

## Are Liberal Peoples Peaceful?\*

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ARE liberal societies peaceful? Many liberals believe so, and John Rawls argues their case. Rawls holds that truly liberal societies are *satisfied*: they will not go to war for the sake of power, territory, riches, glory, or to spread their religion. “Their basic needs are met, and their fundamental interests are fully compatible with those of other democratic peoples . . . There is true peace among them because all societies are satisfied with the status quo for the right reasons” (LoP, p. 46).<sup>1</sup> Rawls also offers a striking explanation for this thesis of liberal satisfaction: it is the *internal* political structures of liberal societies that make them *externally* non-aggressive.

We believe that there are serious difficulties both with Rawls’s thesis that liberal societies are peaceful and with his explanation for why they might be so. Rawls has not established that liberal societies “will have no reason to go to war with one another” or with other peaceful states (LoP, p. 19). Moreover we hold that there are good grounds—even within Rawls’s own view—for doubting this pacific element of the liberal self-image.

The plan of this article is as follows. First, we present Rawls’s taxonomy of societies and his general theory of foreign policy. Second, we check the democratic peace literature to see whether it offers *prima facie* support for Rawls’s vision of a peaceful world. Third, we set out the three internal features of liberal societies that allegedly make them peaceful. These three features are a commercial orientation, an indifference to economic growth, and a lack of desire to impose a comprehensive world-view on other societies. We then examine these three features critically, arguing that the first and third features do not rule out the pursuit of an aggressive foreign policy, and that the second feature is unlikely to be a feature of a liberal society. We then consider Rawls’s attempt to explain away historical examples of liberal aggression by attributing the aggressiveness to

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<sup>1</sup>In this article all parenthetical page references indicated by “LoP” are to Rawls (1999).

1 flaws in these liberal societies' internal political structures. We offer an alternative  
2 understanding of foreign policy-making in a liberal polity, and argue that liberal  
3 aggression results not from flaws but from permanent features of democratic  
4 institutions. In the last section, we speculate on two final motivations for a liberal  
5 society to pursue an aggressive foreign policy: inequality and insecurity.

6  
7 I. RAWLS'S TAXONOMY AND GENERAL THEORY OF  
8 FOREIGN POLICY

9 Rawls's taxonomy distinguishes three types of societies. *Liberal peoples* are  
10 internally liberal: they give high priority to securing familiar liberal rights and  
11 liberties for all of their citizens, and take steps to ensure that all citizens have at  
12 least adequate means to exercise those rights and liberties. *Decent peoples* are not  
13 liberal: they may for example be non-democratic, and they may restrict high  
14 office to adherents of a dominant religion. Yet decent peoples are respectable  
15 members of the international community. They secure at least basic human rights  
16 for all of their citizens, and they ensure that the interests of minority communities  
17 and women are represented within their political processes. Both liberal and  
18 decent hierarchical peoples are "well-ordered" societies. *Outlaw states* are  
19 characterized either by aggressive behavior toward other societies, or by serious  
20 violations of the human rights of their own citizens, or by both.<sup>2</sup>

21 Within this taxonomy a society counts as liberal because of its internal  
22 structure, and a society can qualify as an outlaw because of its aggressive foreign  
23 policy. Therefore it is conceptually possible for a society to be internally liberal  
24 and externally outlaw.<sup>3</sup> However, on Rawls's general theory of international  
25 relations a truly liberal outlaw state is quite unlikely to occur. Rawls's general  
26 theory traces the foreign policy of each society back to the design of its domestic  
27 political institutions and the character of its domestic political culture. A truly  
28 liberal society will be peaceful because of the virtues of its constitution and its  
29 citizenry. When such a society achieves fully the conditions of internal justice and  
30 stability, its external relations will reflect its internal satisfaction.

31 The aggressive propensities of an outlaw state will flow from what Rawls sees  
32 as failures in its domestic institutions and political culture. For instance, in  
33 explaining the warlike nature of early modern Spain and France as well as Nazi  
34 Germany, Rawls writes:

35 Their fault lay in their political traditions and institutions of law, property, and class  
36 structure, with their sustaining religion and moral beliefs and underlying culture. It  
37 is these things that shape a society's political will (LoP, p. 106).

38  
39 <sup>2</sup>Rawls's fourth and fifth types of society—"burdened societies" and "benevolent  
40 absolutisms"—will not concern us here. Rawls is careful in his terminology to distinguish "peoples"  
41 from "states"; we will mostly follow him in this, and will use "society", "country", and "polity" as  
42 neutral terms.

43 <sup>3</sup>Indeed Rawls admits the possibility of a liberal outlaw society (LoP, p. 91).

1 Similarly, England, Hapsburg Austria and Sweden “fought dynastic wars for  
2 territory, true religion, for power and glory, and a place in the sun. These were  
3 wars of Monarchs and Royal Houses; the internal institutional structure of these  
4 societies made them inherently aggressive and hostile to other states” (LoP, p. 8).  
5 Rawls also explains the imperialistic wars waged by Britain, France, and  
6 Germany before World War I by how the class structure within each of these  
7 countries led to a desire (supported by military and commercial interests) for ever  
8 more colonies (LoP, p. 54). Even the aggressiveness of ancient Athens is attributed  
9 to its autocratic institutions (LoP, p. 28, fn. 27).

10 Rawls’s linkage between domestic politics and foreign policy contrasts sharply  
11 with Realist approaches to international relations, which portray states as  
12 politically identical black boxes distinguished primarily by their military and  
13 economic power.<sup>4</sup> On Rawls’s view each country has a character set by its  
14 domestic political life. While the internal political flaws of some societies drive  
15 them toward violence, the perfected characters of others (the liberal ones) will  
16 make them very reluctant to fight. Rawls says that the two main ideas of his law  
17 of peoples are that injustice *within* societies causes the great evils of human  
18 history including unjust war, and that these great evils can be eliminated by  
19 eliminating social injustice (LoP, pp. 6–7).

## 20 21 II. RELATION TO DEMOCRATIC PEACE THEORY

22 Rawls’s ideal of a peaceful liberal people does not preclude a liberal society going  
23 to war. As Rawls says, a liberal people will fight in self-defense, and may  
24 intervene in other countries for the sake of stopping very serious violations of  
25 human rights (LoP, p. 8). However, liberal peoples will not, Rawls says, fight each  
26 other. This is because each liberal people has domestic political arrangements that  
27 leaves it satisfied with its own situation. Liberal peoples will not war with one  
28 another, “simply because they have no cause to” (LoP, p. 8). Indeed liberal  
29 peoples are not only satisfied *with each other*. Liberal peoples will tend not to  
30 war with decent peoples or even with outlaw states (except to defend themselves  
31 or their allies or to stop egregious human rights violations) (LoP, p. 49). Liberal  
32 peoples are, because of their internal characters, *intrinsically* non-aggressive: they  
33 are satisfied *in themselves*.<sup>5</sup>

34  
35 <sup>4</sup>E.g., Morgenthau 1948, Waltz 1979.

36 <sup>5</sup>Rawls’s theory is what scholars of international relations call a “monadic” theory (liberal peoples  
37 will not act aggressively toward any other nation) rather than merely a “dyadic” theory (liberal  
38 peoples will not act aggressively toward peoples that resemble them). We bypass this terminology,  
39 since the label “monadic” might suggest wrongly that peacefulness can be a non-relational property  
40 (by “monadic” most authors in fact mean “obtains across all dyads of which the democratic nation  
41 is a member”). However, as we will see “monadic” theory is nowhere near as well supported in the  
42 literature as “dyadic” theory, and is often denied even by the democratic peace theorist that Rawls  
43 most often cites in support of his view (Doyle).

1 Rawls hopes to gain support for his vision of a peaceful world from the  
2 “democratic peace hypothesis”: the hypothesis that democracies have not gone to  
3 war with each other in the past.<sup>6</sup> Rawls cites the empirical literature on this  
4 hypothesis with approval:

5 The absence of war between major established democracies is as close to anything  
6 we know to a simple empirical regularity in relations among societies. From this  
7 fact, I should like to think the historical record shows that a society of democratic  
8 peoples, all of whose basic institutions are well-ordered by liberal conceptions of  
9 right and justice . . . is stable for the right reasons (LoP, pp. 53–4).

