# Adrian Pabst on the Liberal World Order

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**Abstract:** The theologian and political scientist Adrian Pabst is one of the most prominent critics of contemporary liberalism, whether considered as an intellectual tradition, a political and economic regime, or an international system. In *Liberal World Order and its Critics: Civilisational States and Cultural Commonwealths* (2019), he purports to offer an alternative to our current 'liberal' global system, which, he argues, is inherently unstable and, in the long term, self-destructive, insofar as it extends to all parts of the world a mode of political and economic activity hostile to traditional ways of life and sources of meaning. Drawing on Karl Polanyi's analysis of modern capitalism as a 'disembedding' of the economy from ethical norms, and echoing other Christian 'post-liberals' such as John Milbank, Pabst calls for a new division of the globe among great powers, each with a culturally-specific 'civilizational' vision.

Pabst's work connects theology and intellectual history via a diverse range of modern thinkers—from illiberal conservatives to heterodox leftists—to achieve a vantage from which he can apparently comment with ease on nearly every aspect of politics and economics in the past and present. But his simplistic historical panoramas, idiosyncratic readings of other thinkers, broad condemnations of modernity and vague claims about what must replace it fail to offer much of substance to readers concerned either to replace or defend the current form of international politics on liberal or illiberal grounds.

Recent years have seen a significant revival of critiques of liberalism informed by a line of Christian, and particularly Catholic, theological thinking that identifies liberalism, broadly conceived, with modernity, and seeks an alternative to them. Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1981) was perhaps the first major introduction of this line of thought into English-speaking academia. It has since expanded throughout the latter, through institutions like Notre Dame University (home now to MacIntyre and the political theorist Patrick Deneen) and the theology department at Peterhouse College of Cambridge, out of which an important strand of 'post-liberal' thought has emerged. The theologian and political scientist Adrian Pabst is one of the most important scions of Peterhouse; his work both furthers, and is representative of, a now-widespread effort to resist what is understood to be liberalism on grounds rooted in the history of the Christian intellectual tradition.

For Pabst, as for many associated with 'post-liberalism,' the word 'liberalism' names the modern world, both in its

modernity and in its worldliness. In *Liberal World Order and its Critics: Civilisational States and Cultural Commonwealths* (2019), he purports to offer an alternative to our current, supposedly liberal, system of interstate relations, trade and hegemonic political culture. Pabst argues that this system, and liberalism more broadly, is unstable and, in the long term, self-destructive, because it extends to all parts of the world a mode of political and economic activity hostile to traditional ways of life and sources of meaning that are vital to the flourishing of the system itself. Many of his specific critiques of liberalism are cogent and worthy of the attention of liberals alert to the fragility of both this form of regime and of our current—perhaps already unraveling—global order. However, his alternative vision of the world's future, built on a problematic interpretation of the history that has brought us to the present, does not hold up to scrutiny. Pabst unsuccessfully attempts to differentiate his own project from sorts of illiberal politics that he acknowledges to be troubling, such as nationalism and authoritarianism, but on inspection, these differentiations are little more than verbal formulas unlikely to assuage the anxieties of liberals who, however aware of liberalism's problems, may remain attached to the ideal of a cosmopolitan order founded on individual rights (whether or not they take it as given that our current world order corresponds to this ideal to any great degree).

*Liberal World Order and Its Critics,* in a sense, is directed against a world order that is already on its way out. It characterizes the "liberal" world order as one led by the United States and founded on a militaristic foreign policy, whether in a mode of "liberal humanitarianism" associated with the left, or "neo-conservatism" associated with the right. As the United States seems bound, if it has not already, to become the second (rather than first) largest economy in the near future, and perhaps lose its premier military standing sometime after that, Pabst's critique seems to come rather late. Nevertheless, it is at least of intellectual interest; his identification of American hegemony with liberalism reveals a number of significant assumptions. He tends to see our world order as an expression of American power, and thus destined to disappear with it. Foreign countries have been occupied by the United States military in order to secure "unfettered economic globalization" and "democracy promotion" (p. 46). The possibility that economic globalization—by which Pabst means the undoing of trade barriers, intensification of networks of exchange, and promotion of economic liberalism as policy and ideology—might be driven by chiefly economic forces, or by political forces beyond the United States (such as the markets and states of East Asia, Europe, etc.) does not feature in his account. While critics of globalization and liberalism, such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their book Empire (2000) have powerfully argued that we might better see economic globalization as employing the United States and its military in its own service rather than the other way around, Pabst tends to see globalization as a sort of meta-policy enacted by the United States and its allies. If economic liberalism at a global scale is in fact an expression of American power—rather than an autonomous process, or even, one that has used the United States as its instrument—then it will prove perhaps rather easy to reverse as the latter declines.

