.’

In this way, under Tansey’s critical methodological gaze, instead of investigating the ideological assumptions of liberal analysts and policy-makers who over and over again design unrealistic policies, we suddenly find ourselves investigating the outcome of these policies by looking at domestic variables in target countries on a case-by-case basis. In effect, Tansey has subtly changed the research question from ‘why are liberal analysts and policy-makers so bad at understanding and predicting the consequences of external policy-interventions in non-liberal states?’ to ‘why are non-liberal states so bad at becoming liberal ones despite our best efforts?’ In short, liberalism itself as an object of analysis has vanished from the agenda.

But how was this vanishing act accomplished? In sum, Tansey argues that liberalism in general and the democracy transition paradigm in particular are much too complex phenomena to be open to a satisfactory definition. And the variety of empirical outcomes of liberal foreign policies, too, militates against
their investigation in terms of common factors. At every single level, then, we are told that the complexity of the phenomenon does not allow its investigation and that the only viable approach to the issue is therefore through a comparative case-by-case analysis of the interaction between domestic-level variables and liberal foreign policies. In other words, the wood is too complex a phenomenon for us to grasp, so we have to start with the individual trees.

This argument requires analysis. To start with, it is simply wrong to assert that a variety of empirical outcomes cannot be caused by a single, uniform factor. Just as industrialization leads to different outcomes in different countries; just as the uniform reduction of steel taxes produces different outcomes for different industries and consumer groups within a country as well as for different economies internationally; so uniform liberal assumptions and policies can very well lead to different empirical outcomes in different settings. The fact that in all of these cases a given cause results in a variety of outcomes may indeed lead us to search for additional explanatory variables – but it does not dissolve the existence of the primary cause. Hence, the fact that liberal foreign policies produce a variety of outcomes does not make liberalism indefinable. And, indeed, by insisting that there is no ‘liberalism’ but just a variety of liberals, Tansey himself presupposes a concept of liberalism for otherwise, how does he know that they are ‘liberals’?

Second, the exclusion of the study of liberalism or the democracy transition paradigm on the grounds of complexity implies that the suggested alternative, namely the study of domestic-level variables in target states that interact with liberal foreign policies in producing highly varied outcomes, is not too complex. But this would be a remarkable claim. It would entail that the study of a host of foreign societies – including their economic, political, cultural, historical, domestic, and international dimensions – is a less complex task than the study of a relatively well circumscribed set of specialist literature (Journal of Democracy, Democratization, as Tansey points out) on democratic transition. Surely, when we stop to think about it, we have to assume that non-liberal societies in their interaction with liberal foreign policies are at the very least just as complex an object of investigation as liberal ideology.

What this second point illustrates is that there is no avoiding complex phenomena in the social sciences. ‘Liberalism’, ‘transition’, ‘democracy’, ‘society’, and not least ‘science’ itself are all complex concepts of the kind described by Max Weber in The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1920), cited above. If we cannot avoid these complex concepts even while we know that we cannot ‘objectively’ define them, we are confronted by the following choice: either we attempt to develop an understanding of these concepts and phenomena, as I have done in ‘The Tragedy of Liberal Diplomacy’, or we keep searching for more stable ground, as Tansey suggests.

But what appears to be stable ground to Tansey, in fact rests on the quicksand of the very same complex concepts he wishes to avoid – only now they are entirely unreflected upon. He takes for granted, first, that liberalism is complex but non-liberal societies are not; second, that democracy is self-evidently
a positive developmental goal; third, that we can clearly identify which
domestic-level variables in non-democratic countries to study; and fourthly,
that the necessary common ground to conduct a comparative analysis exists. The
lens through which these assumptions, indeed, appear self-evident and stable is
the liberal philosophy of history which sees liberalism (including democracy) as
the complex culmination of humanity’s universal development and locates non-
liberal societies at a lower and transitory level; and its universality assures that
we can derive the common grounds for comparison as well as domestic-level
variables from the liberal model.

In sum, the methodological requirement to steer clear of complex phenomena
—and to stick to supposedly clear-cut ‘facts’ – only perpetuates the ideological
power of those same phenomena. Inasmuch as the discipline of international
relations endorses these methodological requirements, it subscribes – albeit
unconsciously – to the core elements of liberal ideology while at the same time
declaring their study taboo. And in this way, the discipline of international
relations has become complicit in the reproduction of the tragedy of liberal
diplomacy.

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