10 Rawls says that the validity of the hypothesis is “crucial” for his law of peoples  
11 to be able to address the problem of war (LoP, p. 8). In this section we take a first  
12 look at how much the empirical literature on the democratic peace supports  
13 Rawls’s vision of peace among satisfied peoples.

14 Rawls is correct that the historical absence of war between major established  
15 democracies is robustly confirmed in the empirical literature, even across studies  
16 using different criteria for what counts as “democratic” and what counts as  
17 “war”.<sup>7</sup> Yet there is a great distance between this historical pattern and Rawls’s  
18 thesis about satisfied peoples. One gets an initial sense of how great this distance  
19 is by noting that even Realists accept the historical correlation between  
20 democracy and peace. However, Realists hold that this correlation has little to do  
21 with democracy (much less with liberal satisfaction).

22 Realists first note that there were too few democracies before World War II to  
23 test for a statistically significant relationship between democracy and peace,  
24 especially since few of the extant democracies in that period were in a position to  
25 fight one another. Realists then attribute the peace among democracies after  
26 World War II to American dominance in the western hemisphere. They observe  
27 that after World War II the United States had the power to impose its will in the  
28 Americas and in Europe, and followed an explicit strategy of enforcing peace so  
29 as to advance its interests (roughly: peace in the Americas furthered US economic  
30 interests, and peace in western Europe prevented the European wars that had  
31 threatened US security interests since the nineteenth century). For Realists, the  
32 democratic peace is better described as an American imperial peace, obtaining  
33 contingently among democracies.<sup>8</sup> This Realist peace is not one that has obtained  
34 for what Rawls would regard as “the right reasons”.

35 Many democratic peace theorists reject this Realist explanation of the history  
36 of democratic peace, believing instead that democracy itself helps to explain the  
37

38 <sup>6</sup>Doyle 1983, Chan 1997, and Ray 1998 review the large literature on the democratic peace.

39 <sup>7</sup>E.g., Ray 1995, Maoz 1998, Weart 1998, Oneal and Russett 1997.

40 <sup>8</sup>Farber and Gowa 1997, Rosato 2003, pp. 599–600. We cite Realists not to endorse their thesis,  
41 but to give a sense of the range of explanations in the literature for the correlation between democracy  
42 and peace. One counterargument to the Realist position could be that a similar Soviet hegemony did  
43 not preclude armed conflicts within their “empire” (East Germany 1953, Hungary 1956, and  
44 Czechoslovakia 1968).

1 history of democratic peace. However, even among these theorists few if any  
2 would commit to Rawls's strong thesis. The empirical regularity that has been  
3 observed is that *democratic states have not gone to war with each other*. Rawls's  
4 thesis is that *liberal and decent peoples will not start wars because they are*  
5 *satisfied peoples*. Rawls's thesis is four steps removed from the historical  
6 phenomena. Rawls changes "democratic" to "liberal"; he changes "liberal" to  
7 "liberal and decent"; he changes "have not gone to war" with "will not start  
8 wars"; and he adds his distinctive explanation of the phenomena in terms of  
9 satisfied peoples. Focusing on only one of these changes—the change from  
10 "liberal" to "liberal and decent"—shows how distant Rawls's thesis is from  
11 empirical democratic peace theory.

12 Rawls's thesis is more ambitious than anything in the empirical literature  
13 because it encompasses both liberal and decent peoples. Rawls's vision of a  
14 perpetually peaceful global order sees a society of liberal and decent peoples  
15 living alongside each other without armed conflict, engaging in trade, and settling  
16 any differences they might have through negotiation and multi-national  
17 mediation. For this vision to be viable, Rawls must explain why both liberal and  
18 decent peoples will be reliably non-aggressive in their foreign policies.

19 Once Rawls has argued that liberal peoples are satisfied, he gets the extension  
20 to decent peoples very easily—essentially by stipulation. Rawls simply *defines*  
21 decent peoples as being satisfied: that is, he defines decent peoples as unwilling  
22 to fight wars of aggression. Any non-liberal society that engages in aggressive wars  
23 is not decent; it is rather an outlaw state (LoP, p. 64).<sup>9</sup> Having demonstrated to  
24 his own satisfaction that liberal societies are peaceful, and having defined decent  
25 societies as peaceful, Rawls believes he has shown that his ideal of a peaceful,  
26 law-governed world of liberal and decent societies is a "realistic utopia" (LoP,  
27 p. 6).

28 This is a line of argument that many democratic peace theorists will find  
29 uncongenial, even accepting Rawls's premise that internal political structure  
30 explains a society's foreign policies. Decent peoples are peaceful, Rawls says. But  
31 why? Rawls has not stated what features of the internal political structure of  
32 decent peoples make them non-aggressive. Whatever these features are, it seems  
33 unlikely that they are the same three features that Rawls claims make liberal  
34 peoples non-aggressive. The three features that Rawls alleges make liberal  
35 peoples non-aggressive (and that we will examine shortly) are that liberal peoples  
36 have a commercial character, that they can be indifferent to economic growth,  
37 and that they lack a unifying comprehensive doctrine which they might otherwise  
38 be tempted to spread. Yet Rawls has given no reason for us to think that decent  
39 societies will be either commercially-minded or indifferent to economic growth.  
40

41 <sup>9</sup>Rawls describes only one type of decent society: a "decent hierarchical society". It is this type of  
42 decent society that he defines as peaceful. Rawls keeps another kind of decent society "in reserve"  
43 without describing it; but there is no reason to think that he would allow that any decent society could  
44 act aggressively.

1 And his ideal type of a decent society, “Kazanistan,” is unlike a liberal society in  
2 that it *does* have a unifying “comprehensive doctrine” (it is Muslim). Even on  
3 Rawls’s own terms, the peacefulness of decent peoples remains unexplained.

4 Moreover, many democratic peace theorists will be unwilling in principle to  
5 extend the explanation for a democratic peace to include non-democracies of any  
6 sort. For these theorists it is features of *democratic politics in particular* that  
7 explain why democracies are peaceful. For example, some theorists suggest the  
8 deliberative character of democratic politics forces elites not to rush into a war.<sup>10</sup>  
9 Others say that the publicity inherent in democratic debates hinders democracies  
10 from launching surprise attacks, or that this publicity effectively signals the  
11 resolve of the people to potential opponents.<sup>11</sup> Others theorize that democratic  
12 elites need to provide more public goods in order to stay in office, and so are less  
13 likely to engage in potentially costly adventures abroad.<sup>12</sup> These theorists will  
14 object to Rawls’s attempt to stipulate the peacefulness of decent peoples, because  
15 decent peoples lack just the democratic features that these theorists appeal to in  
16 explaining the democratic peace.

17 Furthermore, to support his vision of peace among satisfied peoples Rawls  
18 needs to establish not only that decent peoples will not attack liberal peoples, but  
19 also the converse.<sup>13</sup> Michael Doyle argues forcefully that both theory and history  
20 work against Rawls on this point: “Liberal states are as aggressive and war prone  
21 as any other form of government or society in their relations with nonliberal  
22 states”.<sup>14</sup> Doyle’s thesis is that liberal peoples will create “a separate peace” with  
23 each other, in part because they *trust each other as liberal peoples*. So Doyle  
24 explicitly rejects Rawls’s attempt to use the democratic peace to establish liberal  
25 peacefulness toward non-liberals:

26 Can Rawls appeal to the stability of the democratic peace thesis to support respect  
27 for decent hierarchicals, as he did for tolerance and peace among liberal peoples?  
28 It doesn’t appear so. Liberals respect other liberal governments because those  
29 governments represent individuals who deserve respect. But that very logic of  
30 representative respect that generates tolerance for fellow liberal peoples generates  
31 suspicion of governments that systematically remove themselves from democratic  
32 accountability to the majority. If those governments will not trust their own publics,  
33 why should *we* trust them? The record of war and cold war between liberals and  
34 non-liberals lends support to this . . .<sup>15</sup>

36 <sup>10</sup>Owen 1997, pp. 41–43.

37 <sup>11</sup>Russett 1993, pp. 38–40; Bueno de Mesquita et al. 1999, pp. 802–03.

38 <sup>12</sup>Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003, pp. 215 ff.