Given what from his perspective is the hopeful prospect of American decline, and with it, the erosion of economic liberalism in its form of contemporary globalization, Pabst advocates Western states pursue domestic policy changes that he sees as necessary to adapt to the end of globalization, and replace it with a more sustainable form of international political and economic relations, based not on commercial exchange and individual rights, but on the promotion of collective solidarities across a variety of levels. This would entail not only a kind of cultural nationalism at the level of the state, but also—differentiating Pabst's views from those of illiberal centralizing nationalists—the creation of more local and regional institutions that will reinforce individuals' sense of cultural identity and difference from members of other populations: what Pabst calls "cultural association." He argues that "cultural association is more primary than states" and faults the current international system for its reliance on the power of the latter (p. 66). He adds that an "important dimension of the global backlash against liberalism is the celebration by powers such as China, India or Russia of their civilizations and their conviction that global stability depends upon coexistence and mutual respect of civilizational identity" (p. 77). By invoking culture and civilization as the grounds for both his own critique of the supposedly liberal global order, and for the varying stances of non-Western governments towards it, Pabst carefully decouples both from *nationalism,* a word which he never treats in

a positive light and associates with the supposedly objectionable modern state. Rather than submitting individuals to a state-directed process of assimilation to a national identity defined by a centralizing administration, the sort of politics Pabst advocates supposedly undoes the current world order in order to recognize and reinforce pre-existing 'cultural' and 'civilizational' collectivities that are both smaller and larger in scale than states.

Pabst is not specific about what 'cultural association' would look like, or how it will challenge both liberal globalization and illiberal nationalism. Indeed, he seems to desire 'cultural' and 'civilizational' politics less to reshape international relations than to give greater legitimation for policy shifts he desires at the domestic level. Pabst desires the latter to no longer be organized on the basis of appeals to individualism, whether couched in terms of the logic of the market or the egalitarian condition of citizens of liberal states. Instead of seeing themselves primarily as self-interested economic actors or citizens, individuals should see themselves as members of cultural and civilization zones that do not overlap with state borders. These identities (such as ethnicity and religion) would engender "shared substantive ends" that "correct the liberal fixation either with instrumental and transactional relationships (merely national or international corporate interests) or with procedural ties (abstract rules and regulatory agencies)." They thus "shift the focus towards the reality of shared cultural and social bonds" (p. 78).

Embracing such a shift, however, would mean not so much reinforcing the current identities of Western polities, but transforming them. Pabst finds that "at the heart of the liberal order lies the West and at the heart of the West lies a paradox … the West is the only civilizational community of nations and peoples founded upon shared political values … [which are] the self-determination of nations, the self-government of people, democracy and free trade." These values, however, do not so much express the identity of the West and its constituent members, but, rather "erode the foundations of Western civilization" by promoting individualistic behavior and identities based on what Pabst considers the abstract basis of the market and the state. Although liberalism emerged from the modern West, is distinctly Western and still perhaps commands the adherence of most, or at least many, citizens in the West, its values undermine "the common cultural customs, beliefs and practices of its nations and peoples." Insofar as Westerners are liberal, "the West is its own *first* enemy" (p. 89). For Westerners to identify with 'cultural' bonds rather than with liberal values would mean for them to undo their current self-understanding and embrace a substantively different one, changing rather than embracing 'who they are.' It remains unstated what bonds exactly Westerners ought to endorse.

It might seem that a renewed emphasis on such bonds, which are necessarily particularistic, might incline members of different communities to regard each other with more suspicion and hostility. However, Pabst argues, this shift will have harmonious effects on both domestic and international politics. At home, he insists, "cultural commonwealths fuse the autonomy of peoples and nations with substantive assistance in case of need, which reflects local customs and habits and does not override them in the name of abstract standards such as procedural democracy or purely individual rights that leave out mutual obligation." As with other such claims, what this means in practice is rather vague, although it is clear what is being negated by them—the supposedly abstract logic of the 'market-state' as manifested in democracy and human rights. Ironically, these specific phenomena are to be undone in the name of supposedly concrete ties, the substance of which remains less concrete than what they replace. Likewise, the realm of foreign policy, "purely formal alliances that merely share liberal principles in common" (no examples are given) will be replaced by "substantive international engagements" (p. 75).

Instead of describing how a new set of institutions could promote such a sense of association and lead to international engagements on that basis, Pabst discusses thinkers he takes to be inspirations for this proposed post-liberal shift. Of these the most important is Burke. Indeed, he claims that "the only genuine alternative" to the current liberal global order "is to embrace a Burkean vision of the West as something like a commonwealth of nations that reflects a relational covenant among peoples where substantive social and cultural ties based on a common heritage shape identity more than trade or formal treaties" (p. 91). In Pabst's version of Burke's argument, the West should be understood by its inhabitants as a single cultural

zone, ranged alongside other cultural zones such as China, India, the Islamic world, etc. Pabst argues that such a conception of global politics would not lead to what Samuel Huntington, thinking on similar lines, described as a 'clash of civilizations,' but to a peaceful division of the world among cultural zones, each at peace with itself. This argument, which is perhaps dubious on the face of it, is supported by questionable interpretations of Burke's writings.

