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The Liberal International Ordering of crisis

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Abstract

This article analyses and critically reflects on how the concept of ‘crisis’ has tended to feature within prominent debates on ‘Crisis of the Liberal International Order’. Within such scholarship, the article argues, the concept of crisis most often functions as a technology of crisis management in itself: rather than disrupting narratives and assumptions of liberal progress and order, invocations of crisis within Liberal International Order scholarship tend to recapitulate those same narratives and assumptions. To make this case, the article undertakes an immanent critique of how crisis has been understood within debates on the Liberal International Order, drawing on wider critical and social theoretic reflections on ‘crisis talk’ as the basis for a more critical engagement. Doing so, it seeks to highlight the ways in which Crisis of the Liberal International Order debates constitute a particular way of understanding the relationship between crisis, liberalism and modernity.

Keywords

crisis, crisis management, Liberal International Order, modernity

‘And so it is left to the United States to lead the way in reclaiming the core premise of the liberal international project: building the international institutions and norms to protect societies from themselves, from one another and from the violent storms of modernity. It is precisely at a moment of global crisis that great debates about world order open up and new possibilities emerge. This is such a moment, and the liberal democracies should regain their self-confidence and prepare for the future. As Virgil has Aeneas say to his shipwrecked companions, “Brace up, and save yourself for better times”’.¹

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‘The concept of crisis, which once had the power to pose unavoidable, harsh and non-negotiable alternatives, has been transformed to fit the uncertainties of whatever might be favoured at a given moment. Such a tendency towards imprecision and vagueness, however, may itself be viewed as the symptom of a historical crisis that cannot as yet be fully gauged. This makes it all the more important for scholars to weigh the concept carefully before adopting it in their own terminology’.²

Introduction

The concept of ‘crisis’ occupies an interesting position within the study of International Relations. Invoked, variously, to denote and signify the failings of efforts to control international armed conflict,³ through varieties of Marxian and Gramscian inspired analysis,⁴ and the subject of efforts to model and understand the dynamics of nuclear or other forms of foreign policy ‘crisis management’,⁵ crisis has by now also been referenced across a much wider spectrum of issues within the study of the international. These range from concerns with cyclical breakdowns of global financial markets and their aftermaths,⁶ to recurrence and resurgence of nationalism as a ‘crisis of world order’, to global pandemics and risks of climatic and ecological catastrophe.⁷ Yet, while familiar, the concept of crisis itself deserves further consideration, not least owing to its occurrence and recurrence within such literatures. Several major contributions have previously moved in this general direction, with some seeking to reflect on how concepts of crisis frame, bound, and thus specify and delimit international policy problems.⁸ Others reflect in depth on how crisis might relate to understandings of historical time within the discipline of International Relations (IR), moving to questions and issues of disciplinarity itself.⁹ Multiple thematic journal issues and collections have also centred on issue-specific considerations of crisis.¹⁰ Predominantly, though, it might be ventured that IR has tended to follow rather than critically reflect on the saturation of modern media and political discourse with references to ‘crisis’ and ‘crises’, and even some of those accounts that seek to analyse the complexities of converging crises often tend to take the meaning and status of crisis as self-evident.¹¹

Recurrence of the concept of crisis is itself worthy of further critical reflection precisely for those reasons. It might prompt questions and considerations of what crisis ‘is’ and what it is for, and, crucially, what the concept of crisis does: insofar as crisis is usually associated with and defined in terms of the disruption of the order of things past and the shape of things to come,¹² its usage, application and assumed implications potentially have much to tell us about implicit expectations for the way ‘things should be’. ‘[O]ne cannot fail to notice’, as Richard K. Ashley and R.B.J. Walker argue in direct relation to the discipline of IR, ‘that remembrances of a “pre-crisis past” are very much a part of the disputed terrain of the crisis of today’.¹³ It is in this spirit that this article seeks to develop its own immanent critique of crisis in IR,¹⁴ with a specific focus on ‘Crisis of the Liberal International Order’ scholarship. The latter, as is discussed in more detail below, has come to be prominent within the study of IR (as well as bleeding into and in from political discourse more broadly),¹⁵ with some even going so far as to suggest that the ‘crisis of liberal order’ is ‘in many ways the fundamental problem for international theory’.¹⁶

While that contention in itself warrants further consideration – as pursued later in the article – ‘crisis’ has indeed come to be a ‘leitmotif’¹⁷ of recent debates on the ‘Liberal International Order’ and a minimally shared reference point for its critics and defenders alike in what has, by now, come to be an extensive range of literature.¹⁸ Much intellectual energy has consequently been poured into determining the causes and extent of this crisis and, in tandem, the parameters and nature of ‘Liberal International Order’. Rather than seeking to determine what *the* ‘Crisis of the Liberal International Order’ *is* as an extension of those debates, though, in line with the ethos outlined above the account below seeks to offer an immanent critique of those debates by focusing on what the concept of crisis *does* within those debates. Within such scholarship, this article argues, the concept of crisis most often does the work of functioning as a technology of crisis management in itself: rather than disrupting narratives and assumptions of liberal progress and order, invocations of crisis within Crisis of the Liberal International Order scholarship more often tend towards recapitulating those same narratives and assumptions. To make this case, the article moves first to an overview of how crisis has commonly been understood within debates and scholarship on the Liberal International Order. Turning next to consideration of wider critical and social theoretic reflections on ‘crisis talk’, the article then sets out a more critical analytical mode of considering the concept of crisis; that as the basis for a more critical engagement with how crisis has been understood within what the article terms, for shorthand, as ‘CLIO’ (Crisis of the Liberal International Order) scholarship in the proceeding sections. In a mode of immanent critique, understood broadly as a form of internalist strategy of interrogating the ‘background normative assumptions’ of theories and worldviews in their own terms,¹⁹ the article then specifically seeks to drill down into the understandings of crisis articulated and propounded in the work of G. John Ikenberry as one of the most prominent voices in CLIO debates and scholarship.