39 <sup>13</sup>Although the democratic peace hypothesis is robustly corroborated by the empirical evidence,  
40 the evidence that democracies are peaceful with respect to non-democracies is much weaker. Rummel  
41 (1995) is the main outlier supporting the “peaceful democracy” thesis. (All of these empirical studies  
42 are rendered even less conclusive from a Rawlsian perspective by the difficulty of coding the historical  
43 record as to which side initiated a conflict (given the possibility of, e.g., pre-emptive strikes against  
44 undeterable attacks), and because the data on conflict do not separate out those conflicts motivated  
45 by a concern to stop severe abuses of human rights.)

46 <sup>14</sup>Doyle 1983, p. 225.

47 <sup>15</sup>Doyle 2006, p. 114; see also Rousseau et al., 1996, pp. 527–28.

1 Doyle's dissent lines up with the bulk of the democratic peace literature, and  
2 shows how little support Rawls can draw from this literature for his thesis of  
3 pacific liberal-decent relations.<sup>16</sup>

4 To summarize: even putting Realists to one side, most theorists of the  
5 democratic peace will not accept Rawls's bare stipulation that nondemocratic  
6 decent peoples will be as peaceful toward democracies as democracies are toward  
7 each other. Moreover even sympathetic theorists like Doyle deny the logic behind  
8 Rawls's transition from inter-democratic peace to democratic-decent peace. And,  
9 to complete the skepticism toward Rawls's thesis, we now add that no empirical  
10 theorist of any persuasion will wish to commit to the final proposition necessary  
11 for Rawls's imagined world to be stably at peace: that some (non-rigged) subset  
12 of non-democratic peoples will act peacefully toward one another.<sup>17</sup>

13 Rawls cannot simply gesture to the empirical literature on the democratic  
14 peace in support of his strong thesis that liberal and decent peoples will be  
15 satisfied. Even when we focus only on the extension to decent peoples we see that  
16 Rawls's thesis either goes beyond the democratic peace literature or that it cuts  
17 against its grain. To show that his law of peoples actually describes a "realistic  
18 utopia," Rawls therefore needs to provide *independent* theoretical arguments for  
19 his strong thesis that liberal peoples will be satisfied in themselves. Rawls needs  
20 to provide independent arguments for believing that Doyle is mistaken when he  
21 says that, "Liberalism is not inherently 'peace-loving'; nor is it consistently  
22 restrained or peaceful in intent".<sup>18</sup> If Rawls can produce independent arguments  
23 for believing that liberal peoples will be satisfied in themselves, there might be  
24 hope for extending these independent arguments to provide what *Law of Peoples*  
25 lacks, which is an explanation of why decent peoples will be satisfied as well.

### 26 27 III. RAWLS'S EXPLANATION FOR THE SATISFACTION OF 28 LIBERAL PEOPLES

29 Liberal peoples, Rawls argues, will be satisfied in themselves because they have  
30 no *interest* in launching aggressive wars. When Rawls catalogues the interests of  
31 a liberal people, triggers for aggression are noticeably absent. A liberal people  
32 will have an interest, Rawls says, in guaranteeing its own security, in preserving  
33 its territory, in safeguarding the well-being of its citizens, in protecting its free  
34 institutions and culture, in assuring justice for all of its citizens and for all

35 <sup>16</sup>Further, as a referee for this journal has noted, liberal peoples may have difficulty trusting that  
36 a currently decent country will remain decent. Since the leaders of decent societies face weaker  
37 institutional checks than leaders of democracies, it may be easier for them to start acting as outlaws.  
38 This uncertainty may increase the "security dilemma" of a liberal society and make it more prone to  
39 attack pre-emptively.

40 <sup>17</sup>Doyle (2006, pp. 115–18) hazards that "a handful" of extant states such as Oman or Bhutan  
41 might approach Rawls's description of decent hierarchical societies. However, neither Doyle nor any  
42 other theorist that we are aware of has ventured to extrapolate from these few uncertain data points  
43 to a hypothesis of an "inter-decent peace".

44 <sup>18</sup>Doyle 1983, p. 206.



1 peoples, and in maintaining its self-respect by insisting on formal equality in its  
2 relations with other peoples (LoP, pp. 29–30, 34–35). There is nothing in this list  
3 of interests that would lead a liberal people to fight for land or glory, for  
4 domination or ideological supremacy. There is nothing that other countries have  
5 that a liberal people will wish to obtain through violence, and (except for extreme  
6 cases of human rights violations abroad) a liberal people will be content to  
7 maintain its armed forces solely for self-defense.

8 Rawls asserts that the limited interests of a liberal people makes it unwilling to  
9 engage in adventures abroad, and that the internal political structure of a liberal  
10 people generates only these specific interests. Rawls’s explanation of why this  
11 internal political structure generates only non-aggressive interests centers on  
12 three features of a liberal people. First, a liberal people will have a commercial  
13 character; second, a liberal people will be indifferent to economic growth; and  
14 third, a liberal people will tolerate religious diversity. We survey each of these  
15 three features briefly before discussing each more fully in the next section.

16 First, on commerce, Rawls cites the tradition of “*moeurs douces*” theory  
17 stretching back to Montesquieu:

18 Commercial society tends to fashion in its citizens certain virtues . . . [and]  
19 commerce tends to lead to peace . . . We might surmise that democratic peoples  
20 engaged in commerce would tend not to have occasion to go to war with one  
21 another. Among other reasons, this is because what they lacked in commodities they  
22 could acquire more easily and cheaply by trade (LoP, p. 46).

23 The citizens of a trading culture tend to have a “sweeter” temperament, and  
24 they are unwilling to fight for what they can buy. A liberal people made up of  
25 such citizens, Rawls suggests, will not be inclined to go to war for material gains  
26 such as territory or treasure.

27 Indeed, second, not only are liberal peoples unwilling to war for economic  
28 gain, they may be positively indifferent to economic growth as such. “Greater  
29 national wealth” is notably absent from Rawls’s list of the fundamental  
30 interests of a liberal society. In fact, “increasing relative economic strength”  
31 (along with enlarging empire, winning territory, and gaining national prestige)  
32 is a feature of states to which Rawls *contrasts* liberal peoples (LoP, p. 28).  
33 Rawls says that once a liberal people has achieved internal justice it can go  
34 “stationary” and reduce its real rate of savings to zero (LoP, pp. 106–7). He  
35 says that, “The thought that real saving and economic growth are to go on  
36 indefinitely, upwards and onwards, with no specified goal in sight, is the idea  
37 of the business class of a capitalist society” (LoP, p. 107, fn. 33). Liberal  
38 peoples will not go to war for greater wealth, because a liberal people as such  
39 does not *want* greater wealth.

40 Nor, third, will liberal peoples begin ideological conflicts. Liberal  
41 constitutional democracies have no state religion or other “ruling comprehensive  
42 doctrine,” so they will not be moved to try to convert other societies to any such



1 doctrine (LoP, p. 46). Rather, liberal peoples are internally tolerant of various  
2 comprehensive doctrines. Since liberal citizens think it unreasonable to impose  
3 religious or other world-views on each other, they support a polity which has no  
4 such world-view to impose on other societies.

5 In sum, Rawls argues that a liberal people—being a commercial, non-  
6 acquisitive and non-sectarian society—will have no interest in acting  
7 aggressively abroad. Its inner character will leave it, as he says, entirely  
8 satisfied. Rawls of course does not deny that there have been occasions on  
9 which Western democracies have engaged in aggressive behavior: the historical  
10 record clearly shows that such episodes have occurred. However, this does not  
11 disprove the thesis that liberal societies are intrinsically peaceful. It shows,  
12 Rawls says, that these non-peaceful democracies were *imperfectly liberal*.  
13 Rawls says that when a democracy fails to be peaceful, “My guiding hypothesis  
14 leads me to expect to find various failures in [that] democracy’s essential  
15 supporting institutions and practices” (LoP, p. 53). A perfectly liberal people  
16 will be perfectly satisfied within itself; only an internally flawed liberal society  
17 will start trouble abroad.

18 Do Rawls’s arguments provide compelling reason for thinking that liberal  
19 societies—because of their internal nature as commercial, non-acquisitive, and  
20 tolerant—can live in harmony with their liberal and decent neighbors? There are,  
21 we believe, several reasons to think not.