Pabst draws heavily for Burke's supposed 'civilizational' theory of international order on the latter's late work, *Letters on a Regicide Peace* (1796) which urged the government of Great Britain to commit to war against revolutionary France on ideological grounds and not to make peace until the French monarchy was restored. It was in service of that cause that Burke "emphasized cultural association as the most universal mode of human political interaction" (p. 76). In Burke's eyes Christian Europe before the French Revolution had formed a single cultural zone united by religion, mores, and monarchical forms of government. The Revolution had disrupted the homogeneity of this zone, and therefore had to be suppressed. In other words, far from being linked to a relative pacifism in international relations within a given cultural zone (let alone among different zones), Burke's argument was developed in order to justify an ideologically-motivated war within the European cultural zone.

A similar misreading sustains Pabst's claim that the Burkean approach to international relations would reduce the interstate conflict that is supposedly endemic in our own day. Pabst finds that the reason for "anarchy and violence in the sphere of international relations," according to Burke—whom he takes as correct on this heading— is the fact that people are divided into "arbitrary" states whose borders do not reflect the sorts of relationships that actually define identities (p. 72). If political life better represented the cultural zones that in fact divide humanity, then there would be more peaceful relationships among these new polities than currently prevails among our too-heterogeneous states. The problem to be feared is thus not a 'clash of civilizations,' but rather that states will clash because they too little resemble or refer to the supposedly pre-existing set of civilizations lying beneath and beyond the level of abstract national identities oriented toward artificial states.

In support of this position, Pabst cites Burke's now relatively obscure early writing, *A Vindication of Natural Society* (1756). The latter, however, is widely understood by scholars to be a satire, and is far from a straightforward critique of liberalism. Indeed, as Frank N. Pagano has compellingly argued, it is an endorsement of liberalism on apparently conservative, ethnocentric grounds, as the form of government appropriate for the English. More might be said as well about the fact that Pabst presents Burke as one of liberalism's major foes, an interpretation that ignores the complexities of Burke's thought, and its complex relationship to liberalism (the subject of voluminous scholarly debates). It is however perhaps sufficient to note that Pabst's treatment of the two Burke texts that are central to his construction of a 'Burkean' view of international relations is problematic, if not disingenuous.

A similar approach marks Pabst's engagement with the ideas of Schmitt, the Nazi jurist and arch-critic of liberalism. Pabst seeks to avoid identifying his ideas with those of Schmitt, just as he seeks to avoid linking them to illiberal nationalist movements that purport to oppose globalization. Yet just as his 'cultural' or 'civilizational' approach may seem to differ little in substance from the latter, so too do his ideas have striking parallels to Schmitt's later writings, such as *Land and Sea, Dialogues on Space and Power* (1942), and *The Nomos of the Earth* (1949). This is not to say that Pabst is a 'Schmittian', but the implications of his ideas do seem to lead toward directions like those explicitly posited by the anti-liberal Schmitt.

Pabst notes that Schmitt in the 1940s developed a conception of global politics (in defense of Nazi imperialism) according to which the world should be divided not into sovereign states but into 'great spaces' or zones of influence. Pabst argues that his own calls for replacing the autonomy of nation-states with civilizational blocs is critically different from Schmitt's argument insofar as his view is premised on the idea that these blocs represent genuine and durable differences among the world's peoples. As he puts it, "a pre-established order and suzerains with gradated forms of power can coexist precisely because they often have spheres of influence with partially overlapping cultures." In contrast, he argues, the Schmittian view merely posits competing zones that have no substantive basis in different ways of life and values (p. 49).

For Pabst to distinguish himself from Schmitt on these grounds is strange indeed, given that scholarship on Schmitt tends rather to reveal the connections between Schmitt's theories of an international order founded on 'great spaces' and his conceptions of domestic politics animated by the aim of suspending supposedly abstract and formal liberal norms to achieve greater moral and racial 'homogeneity.' As Peter Stirk has argued, the international and domestic aspects of his thought fit together in a common hostility to liberalism's supposed inability to recognize that political life must be founded on specific, concrete cultural ties (Stirk 1999). In Schmitt's case, this meant endorsing the 'Aryanization' of Germany and German-occupied states, and, eventually, genocide.

It would be grotesque to suggest that Pabst has any such agenda. But his critique of the current world order structured on terms clearly similar to those of Schmitt, seems unable to provide adequate safeguards against such outcomes. Like Pabst, Schmitt during the Nazi era critiqued liberal conceptions of individual rights and the modern state in order to promote a supposedly more authentic and rich conception of politics founded on the moral homogeneity of a community and its ties to similar communities in a civilizational zone. Although the ends to which Pabst and Schmitt promote these ideas differ, they are quite in agreement about what they see as the deficiencies of liberalism and the international order of sovereign states, and, in broad terms, about the sort of order that ought to replace it.