Ikenberry’s work is, of course, but one example among a multitude of contributions that move in potentially different directions: it is particularly noteworthy, though, not just for its prominence within CLIO debates but also for Ikenberry’s further specification, as discussed later, of the crisis of Liberal International Order as being a ‘Polanyi crisis’ as distinct from an ‘E.H. Carr crisis’. ‘Crisis’ thus has a very particular meaning for Ikenberry, but – the article seeks to demonstrate – it also plays a very particular function in relation to his conception of (Liberal International) order: namely to articulate, re-establish and re-value the assumed value and values of Liberal International Order. Though particularly evident in Ikenberry’s thinking, this conception of crisis is, so the article argues, representative of a wider tendency within CLIO debates and scholarship more generally, and amounts to what the article terms as the ‘Liberal International Ordering of Crisis’. This constitutes a particular and potentially troubling, in a normative sense, way of understanding the relationship between crisis, liberalism and the meaning of (European) modernity. E.H. Carr’s work, specifically *The Twenty Years’ Crisis*, is instructive in this respect as it arguably contends with similar themes, and, as is argued below, is in that sense closer to more recent work that engages in the Liberal International Ordering of Crisis than Ikenberry suggests. Like Clio, the namesake goddess of Greek mythology, CLIO scholars thus assume the role of muse of history, in which the ‘. . . the severity of the perceived crisis of the contemporary order rests on the assumption that

liberal industrial democracies are the creators, protagonists, and sustaining pillars of the world order'.²⁰ The Liberal International Ordering of Crisis thus excludes conceptions of crisis that have envisaged 'the world' very differently for some time. For example, understandings of the 'lived experience of crisis' not as epochal or era-defining but as consisting in recurring and everyday encounters of urban life in Cameroon in the mid-1990s as defined by '[. . .] acute economic depression, the chain of upheavals and tribulations, instabilities, fluctuations and ruptures of all sorts (wars, genocide, large-scale movements of populations, sudden devaluations of currencies, natural catastrophes, brutal collapses of prices, breaches in provisioning, diverse forms of exaction, coercion and constraint) that make up the fundamental experiences of African societies over the last several years'.²¹ In such accounts, attempts to diagnose, recover or escape from crisis appear in a radically different light to those that tend to be directly encountered within the CLIO debates, and in terms that have largely tended to be absent from that discussion, not least in those accounts that tend to present 'international order' primarily as the 'broadening' of the European space over time.²² More generally, then, immanent critique of CLIO scholarship and its assumptions might alert us to the 'worlds' not seen from within that framing of crisis, and to the politics of the Liberal International Ordering of crisis.

Crisis and the Liberal International Order

In scholarship on the 'LIO' (as Liberal International Order is sometimes abbreviated), we are informed, often with seemingly ever-increasing degrees of certainty as that literature has accumulated over time, that 'The liberal world order is collapsing'.²³ Where, once, 'At the end of the last century, the prevailing conviction was that globalization had guaranteed the triumph of Western-style democracies', and '[t]here was confidence that the Liberal International Order (LIO) was here to stay even in the event of US decline', Adler-Nissen and Zarakol argue, 'In the second half of the last decade, that optimism has been replaced by concern or even pessimism about the LIO's durability'.²⁴ As set out above, among multiple invocations of the concept of crisis within IR, it has prominently featured in debates on the 'crisis of the liberal international order'.²⁵

Furthermore, as Flockhart intimates such exercises in prognosis often become reflective in nature, prompting further consideration of what Liberal International Order 'is', whether it exists and can be defined in the singular, and what aspects of it are either likely to be 'resilient' and persist, or should actively be preserved (or altered).²⁶ While the fine points of these points of contention have been intensely debated within what might be referred to more specifically as 'CLIO' (*Crisis* of the Liberal International Order) scholarship, there is nevertheless a preponderant sense that the crisis diagnosis is relevant. In CLIO scholarship, crisis is, ostensibly at least, the condition that is unsettling for and disruptive of (liberal) international order. As Babic argues by way of critique from a Gramscian perspective, the crisis of Liberal International Order is, in turn, most commonly seen to arise out of an accumulation and cascading of multiple crises plural: 'The near-collapse of the global financial system in 2008; the emergence of "statist" economies (especially the BRIC(S) states) as a counter-model; the rise of right-wing movements across Europe and the United States since the crisis; the Brexit vote and Trump's

election in 2016 - these are just the most obvious signs'.²⁷ For G. John Ikenberry, the Coronavirus pandemic and the international response to it, likewise, should be viewed as a both contributing to and indicative of the Crisis of the Liberal International Order: 'When future historians think of the moment that marked the end of the liberal world order, they may point to the spring of 2020 – the moment when the United States and its allies, facing the gravest public health threat and economic catastrophe of the postwar era, could not even agree on a simple communiqué of common cause'.²⁸ Yet, Ikenberry goes on to note, 'the chaos of the coronavirus pandemic engulfing the world these days is only exposing and accelerating what was already happening for years. On public health, trade, human rights and the environment, governments seem to have lost faith in the value of working together. Not since the 1930s has the world been this bereft of even the most rudimentary forms of cooperation'.²⁹ In that sense, the crisis of the Liberal International Order is seen to be related to but also run deeper than individual leaders, administrations or events. Robert Kagan, writing on the 'twilight of the liberal world order', goes along similar lines when he contends that 'The liberal world order established in the aftermath of World War II may be coming to an end, challenged by forces both without and within', speculating further that 'This crisis of the enlightenment project may have been inevitable. It may indeed have been cyclical, due to inherent flaws in both capitalism and democracy, which periodically have been exposed and have raised doubts about both—as happened, for instance, throughout the West in the 1930s. Now, as then, moreover, this crisis of confidence in liberalism coincides with a breakdown of the strategic order'.³⁰