#### 22 23 IV. RAWLS’S THREE REASONS FOR THE SATISFACTION OF 24 LIBERAL PEOPLES

##### 25 A. COMMERCE

26 The view of “doux commerce” has, since Montesquieu, been ventured as an  
27 explanation of why trade and war are unlikely to mix. Trading nations will shun  
28 aggression because aggression would be disruptive of commerce. Trade also  
29 affects citizens’ attitudes (“moeurs”), making commercial people “softer,” more  
30 “polished,” and more considerate of other people’s customs and interests. From  
31 the change in personal characteristics occasioned by commerce springs the  
32 change in the character of the people and finally the change in the foreign policy  
33 of the nation.

34 The theory that commerce leads to external peacefulness was broadly shared  
35 during the last episode of globalization at the turn of the twentieth century. It  
36 found its most famous expression in Norman Angell’s 1909 bestseller *The Grand*  
37 *Illusion*, which proclaimed that the commercial interdependence of European  
38 powers had become so great that the outbreak of war between them could not be  
39 expected. War, Angell argued, would run counter to the commercial interests of  
40 large and powerful segments of the population in the potentially belligerent  
41 countries: it would be unprofitable. The devastation of World War I brought a

1 temporary end to theories asserting that commercial interdependence leads  
2 to peace—though such theories have re-emerged in the current episode of  
3 globalization.<sup>19</sup>

4 At around the same time that many parts of European society held the notion  
5 that “war is unprofitable,” another segment of the ideological spectrum advanced  
6 precisely the opposite doctrine. This doctrine is reflected in the dictum that “trade  
7 follows the flag”. The argument was based on the history of European  
8 imperialism and colonialism up through the 19th century when military conquest  
9 of Africa and parts of Asia was thought necessary to bring these countries into the  
10 commercial orbit of the West. The most famous example of trade following the  
11 flag was Commodore Perry’s putting an end to Japan’s isolationism. But while  
12 Perry’s tactics were spectacular they were not substantively different from the  
13 Western approaches to China, Africa, and the Indian subcontinent. The conquest  
14 and exploitation of the Congo provides a particularly dramatic and bloody  
15 example of this doctrine. This imperial aggressiveness was caused, in Hobson’s  
16 and later Lenin’s view, by the commercial needs of capital, which required  
17 external markets and control of foreign natural resources and labor to offset  
18 either domestic underconsumption (according to Hobson) or the declining rate of  
19 profit (according to Lenin).<sup>20</sup> The crux of both of these influential theories is that  
20 trade is facilitated by war, and the data tend to bear them out:

21 The imperialism of Europe’s great powers between 1815 and 1975 provides good  
22 evidence that liberal democracies have often waged wars for reasons other than  
23 self-defense and the inculcation of liberal values. Although there were only a  
24 handful of liberal democracies in the international system during this period, they  
25 were involved in 66 of the 108 wars listed in the Correlates of War (COW) dataset  
26 of extrasystematic wars. Of these 66 wars, 33 were “imperial,” fought against  
27 previously independent peoples, and 33 were “colonial,” waged against existing  
28 colonies.<sup>21</sup>

29 The “commercial” grounds for liberal people’s peacefulness can thus be shown  
30 to be more controversial than Rawls presents them to be. A more balanced view  
31 is that commercial forces can pressure toward either war or peace depending on  
32 the circumstances.<sup>22</sup> We will ourselves present a model toward the end of the  
33 article in which commercial ties are one factor that lessens the likelihood of war

34 <sup>19</sup>See Oneal and Russett 1997, Mousseau et al. 2003. See also Doyle’s (1997, pp. 230–50) cautious  
35 discussions of the “commercial pacifism” of Adam Smith and Joseph Schumpeter.

36 <sup>20</sup>Hobson 1903, Lenin 1916. See also the neo-Hobsonian analyses of the connection between  
37 commercialism and imperialism in Snyder (1991).

38 <sup>21</sup>Rosato 2003, p. 588.

39 <sup>22</sup>See Moravcsik (1997, pp. 528–9): “As theory rather than ideology, commercial liberalism does  
40 *not* predict that economic incentives automatically generate universal free trade and peace—a utopian  
41 position critics who treat liberalism as an ideology often wrongly attribute to it . . . but instead  
42 stresses the interaction between aggregate incentives for certain policies and obstacles posed by  
43 domestic and transnational distributional conflict. The greater the economic benefits for powerful  
44 private actors, the greater their incentive, other things being equal, to press governments to facilitate  
45 such transactions . . . Liberal [international relations] theory focuses on market structure as a variable  
46 creating incentives for both openness and closure”.

1 between democracies. But this model does not portray liberal peoples as  
2 “satisfied”: that is, unwilling in principle to fight for their economic interests.

3 It is open to Rawls to deny that the major imperial powers like Britain and  
4 France were “liberal enough” during the period 1815–1975 for their wars to  
5 count against his thesis of liberal satisfaction. For example, he might say that  
6 colonial states are nearly always racist states, and so cannot be liberal. Rawls can  
7 only make this move, however, at the high cost of relinquishing the historical data  
8 from this period that supports his “historical trend” thesis that liberal societies  
9 will be satisfied. One cannot have it both ways. Moreover, as we will now show  
10 the one characteristic that Rawls attributes to liberal peoples that could explain  
11 why they will not aggressively follow their economic interests abroad is a  
12 characteristic that commercially-minded liberal peoples are most unlikely to  
13 possess.

#### 14 15 B. SATISFIED ECONOMIC NEEDS

16 Rawls’s second ground for the external peacefulness of liberal peoples is that  
17 liberal peoples as such have no desire for greater absolute wealth. “Greater  
18 wealth” is never listed among fundamental interests of peoples.<sup>23</sup> Rawls claims  
19 that once a people has achieved internal justice and formed a “well-ordered”  
20 society, “the aim is to preserve just (or decent) institutions, and not simply to  
21 increase, much less to maximize indefinitely, the average level of wealth, or the  
22 wealth of any society or any particular class in society” (LoP, p. 107). Rawls  
23 refers approvingly to John Stuart Mill’s ideal of the “stationary state” which  
24 envisages a national economy with a zero real rate of saving (LoP, pp. 107–8).

25 There are two main objections to the view that liberal peoples as such have no  
26 desire for greater wealth. First, it has no empirical support. Although one could  
27 adduce a few examples of societies which did not aim for greater absolute wealth  
28 (for example, China under the Ming dynasty, Japan up to 1867) these cases seem  
29 to be explained more by the domestic elite’s fear that trade would invite foreign  
30 meddling or generate revolutionary instability. In such cases, the ruling classes  
31 may indeed have opted for less wealth for all, including for themselves, in the  
32 belief that this would help them to sustain their rule. But these are examples  
33 of a trade-off for leaders between wealth and power, not evidence that a  
34 population’s desire for greater wealth *per se* is nil. Moreover, none of these  
35 examples concern liberal peoples. If there has ever been a liberal people that has  
36 not made greater wealth an explicit goal of national policy, we are unaware of it.

37  
38 <sup>23</sup>Rawls says repeatedly (LoP, pp. 32, 33, 34, 40) that the interests of liberal peoples are specified  
39 by their liberal principles of justice (for example, his own two principles of justice as fairness). He  
40 adds to this (LoP, p. 34) that a people also has an interest in a proper sense of self respect. This  
41 repetition bolsters the case for saying that Rawls does not see “increasing national wealth” as an  
42 interest of a liberal people.

1 At one point Rawls says that democratic societies will be less likely to go to  
2 war with each other to the extent that their internal political structures evidence  
3 five features: fair equality of opportunity, a decent distribution of wealth and  
4 income, society as the employer of last resort, universal health care, and public  
5 financing of elections (LoP, p. 49). Rawls's thought here may be that citizens in  
6 liberal societies that fulfill these conditions will be less likely to want further  
7 increments of wealth and income, and so will be individually "satisfied". A  
8 people made of satisfied individuals will be satisfied as well. If this is Rawls's  
9 argument, it also seems empirically suspect. Citizens of contemporary societies in  
10 which these five features are at least close to being met (for example, Norway,  
11 Luxembourg) are not economically "satisfied" in Rawls's sense, nor are these  
12 countries indifferent to increasing their absolute (and relative) levels of wealth.