*Liberal World Order,* in its critique and alternative to the international system founded on American military power and economic liberalism, promotes such keywords as 'association,' 'culture', 'civilization' etc., which are supposed to be more stable and satisfying than the kind of connections among states, and among individuals, fostered by liberalism. Not much, however, is said about the positive content of these bonds. Problematically, one of the sources for this set of ideas, Edmund Burke, saw them as justifying liberalism, at least within England, while another of their sources, Carl Schmitt, took them as justification for Nazi imperialism. It would seem that valorizing associative solidarity in fact neither prevents one from accepting a sort of liberalism (Burke) nor falling into the sort of bellicose authoritarian nationalism from which Pabst wishes to differentiate himself (Schmitt). But, although this is not immediately apparent in *Liberal World Order,* Pabst is in fact up to something rather more specific than a mere, and open-ended, promotion of the value of culture-based solidarity as such. He aims, in fact, at a transformation of Western cultural values, in a distinctly illiberal and clerical direction.

Pabst's critique of the supposedly liberal international order cannot be understood without first working through his more general philosophical, historical and political commitments on which he grounds his critique of liberalism. This is especially true because his proposals in *Liberal World Order* remain quite vague, and seem to be largely in the service of promoting certain domestic political ends, and specifically towards shifting the terms of political discourse within Western countries away from liberal conceptions of human rights and democracy towards new sorts of ethnic and cultural solidarities.

Pabst is above all a theologian, and his critique of liberalism, as the basis of an international order or of a domestic political and economic system, begins from his theological premises. These are most fully articulated in one of his earliest and longest works, *Metaphysics: the Creation of Hierarchy* (2012). While the topic of 'metaphysics' may not necessarily seem to have political implications, Pabst's subtitle, pointing to the existence of 'hierarchy,' already has connotations of an inegalitarian ordering of the world pregnant with implications for his political thought.

*Metaphysics,* like much of Pabst's writing on liberalism, is at once a historical account of the development of concepts, and a set of claims about the nature of reality. On the first count, it traces how ancient Greek philosophers and early Christian theologians articulated theories according to which the nature of individual beings requires their active and ongoing 'participation' in the creative, outflowing essence of the divine. 'Participation' is a rather opaque concept the particulars of which need not detain us; it is important for Pabst's politics insofar as it signals that beings—and most significantly human beings—are not autonomous and self-determining, but radically dependent on higher authority.

Pabst sees the emergence, and subsequent occlusion, of the theory of participation as a central process in Western intellectual, and political, history. He argues that under the influence of theologians like

William of Ockham (1287-1347) in the Middle Ages, and then in an accelerating tendency since, Western thinkers have eschewed the concept of participation for another vision of ontology according to which beings possess within themselves self-sufficient natures disconnected from continual, sustained engagement with a nature beyond and above their own. Pabst insists that this modern conception is at odds with the original account of being held by Plato, Aristotle and the early fathers of the Christian church. It is not only an epochal break, and theologically invalid, he adds, but one that has perilous practical consequences, not least of which is the emergence of liberalism, founded on the idea that human beings fundamentally are, or can be made to function as, self-interested agents.

Pabst treats the emergence of modernity, in all its varied aspects, as the result of a pre-modern shift in intellectual culture, giving vast historical power to what might seem to be a minor change. Moreover, he treats modernity as almost identical with the more historical specific phenomenon of liberalism, which he understands to be the conceptual matrix out of which both the modern economy (capitalism) and the modern state arose. Liberalism does not appear to him as a particular intellectual tradition, rivalled by a number of others for influence in modern political and economic history, but as *the* master-discourse that gave rise to the fundamental modern historical processes. Although this conflation means Pabst's concept of liberalism has little historical specificity, it does offer a rhetorical advantage. If liberalism is the source of the modern economy and state, then it can be imagined as responsible for all the problems of modernity.

Pabst's wide-ranging historical argument connecting political liberalism and its premise of individualism as it emerged in early modernity to a much earlier shift within Christian accounts of ontology is not unique to him or as unprecedented as it might seem. A number of other modern Christian thinkers and scholars of the medieval era, such as André de Muralt in his *L'Unité de la philosophie politique. De Scot, Occam et Suarez au libéralisme contemporain* (2002). Similarly, Michael Allen Gillespie has presented medieval theological debates as the crucible of political modernity in his *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (2008). Pabst's tendency to conflate 'modernity' and 'modern politics' with liberalism, meanwhile, seems to be derived from the influence of a tradition beginning with the political philosopher Leo Strauss (1899-1973) and best represented in Europe by Pierre Manent. Whatever the intellectual merits of this genealogy of concepts (which is distinctly conservative in tenor), however, in Pabst' hands it serves as an instrument for arguing that modernity and liberalism are both theologically and politically bankrupt.