With such suppositions most frequently as a starting point of further consideration, CLIO debates then move on to try and provide prognoses for the liberal international order: with some predicting that 'although America's hegemonic position may be declining, the liberal international characteristics of order – openness, rules, multilateral cooperation – are deeply rooted and likely to persist'³¹ and that the LIO can and will 'survive' crisis³²; and others welcoming the crisis as 'an opportunity to reaffirm, redefine, and broaden' international ethics in contrast to the 'system of universal morality associated with the liberal order (also known as liberal hegemony). . . [that] was underpinned by the power and interests of the leading Western nations and gave scant recognition to the ethical and moral claims and contributions of other cultures and civilizations'.³³ Still others, returning their central focus to implications for American power and strategic interests, contend that the crisis is more a case of a death foretold of an international order that 'contained the seeds of its own destruction'³⁴ and in which 'Liberalism' was always itself a 'source of trouble', not least within American foreign policy itself.³⁵ With 'little [that] can be done to repair and rescue' the Liberal International Order as ' . . . a failed enterprise with no future', John J. Mearsheimer argues, now is instead an opportune moment at which American policy makers can and should set about planning for the future ' . . . realist orders that must be fashioned to serve the United States' interests'.³⁶

Diagnosing crisis

Of course, the CLIO debates as outlined above are precisely that: debates, and debates in which not all commentators are as convinced that the term 'crisis' applies. As the

editors of a recent *International Organization* special issue on 'Challenges to the Liberal Order: International Organization at 75' comment, 'This is not the first time the postwar LIO has faced difficulties, of course. Like Mark Twain's death, rumors of the demise of the LIO have been greatly exaggerated. The LIO has proven resilient in the past, and it may prove to be so once more'. Yet, they immediately concede, '. . .the combination of internal and external challenges suggests that this time might be different'.³⁷ As if reflecting the qualified nature of that characterisation, some contributors to the same special issue, refer not to crisis but instead to the LIO being 'under pressure' amid a '. . .tide of current contestation'³⁸; others are more certain in their assertions that 'The Liberal International Order is in Crisis',³⁹ and in their identification of 'the current crisis of liberal order'.⁴⁰

Points of agreement and disagreement aside, it is certainly true to say that there has been a 'rapidly proliferating literature on the subject'⁴¹ of crisis in the Liberal International Order. In some ways this might be considered as not especially surprising. Crisis in relation to liberalism and liberal order is an already established theme in the study of International Relations that pre-dates more recent treatment,⁴² and while such considerations usually come with a corresponding sense of 'alarm'⁴³ the use of the term crisis in such debates is by now relatively familiar and so even alarm does not necessarily correspond to shock or surprise.

In this respect, CLIO debates are arguably very much in keeping with trends towards seemingly ever-increasing applications and invocations of the concept of crisis at a wider level of discourse. 'Crisis' appears and recurs so frequently in modern social and political discourse that for some ubiquity is by now the concept's primary feature of note. The 'everyday reporting of crisis', Joseph Masco contends, 'proliferates across subjects, spaces and temporalities today and is an ever-amplifying media refrain'.⁴⁴ In some media narratives and circuits, that claim would seem to have a good degree of traction. The outbreak of COVID-19/Coronavirus is but one of the most recent examples, characterised as a crisis in its own right,⁴⁵ but also seen as generating and exacerbating crises in health,⁴⁶ educational⁴⁷ and economic⁴⁸ systems and infrastructures to name but a few. Nor does the 'COVID crisis' exist in isolation: prior to and concurrent with it, 'Climate crisis' has come to be an established part of both media and academic lexicons, while some go even further in arguing that it is the intersection of pandemic, climatic and the continuing legacies of global financial crisis that, cumulatively, constitute *the* crisis of modern political life as a 'Great Implosion'.⁴⁹ Add in any number of geographically specified crises of varying perceived duration – Ukraine,⁵⁰ Hong Kong,⁵¹ Syria,⁵² Yemen,⁵³ Democratic Republic of the Congo⁵⁴ – and any number of issues – displaced people,⁵⁵ peacekeeping,⁵⁶ institutions,⁵⁷ world order⁵⁸ – and it becomes plausible to argue that as a seemingly 'omnipresent sign',⁵⁹ with its usage 'inflated' by modern mass media,⁶⁰ 'crisis' has become 'overwhelming'.⁶¹