13 Beyond being empirically suspect, there is a second and related reason that  
14 Rawls ought not ground the peacefulness of liberal societies on their indifference  
15 to greater wealth. This is that it conflicts with his first ground: the commercial  
16 nature of liberal peoples. Commercial societies always aim at greater wealth. It is  
17 precisely the desire for greater wealth that propels them to trade. Even if trade  
18 does sweeten the temperaments of commercial peoples, it also makes those  
19 peoples want to become richer. A commercial people could not be satisfied with  
20 a stationary state. So Rawls's second ground for liberal satisfaction is unlikely to  
21 apply to liberal peoples.

### 22 23 C. TOLERATION

24 Rawls's third ground for believing that liberal peoples will have no interest in  
25 launching aggressive wars is that a liberal people will have no wish to convert  
26 other societies to its ideology. On Rawls's understanding, a legitimate liberal  
27 constitutional order cannot be based on a state religion or any other "ruling  
28 comprehensive doctrine" (LoP, p. 46). Rather, citizens in a liberal society will  
29 support a "political" conception of justice for a variety of religious and  
30 philosophical reasons, forming an "overlapping consensus" that tolerates all  
31 reasonable views.<sup>24</sup> This internal toleration, Rawls believes, then translates  
32 directly into external peacefulness. Since liberal peoples will have no official  
33 religion (or other comprehensive doctrine) to impose on others, they will have no  
34 desire to "disseminate their institutions" abroad (LoP, p. 46).

35 Rawls's progression of ideas here is at best too quick. Even if a liberal society  
36 is not officially Catholic or Protestant (or Kantian), it is still politically *liberal*.  
37 Liberal citizens who tolerate each other's comprehensive doctrines will still hold  
38 liberal commitments to basic rights, to democratic participation, and even to  
39 toleration itself. Indeed for Rawls's domestic theories of liberal justice and  
40 legitimacy to be realistic, liberal citizens must hold to these liberal commitments

41  
42 <sup>24</sup>Rawls 1993, pp. 133–72.

1 quite strongly, believing them to represent “very great values”.<sup>25</sup> Yet these liberal  
2 commitments are not ones that all foreign societies share. For example, recall that  
3 Rawls’s decent peoples may well have undemocratic political systems, and they  
4 may restrict high office to adherents of some dominant religion. Rawls has given  
5 no reason to think that liberal citizens who believe very strongly in liberal rights  
6 and liberties will lack the desire to disseminate their *liberal* institutions to  
7 countries that do not have them.

8 The foreign policy of the United States shows that this is not merely a  
9 theoretical possibility. Rawls short-changes the “Wilsonian” tendency in US  
10 foreign policy. Wilsonians insist “that the United States has the right and the duty  
11 to change the rest of the world’s behavior, and that the United States can and  
12 should concern itself not only with the way other countries conduct their  
13 international affairs, but with their domestic policies as well”.<sup>26</sup> Wilsonianism  
14 has been a persistent and powerful strand in US foreign policy, showing itself  
15 most recently in official statements that America was justified in using military  
16 force for the sake of democratizing the Middle East. There is no doubt that Rawls  
17 would set himself firmly against this Wilsonian position in US foreign policy, and  
18 claim that liberal peoples should tolerate peaceful undemocratic peoples just as  
19 liberal citizens should tolerate reasonable citizens who hold to different faiths.  
20 Yet Rawls cannot plausibly assert that Wilsonianism only arises because of some  
21 flaw in American democratic institutions. For it is a deep commitment to the ideal  
22 of liberal democracy itself that inclines at least some Americans to want to see the  
23 “blessings of liberty” spread across the earth. Commitment to liberal political  
24 values cannot be portrayed as a failing of liberal citizens; such commitment is, as  
25 Rawls himself says, one of their most necessary virtues.

26 In fact one can conjecture that liberal peoples may become aggressively liberal  
27 even from what Rawls says about them in *The Law of Peoples*. Halfway through  
28 the book Rawls engages in a revealing discussion of human rights, and how these  
29 rights will feature in a liberal people’s foreign policy decisions (LoP, pp. 67–8,  
30 78–80). He divides liberal citizens into two types with respect to their attitudes on  
31 human rights. Both types believe that it is appropriate for a liberal people to  
32 intervene abroad to check violations of what Rawls calls “human rights proper”,  
33 for example to stop a genocide. The first type of liberal citizen believes that  
34 a liberal people can be justified in pressuring other countries for the sake  
35 of promoting additional human rights, such as the right to democratic  
36 participation.<sup>27</sup> The second type believes that coercive measures in favor of  
37 democracy abroad are inappropriate (this is Rawls’s own view). Rawls says that  
38 both types of liberal citizen are reasonable, and gives no reason to think that  
39

40 <sup>25</sup>Rawls 1993, pp. 139, 169.

41 <sup>26</sup>Mead 2002, p. 138. See also Owen 1997.

42 <sup>27</sup>The right to democratic participation is proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human  
43 Rights, Article 21. This is not a right that Rawls holds to be a human right “proper”—it is rather, he  
44 seems to suggest, a liberal aspirational right (LoP, p. 80, fn. 23).

1 those with a more expansive view of human rights will not form a majority  
2 within any given liberal people (LoP, p. 67). He thus gives no reason to doubt that  
3 a liberal people may be preponderantly composed of the type of citizen that sees  
4 the promotion of the human right of democratic participation as a worthy  
5 national goal. We therefore have grounds within Rawls's own theory to argue  
6 that a liberal people composed only of reasonable liberal citizens may indeed go  
7 to war for the sake of promoting liberal democracy abroad.

8  
9 V. DOES LIBERAL FOREIGN POLICY-MAKING DIFFER FROM  
10 DOMESTIC POLICY-MAKING?

11 A. FLAW OR FEATURE?

12 So far we have questioned Rawls's attempts to link certain internal features of  
13 liberal societies with a peaceful foreign policy. We have argued that liberal  
14 societies cannot be expected to have such features, or that if they do have such  
15 features these features will be insufficient to support the thesis of liberal  
16 satisfaction.

17 We are now in a position to go further. We will now argue that certain internal  
18 features of liberal societies positively dispose them to intervene forcefully in  
19 other countries' affairs. We should expect the character of liberal peoples to be  
20 only inconsistently peaceful. Indeed we can expect liberal peoples to be  
21 characteristically aggressive, at least toward certain (non-outlaw) peoples, in  
22 circumstances that are not uncommon.

23 Rawls admits that his liberal peace hypothesis might appear to run afoul of  
24 some historical facts. Peoples that are as liberal as any we have known have not  
25 shied from invading countries that could not plausibly be seen as outlaws. The  
26 incessant US involvement in Central and Latin America, punctuated by a number  
27 of military invasions and direct aggressive interferences in domestic affairs (for  
28 example, Haiti, Cuba, Dominican Republic) goes back more than a century. The  
29 US has not hesitated to replace decent or even democratic governments with more  
30 pliant regimes, nor were such actions limited to the distant past or the Western  
31 hemisphere. Since World War II, the US has intervened in Iran, Guatemala,  
32 Guyana, Brazil, Chile, and Nicaragua to bring about the downfall of a  
33 democratically-elected government. In all cases (except Nicaragua) the US  
34 replaced these democratic governments with American-backed authoritarians  
35 such as the Shah in Iran and Pinochet in Chile.<sup>28</sup>

36 Moreover the US is not the only "well-ordered" society to have engaged  
37 in such policies. Almost the entire nineteenth century colonial drive by France  
38 and Great Britain was conducted while these countries were ruled by  
39 democratically-elected governments, after the introduction of an extensive or full  
40

41 <sup>28</sup>Rosato 2003, pp. 590–91.



1 (male) franchise.<sup>29</sup> This drive continued in the first half of the 20th century, most  
2 notably for the French during the Algerian and Vietnamese wars, and for the  
3 British in the severe repression of the “Quit India” movement and the Kenyan  
4 and Malay counter-insurgencies. The UK and France took their last colonial  
5 stand together during the Suez crisis of 1956. The situation in France remains  
6 even today broadly unchanged in the sense that French military involvements in  
7 Africa (e.g., Chad, Ivory Coast) are driven—in the face of general public  
8 indifference—by small groups that have particular economic interests in these  
9 African nations.