Although in his later work Pabst is more explicit on this head, in *Metaphysics* he is relatively restrained. Instead it is John Milbank who, in his forward to *Metaphysics* articulates what he sees as the "political corollaries" of Pabst's argument. Milbank is the key figure in two inter-connected intellectual movements in which Pabst is a major participant. The first of these is 'radical orthodoxy,' a tendency in Anglican and Catholic theology to engage with post-modern critiques of modernity in order to reinvigorate the Christian intellectual tradition. Milbank was one of the co-editors (along with Catherine Pickstock, Pabst's dissertation advisor) of *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (1999), an edited volume that signaled the importance of this movement in the United Kingdom and United States. He is also one of the leading lights in the British movement of 'post-liberalism,' a related, but specifically political effort to move beyond what are seen as the limitations and failures of modern liberal thought (in the United Kingdom, it is often linked to the 'Blue Labour' tendency within the Labour Party, a socially conservative group within the Labour Party; in the United States, the leading venue for such ideas is perhaps the Christian journal *First Things*) Subsequent to the publication of *Metaphysics,* Milbank and Pabst co-authored *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future* (2016), another expression of their common theological and political commitments.

In his preface Milbank argues that Metaphysics demonstrates how the idea that created beings, including human beings, possess ontological autonomy (that is, do not require for the sustainment of their being a continuous participation in a 'higher' sort of nature than their own) must necessarily "generate a politics of either individual or collective autonomy," which translates practically into either liberalism or a kind of nationalism. In such forms of politics, which Milbank suggests are distinctly modern, individuals see the state either as an instrument for securing their own rights, or as a means of their common self-aggrandizement at the expense of other groups. The former sort of liberal politics is "deficient in any true sense of a sharing

in a common good or the primacy of a specific set of relations and reciprocal duties over individual rights" (p. xxi).

Milbank does not have much to say about what the common good that liberalism is unable to conceive of would in fact look like—or why liberalism, understood as a political order designed to protect and prioritize the rights of its individual members, should be incompatible with some version of a 'common good' (such as, minimally, the maintenance of the necessary conditions for the exercise of individuals' rights; or, more ambitiously, the development of these conditions toward the widest possible deployment of rights, whether in the form of economic growth, fostering of opportunities for education and self-cultivation, etc.). Nor does he say much about the substance of our reciprocal duties, nor, again, why within liberalism the preservation of fellow citizens' rights, and the necessary conditions for their rights-bearing to be operative, should not count as a set of specific, reciprocal duties. He does, however, insist that liberalism is inherently deficient in this respect insofar is it presupposes (at least potentially) autonomous individuals, who can encounter each other and determine a structure for the protection of their rights.

This presupposition, supposedly derived from the modern ontology in which beings possess their nature without continuous participation in a transcendent divine reality, equates to a "removal of God from the political sphere," since within the liberal framework human beings are imagined as capable of creating a governmental order based on their needs and rights as human beings, without reference to non-human entities or values. Milbank argues that in Pabst's account, an ontology without participation leads to an impoverished notion of humanity, "without true human relations." The latter, he insists, are only possible if grounded in a "receptivity and gratitude" to God prior to any commitments to fellow human beings, let alone toward oneself. Liberalism, "designed to make the competitions of ignorant individuals balance each other out," functions as a "desperate" substitute for such a grounding. It is perhaps worth noting in passing that Milbank's formula here, while unfavorable in tone to liberalism, does capture important elements of many conceptions of it, in which we might understand liberalism precisely as attempting to allow individuals with imperfect knowledge of economic and political conditions, disagreeing about the ultimate aims of life, and operating in a context of limited resources, to nevertheless find ways of living together without either dominating or being dominated by each other. What is at issue is whether such an attempt is feasible in the absence of the sort of underpinnings that Milbank argues Pabst finds necessary (Milbank 2012, p. xxi).

Pabst himself is generally more reticent about drawing out the political implications of his idea of participation in *Metaphysics,* but in several passages makes significant gestures towards his larger critique of liberalism and the international order that is its supposed consequence. Toward the end of *Metaphysics,* he draws on Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* (1944) to argue that both the modern state and the "free market" depend on the idea that human beings, however fallible, can construct through their "artifice … a peaceful natural order (beyond the violence of the state of nature)" (p. 436). The state and market appear in this logic as utopian abstractions, which inspired intellectuals to advocate and policy-makers to advance the liquidation of the "intermediary institutions" that had long structured economic and political life throughout the West.

Guilds, feudal hierarchies, ecclesiastical institutions, and other sorts of non-state or quasi-state entities, often based on inegalitarian principles and hereditary statuses, were eliminated over the early modern and modern eras through gradual reforms and occasional spectacular events such as the French Revolution. They were by and large replaced with state and market institutions based on "the logic of abstraction that governs both the bureaucratic control and commercial exchange," according to which individuals and commodities are comparable and fungible, rather than marked by specific local identities that prevented their movement or marketization (e.g, serfs who cannot leave their lord's estate, or hereditary estates that cannot be sold). The destruction of feudal intermediary institutions (which, Pabst does not note, must surely be understood to have been somewhat compensated in the modern era by the emergence of new intermediary institutions such as professional associations, unions, chambers of commerce, social clubs and charities, etc.) has, Pabst claims, subordinated modern life to the singular "market-state" (p. 436).