This latter tendency has even led some to become radically circumspect of the term itself, with crisis seen as becoming ever more 'vague' over time the more widely it is used, leading in turn to a dilution of conceptual coherence and to diminishing significance of crisis as a term of 'revolutionary' import.⁶² Within critical anthropological scholarship on crisis this has consequently given rise to what might be characterised as a hermeneutic of suspicion towards 'crisis talk'.⁶³ Insofar as 'Crisis is, in the first instance,

an affect-generating idiom, one that seeks to mobilize radical engagement to foment collective attention and action' proliferating employment of the term has the counterintuitive impact of creating a 'crisis in crisis' as a 'new political modality that can experience repeated failure as well as totalizing external danger without generating the need for structural change'.⁶⁴ It may be, such accounts seem to suggest, that a degree of 'crisis-fatigue' sets in as the recurrence of the concept generates a kind of numbness and detachment through familiarity rather than acting as mobilising idiom. "'Crisis," in other words', in Joseph Masco's view, 'has become a counterrevolutionary force in the twenty-first century, a call to confront collective endangerment that instead increasingly articulates the very limits of the political'.⁶⁵ These thoughts in turn cross reference and resonate with Janet Roitman's conception of *Anti-Crisis*. Roitman argues that 'when crisis is posited as the very condition of contemporary situations, certain questions become possible while others are foreclosed'.⁶⁶ Providing a richly detailed meditation on crisis and its multiple uses and usages over time, Roitman's account is possibly best described as being not just concerned with but concerned *by* the concept. In a practical sense relative to contemporary times, there is, Roitman warns, a '*politics of crisis*' that critical scholars should be particularly attuned to. Narrative designations of crisis, or crises plural, are necessarily spoken from somewhere and privilege certain interests, understandings and worldviews over others.⁶⁷

Roitman's analysis in particular leads to consequential implications, not least given the often assumed relation between 'crisis' and 'critique' within Western political and Enlightenment thought. As has been argued most notably by the preeminent historian and theorist of crisis, Reinhart Koselleck, the concepts of critique and crisis not only share etymological roots in the Greek verb *krinen* – 'to "separate" (part, divorce), to "choose," to "judge," to "decide"' – but also have been indelibly interrelated in, most notably, the emergence of European Enlightenment thought amidst conditions of violent revolutions and social upheaval.⁶⁸ In keeping with Koselleck's appraisal of 'critique and crisis' [*Kritik und Krise*] as being, characteristically, *the* Enlightenment 'pathogenesis of modern society' [*Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt*] – where pathogenesis is commonly taken to denote the manner or development of a disease – Roitman at several points in *Anti-Crisis* wonders if it might not be wise to seek to disconnect any assumed linkage between crisis and critical thought. Crisis, Koselleck arguably set out to demonstrate by cataloguing the concept's multiple invocations and iterations over centuries of European thought, offers a concept of history – a 'super concept' (*Oberbegriff*), as used in the 19th century in particular to 'analyse the challenges of a century'.⁶⁹ However, Koselleck posited, 'From the nineteenth century on, there has been an enormous quantitative expansion in the variety of meanings attached to the concept of crisis, but few corresponding gains in either clarity or precision'. In the process, Koselleck might be read as suggesting, something has been 'lost' in contemporary usages of the concept of crisis: the concept loses its 'power' to 'pose unavoidable, harsh and non-negotiable alternatives'.⁷⁰ Modernity, the self-image of which is often conceived as being synchronised with historical progress, Koselleck seems to contend, is thus instead *the* time of crisis, with the concept persistently and consistently invoked. Drawing on Koselleck, Jordheim and Wigen thus suggest the provocative contention relative to IR as to whether it might not be the case that '*progress* is in the process of being replaced by

the concept of *crisis* as the main tool for synchronising temporalities in international society'.⁷¹

In short, the accounts above suggest, crisis is seemingly ever-present and usage of the term ever-proliferating, but invocations of and actions taken in response to crisis are not necessarily progressive – in fact they may be the very opposite. In turn a consequent scepticism arises towards any assumptions of a necessarily dialectical relationship between crisis and 'progress'⁷²: whether articulated in the context of the grand narratives of Liberal,⁷³ and, even more pronounced, Marxian philosophies of history⁷⁴; or in the repetition to the point of banality of versions of the phrase (frequently attributed to Albert Einstein, and beloved of motivational speakers) that 'In the midst of every crisis, lies great opportunity'⁷⁵; or those that alternatively note, sometimes via citations to John F. Kennedy, that the Chinese word for crisis is composed of two characters, one signifying 'danger' the other 'opportunity'.⁷⁶

And yet this scholarship on crisis, even when – and perhaps particularly when – it exhibits scepticism of and suspicion towards the concept, for this very reason directs us towards the potential importance of researching the *politics* of crisis. Relative to the multiple invocations and iterations of crisis within debates on Liberal International Order, as examined in greater detail in the proceeding sections, the substance of Roitman's anti-crisis approach may be particularly worth noting in its contention that '... crisis is not a condition to be observed (loss of meaning, alienation, faulty knowledge); it is an observation that produces meaning. More precisely, it is a distinction that secures "a world" for observation [...] when crisis is posited. ... what are at stake are not only possible stories about the world, but also worlds'.⁷⁷ What world or worlds plural, it might be asked, are being 'secured for observation' when it is claimed, for example, that the Liberal International Order is in crisis? In this respect, then, we might heed Koselleck's call to 'weigh the concept' of crisis 'carefully', but we might do so in ways that poses questions that are critically reflexive rather than privileging or seeking a return to pre-modern, classical or simply less 'vague' meanings and understandings of the concept and instead seek to analyse the work that concepts of crisis do within IR. The crisis that Koselleck sought to diagnose in modern thought, for example, was explicitly delimited as a European crisis to the extent that it was taken as self-evident by the 1980s that 'From an historical point of view the present tension between two superpowers, the USA and the USSR, is a result of European history. Europe's history has broadened'⁷⁸; and it is notable that at least some more recent efforts to revive Koselleck's conceptual history approach are, Niklas Olsen notes, still predominantly focused on 'the European space'.⁷⁹ To what extent, a more critical conceptual history might ask, do concepts of crisis in IR risk limiting the imagination of political life and life-worlds to those of a liberal European modernity that is either to be salvaged or escaped from?