10 Faced with these types of examples, Rawls appeals to flaws in the internal  
11 political structures of the nations that took the aggressive actions. He points  
12 particularly to flaws in the processes that ensure fair elections, and to flaws in the  
13 provision of relevant information to the public. These flaws, he says, have  
14 historically allowed powerful economic interests to capture a liberal society’s  
15 foreign policy agenda for their own purposes, instead of allowing the people  
16 themselves to decide what foreign policy their country should pursue. Speaking of  
17 the covert operations in Chile, Guatemala, etc., he writes: “Covert operations  
18 against them were carried out by a government prompted by monopolistic and  
19 oligarchic interests without the knowledge or criticism of the public” (LoP, p. 53,  
20 cf. 49). And he laments more generally an insufficient “public financing of  
21 elections and ways of assuring the availability of public information on matters  
22 of policy . . . to ensure that representatives and other officials are sufficiently  
23 independent of particular social and economic interests and to provide the  
24 knowledge and information upon which policies can be formed and intelligently  
25 assessed by citizens” (LoP, p. 50). In short, Rawls holds that the aggression of  
26 liberal democracies through history has been caused by their being insufficiently  
27 liberal and insufficiently democratic.<sup>30</sup>

28 This “internal flaws” strategy again leaves Rawls in a somewhat  
29 uncomfortable dialectical position. To support his hypothesis of the liberal peace  
30 he freely draws on the historical data which show that actual democratic societies  
31 have had a low propensity to go to war with each other. Yet faced with instances  
32 where these same democratic societies have acted aggressively toward  
33 non-democracies, or toward democracies in ways that fall short of all-out war, he  
34 blames the aggression on these same democracies not living up to a political ideal  
35 that seems rarely to have been realized (if indeed it ever has). Rawls is of course

36 <sup>29</sup>According to Polity database which grades countries’ democracy levels on a scale from –10 (full  
37 autocracy and no civil rights) to +10 (full democracy), both France’s and Great Britain’s estimated  
38 democracy levels were 7 or 8 throughout the period from 1877 (1880 for Great Britain) to 1918.  
39 After 1918 their levels went, of course, even higher.

40 <sup>30</sup>See Forsythe 1992. One may argue that Rawls’s choice of historical cases is a bit biased. While  
41 he does mention Vietnam, other examples are relatively small “covert” operations. Yet the US was,  
42 in addition to Vietnam, also a major player in the Korean War (even if it was officially fought under  
43 the aegis of the United Nations). Snyder’s (1991, pp. 206–9) analysis of US involvement in Korea and  
44 Vietnam stresses the capture of US foreign policy by a coalition of pro-war interest groups and the  
45 “ambivalent interest” of the wider population.



1 not the first theorist to use those parts of the historical record that support his  
2 thesis while trying to explain away the parts that do not. Yet Rawls's specific  
3 attempt to attribute liberal aggression to imperfect elections and uninformed  
4 publics is particularly unpersuasive. The liberal propensity toward foreign  
5 aggression is not a *flaw* in liberal institutions, it is a *feature* of liberal institutions  
6 that we should expect to manifest itself within all liberal societies at least when  
7 certain circumstances obtain. We begin this argument by considering the  
8 similarities and differences in the ways in which liberal polities form their  
9 domestic and foreign policies.

## 10 11 B. FOREIGN POLICY FORMATION

12 We argue that domestic and foreign policies in a liberal society are formed in a  
13 similar way. Citizens in liberal societies do not change their objectives when  
14 considering domestic and foreign policy. Nor do citizens change the means they  
15 use to pressure their government to further their objectives. Yet because the  
16 actors (especially the *number* of actors) differ in domestic and foreign policy  
17 contexts, there are substantial differences in the nature of the outcomes.

18 On this model both foreign and domestic policies in liberal societies are  
19 formed by interest groups that, within a constitutional framework, vie for the  
20 ability to implement their own agendas. This is a standard characterization of  
21 democracy,<sup>31</sup> and it translates readily into a framework for analyzing the foreign  
22 policies of democratic nations.<sup>32</sup> In the domestic arena, the density of  
23 interrelations between individuals is very high. By “density of interrelations” we  
24 mean the “intertwining of individual lives”<sup>33</sup> such that a given political decision  
25 will seldom be neutral for the majority of actors: in most cases it will affect  
26 interests of many individuals. Some individuals may benefit from the policy,  
27 others may lose. Individuals will form groups that attempt to turn policy  
28 decisions in directions that favor their interests.<sup>34</sup> The interests of these various  
29 groups are in turn held in check by the interests of opposing groups and by the  
30 strength of domestic institutions (the judiciary, legislatures, the media). Domestic  
31 policy rarely evolves without being subjected to the intense scrutiny of competing  
32 perspectives. Generally, an outcome will be reached through some form of  
33 consensus which gives to every group some stake in a policy, or through a  
34 compromise.

35  
36 <sup>31</sup>E.g., Schumpeter 1942; Aron 1965; Buchanan and Tullock 1969.

37 <sup>32</sup>Keohane 1984. See Moravcsik 1997, p. 518: “The state is not an actor but a representative  
38 institution constantly subject to capture and recapture, construction and reconstruction by coalitions  
39 of social actors. Representative institutions and practices are the critical “transmission belt” by which  
40 the preferences and social power of individuals and groups are translated into state policy”.

41 <sup>33</sup>Cohen and Sabel 2006, p. 163.

42 <sup>34</sup>Interests are understood as broadly as possible: they can include material interests, but also other  
43 interests which individuals or groups feel strongly enough about to try to influence policy (e.g., the  
44 advancement of a religion, or the defense of some ascriptive group).

1 When we look at foreign policy formation, the processes do not change but the  
2 type and number of actors involved do. Since individuals who belong to two  
3 different peoples by definition do not live under a single political authority, their  
4 degree of “shared destiny” will be less. So too will be their shared culture, history,  
5 and—what is crucial for our thesis—the density of their interconnections. Among  
6 different democratic peoples who share historical ties, who have significant trade  
7 with each other, and who maintain a broad range of cross-border contacts, the  
8 density of these interconnections might approach the within-nation density. We  
9 call such densely interconnected societies “politically proximate societies” (or  
10 just “proximate societies”). One can think of a sliding scale of interconnectedness  
11 to measure proximity, ranging from societies who have a high density of  
12 connections to those who have fewer connections and further on until these links  
13 become relatively rare.<sup>35</sup>

14 Because of the many relationships that exist between a democratic society and  
15 societies proximate to it, foreign policy formation relative to proximate societies  
16 may differ little from domestic policy formation. Many domestic interest groups  
17 will be concerned about the effects of foreign policy on a proximate society, and  
18 will form coalitions in an effort to influence foreign policy toward that country.  
19 Foreigners will also form their own coalitions with local citizens who share their  
20 interests, and these coalitions will attempt to turn national policy their way.<sup>36</sup>

21 As we move to policy decisions that affect relationships between a democratic  
22 society and non-proximate societies, with whom little is shared, we are sliding  
23 down the scale of interconnectedness. What distinguishes foreign policy from  
24 domestic policy in such cases is that active interests regarding decisions that affect  
25 non-proximate foreigners are not shared by a large number of domestic  
26 constituents. Low density of interconnectedness between the two peoples means  
27 that only a relatively small number of domestic groups will care about how  
28 foreign policy affects the non-proximate society, while most will be unaffected by  
29 (and thus uninterested in) this particular foreign policy issue. This in turn means  
30 that the small number of groups concerned with the issue will not be kept in  
31 check by countervailing domestic interests (or domestic-foreign coalitions).  
32 David Landes sees imperial policies to be the effects of such causes:

33 One does not need a business class or an economic system to create a demand for  
34 empire. All one needs is a few interested people who can reach the ears or pockets  
35 of those who command. It is sufficient for the others to stand passively by, absorbed  
36 by their own cares or convinced that their opinions are of no weight anyway—as  
37 often they were. For imperialism was in large measure built on the *fait accompli* . . .  
38 with the state always ready to pull its nationals’ chestnuts out of the fire.<sup>37</sup>

39  
40 <sup>35</sup>Cohen and Sabel 2006.