As with Pabst's account of the relationship between the occlusion of 'participation' and the rise of modern politics, his account of the rise of the 'market-state' may seem so sweeping as to have little purchase on historical reality. It is, however, rooted in an intellectual tradition that, derived from the unorthodox economic thinker Karl Polanyi (1886-1964), has influenced a diverse range of thinkers on the right and left. Besides its political influence, this vision also has some genuine historical insights. One of the most empirically grounded versions of the Polanyian view can be found in Steven Kaplan's analysis of the deregulation of the eighteenth-century French grain trade, *Bread, Politics and Political Economy in the Reign of Louis XV* (1974). Kaplan argues that as the monarchy eliminated the dense set of local institutions that had set grain prices to create a single national market, it also created the preconditions both for an increase in centralized state power (by removing the traditional authority of localities to set their own prices) and the emergence of economic liberalism in which commodities and individuals freely circulated. The state and market, at least in this particular historical moment, formed a common front against feudal and mercantilist institutions.

In Pabst's version of the argument, however, it is not merely the case that the state and market worked together against certain institutions at a particular moment in history, but that the state and market are essentially a conjoined entity hostile to 'intermediary institutions' as such and across time. This hostility, moreover, operates not only within the domestic sphere but at the global scale. For Pabst, beyond debates between advocates of market-oriented reforms or of greater state intervention in the economy, both the economic right and left share a common set of political presuppositions hostile to the tissue of "local and global civil society" that is now placed "under the hegemony of the international system of nation-states" (p. 436).

It is not immediately obvious what Pabst means by the institutions of "global civil society" that have thus been subordinated. While early modern "local civil society," to the extent that it refers to institutions such as guilds, parish councils, mercantile associations, etc., was indeed deprived of much of its power to structure economic and political life for ordinary people by early modern European states intent on creating national markets, there are few early modern economic institutions that fulfilled similar functions at a "global" level. Nor does Pabst seem to mean the modern network of human rights organizations, charities, and other such entities addressed to a cosmopolitan public sphere (e.g., Amnesty International) whose members might refer to themselves as "global civil society" in a contemporary context—and still less to multi-national corporations or to international bodies such as the World Trade Organization, which are constitutive members of the international order Pabst critiques as an emanation of the logic of the "market-state."

Given his theological commitments, the most plausible candidate for Pabst's "global civil society" that has been subordinated by the modern market and state would seem to be the Christian Church, and particularly the Catholic Church. This suggestion is supported by another passage in *Metaphysics* in which Pabst draws on the political thought of Pope Benedict XVI to attack both liberalism and the current international order. The former Pope, in Pabst's account, anticipated his own argument that modern politics (understood as degenerate) is the product of an earlier intellectual shift or rather deviation within Christian theology. Moving beyond "value-free democracy" and liberalism will require a return to "pre-secular metaphysics," including the concept of participation. It will also include "a new kind of engagement between all faiths and cultures—above all the world's largest religions, Christianity and Islam" through which liberalism's "modern divorce of religion from politics" will be overcome both at the scale of individual states and at an international level (p. 155). Superseding the singular logic of the 'market-state' with a newly empowered set of religious institutions would allow for a new kind of internationalism founded on inter-faith dialogue.

What exactly Pabst, following Benedict XVI, has in mind for the future of international relations, reestablished on a fresh engagement between Christianity and Islam, is not clear—a problem that recurs in his later critiques of today's international order and proposals for moving beyond it. He seems to suggest that "secular reason," i.e., the imposition of secularism, religious toleration and state neutrality towards religion in domestic politics, has had similarly negative consequences for both Christians and Muslims affected by these measures. Working together against a common problem, or rather common enemy, they might, in overcoming the secularism and individualism of the modern 'market-state,' find new ground for mutual

toleration that appeals to a principle of common religious belief, rather than to what Pabst sees as the formalistic and hollow "value-neutral" toleration offered by liberalism (p. 156).

Yet immediately after this passage, Pabst warns that the "pan-European civilization" that Christianity and the classical Greco-Roman heritage created "is now under threat" not only from the "modern militant secularism" Christianity and Islam might ally to overcome, but also by "modern religious extremism," by which he seems to mean Islamic terrorism and fundamentalism (ibid.). Identifying "religious extremism" as a threat to Europe's "civilization" suggests that rather than a dialogue among civilizations (defined by their religious identities) a post-secular international world order might be rather more likely to see conflict—unless, that is, the current tendency toward "extremism" can be shown to be specifically "modern," and thus a consequence of liberalism, secularism, etc., that will be swept away with them in an eventual post-secular international order (a case Pabst does not make).

In two subsequent books, both published in 2019, Pabst furthered his critique of liberalism and outlined an alternative international and domestic political order. *Liberal World Order and Its Critics*, as we have already seen, is of the two the most ostensibly concerned with the former, while *The Demons of Liberal Democracy* focuses on the latter. However, just as *Liberal World Order* is in fact a plea for a new, post-liberal domestic politics of cultural identity, disguised as a critique of American-led economic globalization, so too does *Demons of Democracy* contain important comments on the international system.