Words on crisis, worlds in crisis: between E.H. Carr and Karl Polanyi

At first glance, and following on from the above, CLIO scholarship might seem to be simply another manifestation of proliferating 'crisis talk', with the concept itself used frequently but with little sustained reflection. Thus Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Hofmann

complain that, more generally, ‘The contemporary global order is widely said to be in crisis. But [. . .] there is surprisingly little clarity about what the crisis consists of, or what precisely is under threat’.⁸⁰ Yet, while that characterisation might have some purchase, a significant subset of CLIO scholarship, in alignment with Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Hofmann, does treat crisis as an opportunity to reflect on the nature of Liberal International Order itself.⁸¹ It is in this sense, for example, that we might understand the diagnosis of crisis provided by G. John Ikenberry, whose work constitutes arguably the pre-eminent reference point in CLIO debates within IR, in which considerations of crisis have consistently recurred over time.⁸² In contrast to Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Hofmann’s characterisation, Ikenberry also provides further consideration as to what ‘the crisis’ consists of. Seeking to specify in this respect – and in ways that in turn link to historical debates on crisis in IR and social theory more broadly – he contends that ‘. . .the troubles [of the Liberal International Order] today might be seen as a “Polanyi crisis” – growing turmoil and instability resulting from the rapid mobilization and spread of global capitalism, market society and complex interdependence, all of which has overrun the political foundations that supported its birth and early development’. Crisis as in the sense of Karl Polanyi’s (1957) *The Great Transformation*, Ikenberry tells us in the same passage, is a more accurate characterisation of the contemporary context than ‘. . .what might be called an “E.H. Carr crisis”, wherein liberal internationalism fails because of the return of Great Power politics and the problems of anarchy’.⁸³

Though a relatively brief part of the architecture of his thoughts on the question, self-posed, of ‘the end of the liberal international order?’, Ikenberry’s distinction between ‘Polanyi crisis’ and ‘E.H. Carr crisis’ arguably has much to tell us. In one and the same move, Ikenberry cites and dismisses an oft-cited work from the anglophone ‘canon’ of IR theory – Carr’s *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919–1939*, published originally with the subtitle of *An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*. Indirectly the citation alludes to and assumes of Ikenberry’s readers the abiding familiarity of Carr’s thinking on crisis as a touchstone within the study of the international. But Ikenberry moves swiftly on from Carr, on the basis that the contemporary crisis is ‘Polanyian’ – crisis has arisen not because of ‘. . .a return of geopolitical conflict, although conflicts with China and Russia are real and dangerous’ but because ‘. . .the liberal international order has succeeded all too well. It has helped usher in a world that has outgrown its political moorings’.⁸⁴ Carr, Ikenberry seems to tell us, offers a guide to crisis of a sort, but one which offers no real guidance at all to the contemporary context of international relations. Noteworthy too is that fact that Ikenberry’s understanding of – and distinction between – ‘Polanyi crisis’ and ‘E.H. Carr crisis’ has been used in his work prior to those reflections on crisis in the Liberal International Order after the global spread of the coronavirus (or, as Ikenberry terms it, ‘The Age of Contagion’).⁸⁵ The very same distinction had already been set out several years prior in his (2012) work *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis and Transformation of the American World Order*: ‘Today, the crisis of liberal international order is more of a “Karl Polanyi moment” [. . .] In effect, this is not an “E. H. Carr moment”—that is, a moment when realists can step forward and say that liberal idealists had it all wrong and that the return of anarchy and war reveals the enduring truths of world politics as a struggle for power and advantage’.⁸⁶

Ikenberry's rendering and rejection of the applicability of an 'E.H. Carr crisis' as a diagnosis in itself is worth considering in terms of the politics of crisis within IR. Carr's work – not just *The Twenty Years' Crisis* but his broader body of work – is of course subject to multiple and sometimes conflicting interpretations as an extensive secondary literature attests to,⁸⁷ and Ikenberry's shorthand 'E.H. Carr crisis' can be argued to align with at least some of those interpretations. Alternative readings of Carr – and, more specifically, of how Carr conceptualised crisis – are possible though. Michael Cox, for example, suggests that Carr's theorisation of IR can be considered as centring precisely on developing a critical account of 'the crisis of Twentieth Century Liberalism' as Carr saw it.⁸⁸ For Cox that theme is evident in Carr's earliest writings and then came to be to the fore in *The Twenty Years' Crisis*. Re-read along these lines and with a more critical eye on how crisis is understood within the text and the functions it seems to play, *The Twenty Years' Crisis* is interesting not just in terms of how it invokes and perpetuates the 'crisis talk' of interwar political commentaries that it often engages with, but also in terms of how Carr might be argued to diagnose and presage a wider crisis not simply of liberal internationalism or even liberal international order, but of liberal modernity itself.⁸⁹ On one level *The Twenty Years' Crisis* does serve as a reflection on a series of crisis events, explicitly denoted as such, in the interwar period: the Manchurian crisis; the Czecho-Slovak [sic] crisis; the 'economic crisis of 1930-1933'; the Abyssinian crisis; the Ruhr crisis; the Panama crisis; the 'rearmament crisis of 1939'.⁹⁰ These pepper Carr's narrative, invoked without further questioning of the framing of these events as crises and their wider characterisation as such. Their presentation and discussion can thus be said to fit with what Koselleck regards as the tendency clearly emergent by the 20th century in both 'political science' and common parlance to use the term crisis 'interchangeably with "unrest," "conflict," "revolution," and to describe vaguely disturbing moods or situations', where 'Every one of such uses is ambivalent'.⁹¹