41 <sup>36</sup>Rawls speaks of “affinity” among peoples—a sense of social cohesion and closeness (LoP, pp.  
42 112–13). Such affinity may be correlated to our explanatory variable: political proximity among  
43 societies.

44 <sup>37</sup>Landes 1961, p. 505.

1 A corollary of this view is that in some cases the interests of the groups that  
2 have captured foreign policy-making may be such that these groups will benefit  
3 from an aggressive stance pursued by their government. Such an aggressive stance  
4 may be needed to protect their interests abroad (say, in controlling the resources  
5 of a foreign country, being able to invest there under preferential conditions, etc.).  
6 Since these decisions will affect very few of their co-nationals, these groups may  
7 be able to convince their government to pursue the aggressive policies.<sup>38</sup> We allow  
8 for the fact that in such cases those foreigners who may be adversely affected by  
9 the policy in question will also try to find domestic supporters (among the liberal  
10 citizens) to resist the aggressive policies. But the lack of interconnectedness  
11 may prevent them for reaching enough people and mounting an effective  
12 counter-campaign. Here clearly, foreigners with greater interconnectedness with  
13 “our” liberal society will be much more successful.

### 14 15 C. RELATIONSHIP TO DEMOCRATIC PEACE THEORY

16 This view of foreign policy formation—which explains how liberal societies may,  
17 in some instances, adopt aggressive foreign policies—accords with the democratic  
18 peace hypothesis. This is because democratic societies will often be politically  
19 proximate to each other, and as such the decision-making in each of them with  
20 respect to the other will come to resemble domestic decision-making. Aggressive  
21 policies which may be favored by one section of the population will be kept in  
22 check by countervailing interests of other groups. It will accordingly be more  
23 difficult to design aggressive policies against “proximate” societies with whom  
24 the density of interconnectedness is high.

25 We distinguish between Rawls’s broader thesis of the liberal  
26 satisfaction—which should ordinarily rule out wars with other societies, liberal  
27 or not—from the thesis of democratic peace, which only rules out wars *between*  
28 liberal societies. The democratic peace is obviously a more restricted thesis  
29 compatible with the existence of aggressive liberal policies toward non-liberal  
30 polities. We believe to have shown why the broader thesis of liberal satisfaction  
31 is unlikely to be true. In addition, we believe that conflict between two liberal  
32 societies cannot be excluded in principle. We put forward the following  
33 hypothesis: the democratic peace will be likely to hold to the extent that two  
34 democratic societies trade, share historical experience, and maintain cross-border  
35 contacts. But the democratic peace will be precarious to the degree that two  
36 democratic societies lack trade, common historical experience, and cooperative  
37 links among their citizens.<sup>39</sup>

38  
39 <sup>38</sup>In a comparative study on influences on US foreign policy, Jacobs and Page (2005) conclude that  
40 internationally oriented business interests have the strongest influence on policy, followed by experts  
41 in think-tanks and academia, labor groups, and (far behind on most issues) the general public.

42 <sup>39</sup>Compare Moravcsik (1997, p. 532): “Liberal theory predicts that democratic states may  
43 provoke preventive wars in response to direct or indirect threats, against very weak states with no

1 Moreover, as far as the relationship between a liberal society and non-  
2 proximate societies is concerned, we have argued that this may be, at times,  
3 dominated by the aggressive policies of the liberal society. There are no principled  
4 grounds to believe that a liberal people will never be aggressive. And of course  
5 our hypothesis makes no commitments regarding the peacefulness of  
6 nondemocratic countries, either toward democracies or toward each other.

7 It is not open to Rawlsians simply to assert that Rawls's version of liberalism  
8 leaves no room for factionalism and foreign policy capture as we have described.  
9 Our model rests on a perfectly standard model of policy formation in a  
10 democracy, which is a model that fits the real practice of existing democratic  
11 states. If Rawlsians believe that there is some mechanism in an ideal liberal  
12 democratic society that would prevent foreign policy being formed in the ways  
13 we have described, it is incumbent on them to say what this mechanism is and  
14 how it works. No such mechanism is described in *Law of Peoples*, and this is too  
15 important a point to rest content with any theorist's intimation that such a  
16 mechanism might exist.

## 17 18 VI. SELF-RESPECT AND SECURITY

19 So far we have examined Rawls's view that there are features of liberal societies  
20 that can be expected to make such societies chary of launching aggressive military  
21 actions. We have argued that Rawls has either not proved that the characteristics  
22 he points to are features of liberal societies, or not proved that these  
23 characteristics would result in a propensity toward peace. Indeed we have argued  
24 that certain features of a liberal society might rather incline it toward aggression  
25 in certain circumstances. In this section we put all of these arguments aside, and  
26 return to Rawls's original description of a liberal people. We argue that—even as  
27 Rawls describes them—liberal peoples have two interests that might lead them to  
28 attack their neighbors without the provocation of a military threat or a severe  
29 violation of human rights. These two interests are not specific to liberal  
30 societies—these are interests that liberal societies share with all others.  
31 Nevertheless the energies behind these interests might well be enough to drive a  
32 liberal people to wreck a liberal peace.

### 33 34 A. SELF-RESPECT

35 We first ask whether the citizens of a liberal society could press for war because  
36 they feel damaged in their self-respect. The answer to this question will

37  
38 great power allies, or in peripheral areas where the legal and political preconditions for trade and  
39 other forms of profitable transnational relations are not yet in place". See also the references to the  
40 democratic peace literature in footnote 20 above supporting a correlation between peace and the  
41 "connectedness" or proximity of democracies.

1 necessarily be speculative, due to the difficulty of evaluating the role of  
2 self-respect in motivating any action. However, we believe that a sharp sense of  
3 inferiority might be one factor amongst others that could push a liberal people  
4 toward an aggressive foreign policy. As Rawls says liberal peoples, like all  
5 peoples, have “a proper self-respect of themselves as a people” (LoP, p. 34). A  
6 liberal people might well find its self-respect damaged, especially in a global order  
7 of the kind that Rawls envisions.

8 To see why, we must first dispense with the presumption that in Rawls’s society  
9 of peoples the liberal peoples will be rich peoples. This presumption has some  
10 justification in the world as we know it, but as we have seen on Rawls’s  
11 understanding a liberal people as such will have no interest in continuous  
12 economic growth. Once a liberal people has obtained internal justice and  
13 stability, it can (and, according to Rawls, probably should) aim for an economic  
14 “steady state”. And there is in Rawls’s theory no reason to suspect that  
15 non-liberal peoples will be similarly disinterested in growth (one could perhaps  
16 imagine a more decent but still acquisitive China or Singapore). So in the realistic  
17 utopia that Rawls imagines, some liberal societies may well find themselves at the  
18 bottom of the economic heap.

19 Moreover, in Rawls’s world the inequalities between peoples may come to be  
20 quite great. In fact within Rawls’s theory there are no limits to how great  
21 international economic inequality may become. Rawls’s law of peoples does  
22 require a “social minimum” for all peoples—a “burdened society” that falls  
23 below this minimal standard for maintaining legitimate institutions must be  
24 assisted by other peoples. Yet given that all peoples have attained this minimal  
25 level, the economic inequality that the theory permits between peoples is  
26 unlimited.

27 Rawls’s relaxed attitude toward international economic inequalities is of a  
28 piece with his general downplaying of wealth as a motivation in international  
29 contexts.<sup>40</sup> Insofar as Rawls admits that a people might be concerned with its  
30 wealth relative to other peoples, he suggests that it is within the control of each  
31 people how far up the scale of relative wealth it wants to be. Rawls says that after  
32 a people has achieved the international economic minimum, no feelings of  
33 inferiority could be justified:

34 For then each people adjusts the significance and importance of the wealth of its  
35 own society for itself. If it is not satisfied, it can continue to increase savings, or, if  
36 that is not feasible, borrow from other members of the Society of Peoples (LoP,  
37 p. 114).

38  
39 <sup>40</sup>For example, when Rawls lists the motivations for individuals to migrate from one country to  
40 another, he mentions persecution, political oppression, starvation, and population pressure—but *not*  
41 wage differentials between countries (LoP, p. 9). This seems a significant omission, given the  
42 contemporary experience of the United States and the European Union at their borders.