Pabst begins *Demons* by arguing that "the post-Cold War order is unravelling and with it the supposed triumph of liberal democracy over all other political models." After 1989, hubristic Western governments attempted to spread "multi-party market capitalism" throughout the world, but have been checked by the dramatic success of "one-party state capitalism" in China (p. 11). This statement is strongly worded but not wholly inaccurate; assumptions that political and economic liberalism had durably triumphed with the collapse of the Soviet Union have indeed been confounded. For Pabst, however, the problem is not merely that Western observers of a generation ago were naively optimistic and have left a crisis for their descendants, but that liberalism as a form of government is by its nature open to such crises.

Drawing on his claims in *Metaphysics* about the interconnected 'market-state' that forms the basis of modern governance, Pabst sees liberalism as prone to instability because its political aspect promises equality and autonomy while its economic aspect generates growth only at the cost of inequality. He warns that the "liberal order is inherently unstable because liberalism erodes the very foundations on which it rests" by creating "economic injustice and divisions in society that are threatening the social contract between the people and their representatives." In a tone that echoes Marxist critiques, Pabst condemns "the forces of dispossession unleashed by liberalism, which include capitalism, statism and globalization." Or again, echoing his earlier analysis inspired by Polanyi, Pabst claims that by destroying intermediary institutions, liberalism creates "an unmediated space based on an oscillation between the individual who is disembedded from history, institutions and relationships" (p. 4). It has led to "the emergence of an anarchic society connected with the fragmentation of everyday life and a weaking of civic bonds" (p. 16).

The intellectual basis of liberalism's liquidation of traditional institutions and subjection of individuals to the logic of the 'market-state' is the supposedly "pessimistic ontology of the social contract tradition" (p. 106). According to Pabst, thinkers like Hobbes, Locke and Rosseau, "share a gloomy outlook about the individual or the free association of people... if human beings (alone or in society) are selfish, greedy, distrustful of one another or prone to violence, then the impersonal institutions of state and market are best positioned to minimize conflict and maximize security, freedom and equality" (p. 107). One can again here note Pabst's tendency to conflate diverse phenomena into a single whole, characterized by some common failing. Just as modernity and liberalism are equated, and just as the state and the market are found to have the same formal and abstract logic necessarily hostile to 'intermediary institutions,' so too are the foundational thinkers of liberalism (in spite of their disagreements with each other, not to mention the contradictions within their own works) united by a single, "gloomy" vision.

Pabst takes issue with what he imagines to be the liberal tradition's claim that neutral institutions premised on the self-interested behavior of individuals can effectively mediate conflict. He argues that mar-

kets and the state on which he takes them to depend in fact generate conflict and thus fail on their own terms. They can only exist, in his vision, where rich, meaningful connections among individuals (embodied in older non-market, non-state institutions such as guilds, ecclesiastical associations, etc.) have been undermined, and they fail to replace those connections with similarly powerful affective bonds. Here Pabst is more explicit than in *Metaphysics* about some of the present-day 'intermediary institutions' that might provide alternatives to what he sees as the single, liberal order composed of market and state. These would include "professional associations, trade unions or universities," which he argues have been systematically weakened by liberalism's emphasis on market and state to create an "anarchy of competing individuals who pursue their own self-interest without much regard for reciprocal recognition or mutual benefit" (p. 36).

If this offers more specificity than did Pabst's account in *Metaphysics*, it does not offer much more clarity. Readers are asked to imagine that professional associations, unions and universities, all of which seem in Western societies today to be intimately and perhaps inherently linked to both the state and the market, are sites of an alternative sort of human relating that is being undermined by the 'market-state.' Pabst argues that the latter assumes, and then creates, individuals driven by self-interested calculations. Such individuals have only feeble and temporary connections to each other, and lack the kind of extra-rational mutual identification and loyalty fostered by 'intermediary institutions' of 'civil society' (one might note in passing that modern nation-states seem to have had rather little trouble commanding the loyalty of their populations, as evinced by mass mobilizations such as the World Wars—and one might also question whether the sort of feelings generated by universities or trade unions are truly of another, less selfish and contingent nature, than the loyalty commanded by states). Thus, when the logic of the liberal state and market generate inequality among individuals or nations, these unequal people or groups can easily turn against that logic and seek to overturn the liberal order to which they feel no emotional bonds. Liberalism sows the seeds of its own destruction.

Pabst's case against liberalism rests on questionable grounds in terms of its claims about the state of present-day institutions and their relationships to the state and market, and the extent to which these relationships can be fairly described as 'liberal' or as the result of policies favored by liberals. At no point does Pabst offer a sample of supposedly liberal thinkers' conceptions of liberalism, in order to compare them to the practice of present-day institutions that he claims are liberal. It is not at all obvious, for example, what foundational thinkers of liberalism like Adam Smith (1723-1790) might make of contemporary capitalism and globalization (given, for example, Smith's criticisms of joint-stock companies—in some ways the ancestors of modern corporations—and state interference in trade), nor whether twentieth-century liberals such as the figures associated with the Mont Pelerin Society would endorse the dominant political and economic institutions of the West today as straightforwardly 'liberal.'