At other times, though, *The Twenty Year's Crisis* does also seem to adopt a less 'ambivalent' engagement with the concept of crisis. Indeed, Carr is explicit in this respect, and in ways that clearly suggests the theme of crisis in *The Twenty Years' Crisis* amounts to more than just references to and invocation of crisis as simply a catchword of contemporaneous political discourse. The original animating rationale for the text and its arguments, Carr tells us, was that though there had been '[m]any excellent historical and descriptive works about various aspects of international relations', none had 'attempted to analyse the profounder causes of the contemporary international crisis'.⁹² Referring in this respect to *the* modern international crisis in the singular, a crucial underpinning of the intellectual architecture of *The Twenty Years' Crisis* was the contention that the '... implications of the opposition between utopia and reality will emerge clearly from a more detailed study of the modern crisis in international politics'.⁹³ The 'real international crisis of the modern world', as Carr would go on to term it, was a crisis of liberal international ordering arising out of the fundamental incompatibility of 19th century liberalism (as Carr perceived it) with the world of the 20th century.⁹⁴ As developed more fully across Part Two of the book, devoted specifically to 'The International Crisis',⁹⁵ Carr's 'critique of liberalism'⁹⁶ is articulated and reasoned not simply as a crisis of liberal internationalism and attempted institution-building of the interwar years in projects such

as the League of Nations, but as a crisis of longer duration in which the liberal ‘utopian’ assumption of a ‘harmony of interests’ was revealed to be patently inadequate:

The hollowness of the glib nineteenth-century platitude that nobody can benefit from what harms another was revealed. The basic presupposition of utopianism had broken down. [. . .] What confronts us in international politics to-day is, therefore, nothing less than the complete bankruptcy of the conception of morality which has dominated political and economic thought for a century and a half. [. . .] The present generation will have to rebuild from the foundations. But before we can do this, before we can ascertain what can be salvaged from the ruins, we must examine the flaws in the structure which led to its collapse; and we can best do this by analysing the realist critique of the utopian assumptions.⁹⁷

The Carr of the *Twenty Years’ Crisis* can thus be considered as setting out a perspective that is avowedly ‘anti-liberal’,⁹⁸ but still, as Seán Molloy argues, ‘progressivist’.⁹⁹ In this sense, Molloy contends, citing Friedrich Kratochwil, that characteristic of Carr’s progressive pragmatism more generally is a willingness to embrace ‘. . .the opportunity that crisis provides to “formulate new questions that could not even be asked previously”’, and to recognise that ‘in times of “revolutionary change the bounds of sense are being redrawn”’.¹⁰⁰

Liberal International Ordering as crisis management

Read as above, the conception of crisis mobilised by Carr in *The Twenty Years’ Crisis* may encompass but simultaneously seems much more than the type of ‘E.H. Carr crisis’ – ‘wherein liberal internationalism fails because of the return of Great Power politics and the problems of anarchy’ – that Ikenberry seeks to distinguish the current ‘Polanyian’ crisis of the Liberal International Order from.¹⁰¹ For Molloy, by way of contrast to Ikenberry, rather than simply being a theorist of problems and crises arising out of international anarchy and an archetypal exponent of power politics, Carr develops a more complex account of crisis that consequently bears closer resemblance to the critical theory of Max Horkheimer than to contemporary IR realist thinking: ‘Horkheimer’s key move, the exposure of the exhaustion and inversion of elements of the enlightenment and liberal ideology, is paralleled in Carr’s work by his unmasking of the outdatedness of the nineteenth-century principles that underpinned the liberal settlement of 1919’.¹⁰² The ‘modern international crisis’ thus had, arguably, an ‘inner meaning’ that for Carr raised much more profound and fundamental questions about the compatibility of ‘liberalism’ and ‘internationalism’. In this sense Carr’s thinking might even be seen as a precursor to contemporary CLIO debates, part of a wider literature on the thematic of ‘liberal internationalism in crisis’,¹⁰³ and it is in this light that we might also view recent adoptions and adaptations of the *Twenty Years’ Crisis* framing within critiques of post-Cold War liberal peace- and order-building.¹⁰⁴

Approached in this way the ‘inner meaning’ of crisis for Carr also begins to potentially look a lot more ‘Polanyian’ than Ikenberry’s distinction between ‘moments’ of ‘E.H. Carr crisis’ and ‘Polanyi crisis’ suggests. Contra Ikenberry, others have made the case for ‘remarkable congruence’ between Carr and Polanyi’s thinking.¹⁰⁵ Whether or

not Ikenberry ‘gets’ Carr or Polanyi ‘right’ on crisis, though, following Roitman’s contention that crisis is a concept that ‘. . . secures “a world” for observation’,¹⁰⁶ we might begin to probe in more depth the question of what kind of world is envisaged as being ‘ruined’ or ‘salvaged’ when Liberal International Order is conceived as being in crisis on these terms. Ikenberry’s distinction is explicitly purposive in this respect:

Regardless of the validity of Carr’s claims, today’s crisis is not a crisis of the sort he identified. Today’s problems cannot be explained or solved by a return to realist thinking and action. Today, the crisis of liberal international order is more of a “Karl Polanyi moment”—that is, the liberal governance system is troubled because of dilemmas and long-term shifts in that order that can only be solved by rethinking, rebuilding, and extending it. Polanyi understood the problems of the nineteenth century Western order in these terms. Indeed, he saw deeper contradictions and problems in the organization of market society than exist today. What is similar about the two eras, as Polanyi would no doubt argue, is the way in which the geopolitical and institutional foundations that facilitated an open system of markets and societal exchange outgrew and overran those foundations, triggering instabilities and conflict. In other words, liberal order has generated the seeds of its own unmaking, which can be averted only by more liberal order – reformed, updated, and outfitted with a new foundation.¹⁰⁷

As a ‘Polanyi crisis’, then, and ‘amidst this great transformation’, Ikenberry argues, ‘. . . it is important to untangle what precisely is in crisis and what is not’.¹⁰⁸ In the process of this untangling, Ikenberry further clarifies that for all his many invocations of the concept of crisis, ‘My claim is that it is a crisis of authority— a struggle over how liberal order should be governed, not a crisis over the underlying principles of liberal international order, defined as an open and loosely rule-based system. That is, what is in dispute is how aspects of liberal order – sovereignty, institutions, participation, roles and responsibilities – are to be allocated, but all within the order rather than in its wake’.¹⁰⁹

Ikenberry might thus be argued to be the key exponent of what might be termed as the Liberal International Ordering *of* crisis, which consists precisely in invoking crisis not as a motor or harbinger of radical change, but instead as a spur to managed transformation of the Liberal Order. Though particularly evident there, that pattern of argumentation is not restricted or unique to Ikenberry’s work. Koivisto and Dunne, for example, have argued that ‘liberal order’s crisis should be read as a crisis narrative that has a sociological and political function, not least in defining the response in terms of the renewal and re-envisaging of inter-governmental institutional arrangements. In making this move, we open up space for understanding the role and function of those aspects of liberal orders that are considered not to be in crisis’.¹¹⁰ Cooley and Nexon concur with Ikenberry’s conception of a great transformation, arguing that ‘We are [. . .] looking not at the end of liberal order, but at a third great transformation in it’; while Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Hofmann conclude that ‘What we are currently witnessing, we suggest, may not be the impending crisis and collapse of the global order, but rather its ongoing transformation from within’.¹¹¹

Indeed, many accounts of the contemporary crisis of Liberal International Order, rather than posing a stark choice between ‘unavoidable, harsh and non-negotiable alternatives’,¹¹² suggest that, at the very least, out of crisis significant remnants of the Liberal International Order can, should, and will live on for the foreseeable future. Ikenberry

characteristically contends that ‘although America’s hegemonic position may be declining, the liberal international characteristics of order - openness, rules, multilateral cooperation - are deeply rooted and likely to persist’, and that by consequence a ‘dramatic moment when the old order is overturned and rising states step forward to build a new one’ is ‘very unlikely’.¹¹³ Trine Flockhart, drawing on ‘resilience thinking’ suggests that the ‘future of the liberal order is by no means certain’, but that if its key ‘agents’, in a more reflexive mode, seek to develop a ‘...clearer understanding of each of its elements and why those who should act on its behalf sometimes are unable to do so, there is still a chance for a managed transformation into a new, smaller, leaner and resilient liberal international order’, even if this will in turn ‘...necessitate acceptance that the liberal international order will not be a universal order with global reach but is more likely to be just one of several orders, each with their own conception of the “good life”’.¹¹⁴ Invoking the Gramscian terminology of ‘organic crisis’ and ‘morbidity’ to characterise such arguments in a less benign light, Milan Babic diagnoses the condition of the contemporary Liberal International Order as being one of a ‘dying order’ that has yet to be superseded and consequently lingers. This, he argues, is captured precisely by Gramsci’s conception of ‘the interregnum’ as distilled in his oft-cited contention that ‘The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear’.¹¹⁵

CLIO debates can thus be argued to frequently preserve the fundamental parameters of the contemporary Liberal International Order. Perhaps most interestingly in this light, Ikenberry specifically suggests that the ‘crisis of the liberal international order’ may be perceived and interpreted somewhat differently if the ‘long view’ is taken where, ‘[. . .] it might be useful to think about liberal international order the way John Dewey thought about democracy – as a framework for coping with the inevitable problems of modern society’.¹¹⁶ On this view, Ikenberry’s account suggests, as opposed to being in crisis, the ‘liberal international project’ might be viewed as an inherently adaptive form of crisis management: rather than being a ‘blueprint for an ideal world order’ it is instead, he argues, ‘a methodology or machinery for responding to the dangers of modernity’, one that has ‘travelled from the eighteenth century to our own time through repeated crises, upheavals, disasters and breakdown – almost all of them worse than those appearing today’.¹¹⁷ Liberal International Order, Ikenberry suggests, is no stranger to crisis. Instead Ikenberry precisely seeks to connect the ‘liberal international project’ to crisis and modernity, with liberal internationalism conceived of as way of managing not simply international anarchy but also the ‘problems of modernity’.¹¹⁸ Crisis in the liberal international order thus seems for Ikenberry to have an ultimately redeeming and preservative effect: the occurrence and assumption of the crisis of the Liberal International Order points, in the end, to the virtue of thinking of liberal internationalism itself more as a ‘framework’ for managing crises. Indeed, ‘What is unique about the postwar liberal order’, we are told, ‘is its capacity for self-correction’.¹¹⁹