1 This passage suggests a rather extraordinary thesis about the control that each  
2 country has over its relative position in the international economic order. Rawls  
3 speaks as if, for example, any lower-middle income country such as Lithuania or  
4 Botswana could simply ‘decide for itself’ that it wished to become richer than  
5 other countries—and that it could thereafter better its relative position just by  
6 increasing saving or borrowing. No theory of international political economy  
7 supports this very strong thesis. Moreover even if Rawls’s thesis here were  
8 correct, it seems a contingent matter whether it could by itself rule out unchosen  
9 international inequalities. Imagine, for example, that all peoples ‘decide for  
10 themselves’ that they wish not to be in the bottom quartile of the international  
11 distribution of GDP per capita.

12 When we put aside this rather extraordinary thesis about national economic  
13 control, we are left with a Rawlsian international order in which economic  
14 inequalities may grow unrestrained and in which some liberal peoples may well  
15 be involuntarily on the bottom of the distribution. In such circumstances, it does  
16 not seem entirely unrealistic to suppose that relatively poor liberal peoples might  
17 well feel some affront to their self-respect. To deny this possibility one would  
18 have to lean very hard on the idea that citizens of different countries form  
19 “non-comparing groups” as far as relative economic prosperity goes.<sup>41</sup> Even if it  
20 is correct that *today* international inequalities do not much bother the global  
21 poor, Rawls would have to maintain that they *never* can, regardless of how great  
22 these inequalities become, how much information technology improves, and so  
23 on.<sup>42</sup> Were the United States to sink past the point where it is as poor relative to  
24 China as China is now relative to the United States, a feeling of injured  
25 self-respect might be one factor that pushed Americans toward some kind of  
26 aggressive action (perhaps in coalition with other peoples) to try to redress this  
27 balance.

## 28 29 B. SECURITY

30 The second interest that liberal peoples share with all peoples, and that might  
31 lead toward external aggression, is security. All peoples have an interest in  
32 security, and even a liberal society that perfectly realized Rawls’s conditions for  
33 internal stability and justice could still be susceptible to security-based arguments  
34 for an aggressive foreign policy. The use of the “Bush Doctrine” of pre-emptive  
35 strikes in the lead-up to the Iraq war is a contemporary illustration of how an  
36 advanced democracy can be drawn into launching a military action by appeal to  
37

38 <sup>41</sup>Rawls 1971, pp. 441–2.

39 <sup>42</sup>Beitz 2001, pp. 104–05. Rawls might here attempt to invoke a technical sense of “self-respect”  
40 that will be satisfied whenever a people is a formally equal member of the society of peoples. But such  
41 a definitional move would not avoid our assertion that there is some motivational force (however  
42 labeled) that can be triggered by being at a low position within a highly unequal economic  
43 distribution among peoples, and that might impel a people toward aggressive foreign action.

1 national security.<sup>43</sup> Rawls admits the possibility that the government of a liberal  
2 people might use an appeal to security to justify at least *covert* operations  
3 abroad—although again he implies that this can only happen when flaws internal  
4 to the liberal polity in question keep the people from knowing what is really  
5 going on:

6       Though democratic peoples are not expansionist, they do defend their security  
7 interest, and a democratic government can easily invoke this interest to support  
8 covert operations, even when actually moved by economic interests behind the  
9 scenes (LoP, p. 53).

10       Whether Rawls is correct here we leave to the reader's judgment. We see little  
11 reason to follow Rawls in suggesting that the government of a liberal people  
12 could only appeal to security interests to justify covert operations, and that it  
13 could not also make such an appeal to justify a full-scale aggressive war. The  
14 question then becomes whether Rawls is right that only the government of a  
15 "flawed" liberal democracy could effectively make such an appeal. Faced, for  
16 example, with the massive domestic public support for the US invasion of Iraq,  
17 Rawls would have to claim either that the American people did not know what  
18 was happening, or that they were being manipulated by "economic interests  
19 behind the scenes"—*and in ways that could not possibly occur within a*  
20 *"non-flawed" liberal democracy.*

21       This seems implausible. Even if we stipulate that the US government  
22 manipulated the American public into supporting the Iraq war, such  
23 manipulation will surely be within the competence of any future government no  
24 matter how reformed the democratic polity of which it is a part. Because of the  
25 complex and secretive nature of security information, every public will to some  
26 extent have to take their government's word that a foreign threat exists.  
27 Moreover the concept of "security" is vague, allowing governments to  
28 characterize a wide range of situations (energy shortages, trade disputes) as  
29 presenting serious "threats to national security".

30       Rawls could of course say that the corrupting influence of money on the US  
31 electoral process allowed a government to be elected that was willing (perhaps  
32 "moved by economic interests behind the scenes") to manipulate the voters  
33 toward war, and that such a government could not be elected were the "flawed"  
34 electoral system reformed.<sup>44</sup> However, Rawls would then need to explain why the  
35 United Kingdom also invaded Iraq. The Blair government also primarily used

36  
37       <sup>43</sup>We stipulate that Saddam Hussein's regime would have counted as an outlaw state either because  
38 of its history of aggression or violation of human rights. The example is intended to illustrate how an  
39 appeal to security can draw a liberal democracy into launching aggressive military actions.

40       <sup>44</sup>This seems to have been Rawls's view of why the Vietnam war was allowed to continue so long,  
41 even after (as he saw it) the American people no longer supported it. See Pogge 2007, pp. 19–21.  
42 Whether or not Rawls was correct about Vietnam, each war must be analyzed separately.



1 security-based arguments to justify the invasion, and British campaign finance  
2 laws are much closer to Rawls's own ideals for how such laws should be  
3 framed.<sup>45</sup>

4 We see no reason to believe that even the most fairly-elected leaders of even the  
5 best-informed democratic publics will always resist the appeal to security as a  
6 justification for aggressive military action. Indeed the very intensity of the feelings  
7 behind the sentiments associated with security makes it seem likely that such  
8 leaders will continue to appeal to security interests to justify aggression in  
9 support of causes that they believe vital.

## 10 VII. CONCLUSION

12 We have, with some regret, found that Rawls's account of a peace among satisfied  
13 peoples describes an "unrealistic utopia". We have shown that the best social  
14 scientific research fails to support Rawls's hope that democratic and  
15 non-democratic peoples can live in peace. We have examined Rawls's three  
16 independent reasons for thinking that liberal peoples will be satisfied. We have  
17 argued that commercial societies have often been warlike instead of peaceful; that  
18 it is unlikely that liberal peoples will be uninterested in economic growth; and  
19 that absence of a societal comprehensive doctrine would not preclude a liberal  
20 people aspiring to impose the doctrine of liberalism itself. We have also suggested  
21 two additional societal interests (self-respect and security) that might push a  
22 liberal people into aggressive action abroad. Rawls has not provided compelling  
23 independent arguments for liberal satisfaction, and there are strong independent  
24 reasons to doubt his view.

25 Rawls rests his vision of a perpetual peace on the thought that liberal peoples  
26 "will have no reason to go to war". We have proposed an alternative  
27 understanding of how liberal polities form their foreign policies that explains  
28 why liberal peoples have been aggressive in the past and why even "perfected"  
29 polities may be aggressive in the future. In our model it is not the *nature of* but  
30 rather the *connections among* democratic peoples that keeps hostilities from  
31 breaking out between them. If this hypothesis is true, a liberal world is not in  
32 itself a peaceful world: it must be a connected world as well. Until that world  
33 emerges, we cannot expect liberal democracies to be as peaceful as many liberals  
34 believe them to be.

36 <sup>45</sup>Rawls 2001, pp. 149–50. See also Doyle (2006, p. 114): "Rawls suggests that it was  
37 insufficiencies in the equal protection of rights or inadequacies in the social protections that ensured  
38 fair equality of opportunity (such as unemployment or health insurance) that made liberal polities  
39 subject to manipulative elites and therefore aggressive against non-liberal polities. But the evidence  
40 for this is indeterminate. Semi-socialist Sweden and Denmark are less militarily interventionist than  
41 (more) laissez faire U.S., but in modern times the UK, France, and Italy (all with better social  
42 insurance than the U.S.) are no less interventionist".

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