Pabst's characterization of post-Cold War globalization as liberal—and his suggestion that it is one of the "forces of dispossession" unleashed by liberalism, as much an expression of liberalism as the 'market-state'—is particularly frustrating in this respect, since it requires (with little argumentation in its support) that readers take the world order of the last thirty years, dependent on the American military's global hegemony, a complex network of international institutions organizing flows of goods, capital and persons, and the power of large multi-national corporations, all as 'liberal,' despite the objections to each of these pillars of the contemporary world order that could be made on liberal grounds. Indeed, contemporary globalization seems best understood as reliant on collaborations of market and state, along with 'intermediary institutions' such as the World Trade Organization and multi-national corporations, that resist identification with classical liberal orthodoxies about, for example, free trade. That may be a ground from which to challenge globalization from a liberal point of view, or, conversely, an empirical challenge to the analytical value of the liberal perspective. But in either case, liberals of various stripes—who could find many reasons from both classical and neoliberal traditions to critique aspects of the post-1989 world order—are unlikely to recognize their ideology in Pabst's description of it as the foundation of both that order and of modernity itself.

Liberals are still less likely to be convinced by the recommendations that Pabst offers for a post-liberal domestic and international order. In Demons, he argues that in order to overcome the atomization and loss

of social cohesion produced by the abstract logic of the market-state, "Western countries require new constitutional settlements that recover the natural link of mixed government with modern traditions of sovereign pluralism and federalism." Pabst imagines that creating more levels of governance, both domestically and internationally, and more centers of sovereignty to distribute power away from national states, will restore something of the associational life that had been secured formerly by 'intermediary institutions.' Pabst notes that the new institutions he envisions will be both "national and supranational," somehow supplementing and going further than the networks of international governance (e.g., the World Bank, World Health Organization, European and African Unions, etc.) that already characterize the contemporary 'liberal' world order (p. 125). Indeed, he hardly acknowledges the ways in which post-1989 economic globalization has been advanced to a great extent through regional organizations that shift governance beyond or outside the nation-state. Critics of globalization, particularly from the right but from the left as well, have often targeted, for example, NAFTA or the EU, as institutions beyond the reach of democratic deliberation at a national level and thus eroding popular sovereignty and historical identities.

Pabst describes the current international order that sustains economic globalization as if it were truly founded on the 'market-state' free of 'intermediary institutions,' ignoring the critical role of such institutions within this order, and taking it as given that the latter can be considered liberal. It is therefore difficult to imagine that his proposed solution of increasing the role of such institutions would necessarily restrain globalization or liberalism. It is even more difficult to accept Pabst's claim that such a shift towards more regional institutions beyond the nation-state will require "a much greater long-term international involvement on the part of traditionally reluctant countries," warning that "the occasional isolationism of the USA and the UK" has retarded the process of "nation- and institution-building" (p. 125).

Pabst presumably is referring to the fact that the Anglo-American alliance has been relatively reticent to participate in 'nation-building' campaigns since the winding down of the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan during the Trump and Biden administrations. In spite of Trump's rhetoric criticizing NATO, NAFTA and other international bodies and agreements, however, his policies hardly amount to "isolationism" comparable to the United States' isolationist era between the World Wars. For that matter, the George W. Bush administration was also critical of many international organizations and treaties during the Iraq War, retaining a distance from bodies such as the International Court of Human Rights. This however in no way made its foreign policy isolationist or skeptical of 'nation-building.' Not only do the questions of nation-building (i.e, foreign policy open to the long-term occupation of foreign countries) and participation in international institutions seem quite distinct from each other in recent American history, but in both cases a range of policy choices seem to be compatible with economic globalization.

In calling for more interventionist foreign policies from the United States and its British ally to shore up international institutions, Pabst seems to envisage not so much a break with the current international order as its perpetuation. This order, although Pabst never acknowledges it, is after all founded not only on nation-states and international markets, but on a range of international institutions promoting co-operation at regional and global scales, and setting the parameters within which markets function. It is isolationism—a retreat from military intervention in the name of 'nation-building' and from participation in international organizations—that, for better or worse, would constitute a break with the current order, however desirable or unpalatable that might be. While Demons makes it clear what Pabst opposes—modernity, liberalism, and globalization—his handle on these concepts seems insecure, and his proposals for reform unclear.

Pabst, like his mentor Milbank and the 'post-liberal' movement of which they are key exponents, has achieved a certain visibility in recent years as a critic of liberalism and to a lesser extent of the current world order. There is in his work a certain power of synthesis, that connects theology and intellectual history via a diverse range of modern thinkers—from illiberal conservatives to heterodox leftists—achieve a vantage from which Pabst can apparently comment with ease on nearly every aspect of politics and economics in the past and present. But his simplistic historical panoramas, idiosyncratic readings of other thinkers, broad condemnations of modernity and vague claims about what must replace it fail to offer much of sub-

stance to readers concerned either to replace or defend the current form of international politics from liberal or illiberal grounds.

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