Somewhat counterintuitively then, rather than disrupting narratives of liberal progress and order, invocations of crisis within CLIO scholarship more often tend towards recapitulating those same narratives.¹²⁰ Again, while particularly clear in Ikenberry’s work, this is a mode of argumentation that has variations that occur elsewhere too. Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Hofmann, who in essence define ‘global order’ in terms of

‘foundational’ liberal principles of ‘national sovereignty, economic liberalism and inclusive, rule-based multilateralism’ – conceding that ‘Arguably ours is a Western understanding of the contemporary global order, which emphasizes principles of European origin’ – likewise contend that ‘the global order is a dynamic construct in which crises and contestations can occur without undermining the order as such’.¹²¹ Order, and the assumed universality and centrality of liberalism to it, are preserved on this account; reproducing in turn, and critiqued as problematic by scholars such as David Rampton and Suthaharan Nadarajah, both the possibility and efficacy of a distinction between (peaceful) ‘liberal’ and (violent) ‘non-liberal’ worlds.¹²² Such conceptions of crisis and liberalism, some have likewise argued, risk reproducing an ‘Endless recall of the liberal order’ that ends up ‘mythologizing’ the post-World War II period and creating an ‘imagination’ of a world that was always ‘less-than-completely’ liberal: a form of recall that tends to be ‘ahistorical because it is blind to the process of “ordering” the world and erases the memory of violence, coercion, and compromise that also marked postwar diplomatic history’.¹²³ In turn, such conceptions of crisis also risk drawing attention away from substantive considerations of ‘patterns’ and processes of *disordering* within international relations.¹²⁴

Conclusion

Within CLIO debates, then, as discussed and analysed above, critical considerations might pertain to how discussions of crisis in relation to liberalism and the Liberal International Order – often explicitly – delimit their understanding of the world to ‘. . . the great traditions of European liberalism’.¹²⁵ (Re)Turning to the likes of Carr and Polanyi, Ikenberry’s cited archetypes of theorists of crisis, arguably adds substance to, but also perpetuates, such delimitations: think again of Ikenberry’s direct mobilisation of Polanyi to support the diagnosis that the ‘. . . liberal order has generated the seeds of its own unmaking, which can be averted only by more liberal order’.¹²⁶ Not only does this foreclose attempts to read and apply Polanyi’s thinking in critique of institutions of (neo) liberalism and in support of, in stark contrast, ‘emancipatory’ feminist, anti-racist and anti-imperialist activism¹²⁷; it also, for Ikenberry at least, consistently leads to and ends up in reaffirming and valorising the role of the United States as *the* ‘Liberal Leviathan’ at the lead of ‘. . . a last-chance effort to reclaim the two centuries-old liberal international project of building an order that is open, multilateral, and anchored in a coalition of leading liberal democracies’.¹²⁸ This without ever fully considering the possibility that such valorisation might itself constitute part of the ‘. . . politics of hegemonic orders and hegemonic ordering’.¹²⁹

Even accounts that seek to separate any necessary connection between American power and leadership and the perpetuation of Liberal International Order still tend to make arguments along similar lines, such that liberal institutions come to be seen as inherently adaptive, and hence resilient. On this view, even the very notion of *the* ‘Liberal International Order’ is misleading since it ‘. . . creates the impression we are referring to a static entity, rather than mutating and shifting ways of ordering regions and domains of world politics’.¹³⁰ Once again, then, the Liberal International Order’s crisis ‘. . . articulates the very limits of the political’¹³¹ on the presumption that there is, ultimately, no

'exit from liberalism'. Though, Cooley and Nexon, for example, concede that there might be 'new ordering projects' underway led in particular by China and Russia, these at most are argued to offer only 'exits' from 'political liberalism', while economic and institutional liberalism remain predominant.¹³²

In the end we might come back to questions of what work crisis is doing in such debates, and how it orders the world in the process: not least in in terms of how the story of Liberal International Order is told in terms of crisis management, and the alternative conceptions of crisis that those narratives tend to either marginalise or exclude. Insofar as CLIO debates often tend to revolve around – and sometimes be resolved in terms of – the suitability of liberal institutions for managing the 'violent storms of modernity',¹³³ wider and fundamental questions and issues open up as to how modernity is being understood in such conceptions. Those grappling with the implications of the 'crisis of the Anthropocene' for IR, by way of contrast, suggest that in the context of a 'planetary emergency' characterised by existential threats of climate change and species extinction, the underpinnings of modern IR are thrown into crisis precisely because the discipline has so often tended to assume a human/nature separation as both essential to the progress and flourishing of human societies and as a 'boundary condition' of the discipline as a field of knowledge.¹³⁴ The conditions, 'storms', and 'crises' of 'modernity' are understood there in radically different terms. Questions and issues of race and racial hierarchy also tend to be either marginal to or absent from CLIO debates, with the notable exceptions to that highlighting the extent to which practices of Liberal International Ordering have been central to 'embedding' regimes of 'racism and antiracism' in ways that mainstream IR, not just scholarship on Liberal International Order, has been insufficiently attentive to.¹³⁵ When situated in that wider context, and in the event that Crisis of the Liberal International Order debates might have continue to run on and recur, the proposition that the way to manage crisis is 'more liberal order' is at the very least worthy of being weighed up carefully: in terms of how 'crisis' is used to frame the problems of, and solutions assumed to endure within, practices of liberal international ordering.

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Notes

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