

Violence and Liberal Universalism:  
The Work of Joseph Fawcett as a Harbinger of  
Hegelian Understandings of History

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Abstract: What sorts of analytical moves have allowed liberalism and violent intervention to be philosophically co-joined into a form of liberal universalism or imperialism (with the 2003 American invasion of Iraq being a recent manifestation)? In this paper we examine the work of Joseph Fawcett, a late Eighteenth century English minister, whose work represents the earliest stage of the domestic English liberal tradition, and whose explicit concern with matters of peace and war encouraged him to imagine how those values might be projected into an international context. His work both anticipates the goals of later, explicit liberal universalism and foreshadows the paradox of the use of state violence for the achievement of such ends. We examine his work here in order to shed light on the tensions inherent in the belief that state violence is required in order to achieve the triumph of the liberal millennium.

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To begin, we would like to apologize for the differences between the paper we are presenting here today and the one listed in the program. Initially we had thought that concepts such as national identity and insurgency would be more important and that Wordsworth would be the central protagonist in our story. Our original intention was to consider concepts of national identity in connection with the English poet Wordsworth's celebration of popular insurgency. Our feeling was that Wordsworth might provide an instructive counterpoint to more conventional Hegelian understandings of history and liberal universalism. From the start, Joseph Fawcett was intended to be a preliminary part of that larger project. As we engaged with him, however, our appreciation of Fawcett's significance and subtlety grew until he (temporarily, we hope!) elbowed Wordsworth aside and demanded a central place for himself. Fawcett interests us because he represents the earliest stage of the domestic English liberal tradition; his explicit concern with matters of peace and war encouraged him to imagine how those values might be projected into an international context. His work both anticipates the goals of later, explicit liberal universalism and foreshadows the paradox of the use of state violence for the achievement of such ends.

In part, this project was prompted by the neo-conservative espousal of liberal universalism as a justification for America's 2003 pre-emptive invasion, occupation, and subsequent oversight of Iraq. How could such behavior be viewed as legitimate by a liberal democratic society? That is, how can pre-emptive state violence against others who have not attacked you become a legitimate course of action in a philosophical doctrine such as liberalism, which would seem antithetical to such belief and behavior? One part of our larger project examines the domestic cultural processes in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 that helped still dissent, rouse patriotism, and reinforce the conviction that military violence against Iraq was a

natural outcome (a paper we will be presenting at 2008 ISA in San Francisco). In our paper today we are concerned with the philosophical tensions inherent in the espousal of liberal universalism itself, which seems to be a policy endlessly replayed in American foreign policy. The ideas, rhetoric and policies of the neoconservatives are not out of the American norm in this regard, owing a clear debt to Woodrow Wilson's arguments (among others) regarding "benevolent intervention."<sup>i</sup>

The belief that liberalism must naturally go hand-in-hand with a form of aggressive, pre-emptive violence if it is to achieve its universal ends represents only one variant within the tradition of liberalism. "Liberals are ambivalent about intervention," Michael Smith points out, with many arguing that "the best—indeed the only—way to promote institutional reform and to advertise the virtues of freedom is by example."<sup>ii</sup> The elements commonly attributed to liberalism – "the importance of the freedom of the individual,...of moral freedom, of the right to be treated and a duty to treat others as ethical subjects, and not as objects or means only" -- do not suggest that it could be used as a platform from which to espouse and enact such violent pre-emptive and ideologically imposing projects.<sup>iii</sup> Such projects imply a conflation of Christian religious belief and furor that is today considered the antithesis of liberalism, although it certainly was not in liberalism's earliest manifestations. In fact, the idea of crusade was implicit in early liberal rhetoric and was therefore available as a recourse when the supposedly natural process of liberalism's secularized, millennial ascendancy appeared threatened or stalled. Yet most liberal thinkers are more likely to identify with L T. Hobhouse's claim that "it is of the essence of Liberalism to oppose the use of force, the basis of all tyranny."<sup>iv</sup>

Alternatively American neoconservatives are a contemporary manifestation of that strain of liberalism which has promoted the use of coercion as a legitimate and desirable means to

advance the values of liberal democracy on a global scale. “Such liberals as Giuseppe Mazzini, Thomas Paine, or Woodrow Wilson,” have, according to Michael Smith, subscribed to the argument “that liberal states have a responsibility to come to the aid of people struggling for their freedom abroad.”<sup>v</sup> It is important here to analytically distinguish the sort of pre-emptive, ideological violence being recommended by this variant of the liberal tradition from violence for the sake of self-defense. While the latter may also involve philosophical tensions for liberalism, it does not necessarily justify a policy of externally imposing a teleological outcome on others. Hence it does not appear to have the same foreign policy ramifications, in contrast to “benevolent intervention” and particularly when being espoused by the elites of militarily hegemonic nation-states. It is worth (re-)considering, then, what sorts of analytical moves have allowed liberalism and violent intervention to be philosophically co-joined.

Although we cannot possibly hope to give a satisfactory answer to such a complex, historical question, in this paper we examine the work of Joseph Fawcett, a late Eighteenth century English minister, in order to shed light on the tensions inherent in the move itself. That move, we argue, begins with the assumption that liberal ideals, and the possession of reason in particular, can lead to universal peace and will naturally, inevitably, and progressively triumph. Yet this assumption is at odds with historical processes in which reason has been employed for destructive purposes. To resolve this paradox, a further paradox is employed. The secularized, liberal millennium is seen to lie in the immediate future, yet a break with history, involving violent acts by the state, is required to actualize it. Thus to obtain millennial peace, one must embrace and employ apocalyptic acts of state violence. The belief that one is living in the climactic period of liberal history, which requires deeds of violence to obtain a greater good, is a road we have traveled many times before. American neoconservatives believe it today, Francis

Fukuyma believed it after the end of Cold War, Hegel believed it after the French Revolution, and Joseph Fawcett appears to have unwittingly embraced it prior to the French Revolution. As an examination of Fawcett's work suggests, it may also be a road that we always have to traverse in the context of liberal democratic societies.

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The rest of the paper is available upon email request. . . .

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#### NOTES

- <sup>i</sup> Michael Joseph Smith, "Liberalism and International Reform," in *Traditions of International Ethics*, Terry Nardin and David R. Mapel, eds, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 212-215. Michael Doyle points out that Machiavelli's work is representative of this strain within the liberal philosophical tradition, and it is more commonly called "liberal imperialism." Michael W. Doyle, "Liberalism and World Politics Revisited," in *Controversies in International Relations Theory: Realism and the Neoliberal Challenge*, Charles W. Kegley, Jr. (New York, NY: St Martin's press, 1995), 87-88. For analyses of American foreign policy in this context, see Colin Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders: Power, Culture, and Change in American Grand Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press); and Michael Cox, "Empire, Imperialism, and the Bush Doctrine," *Review of International Studies* 30 (2004): 585-608. For two contemporary, contrasting perspectives on the concept of "liberal imperialism," see Linda S. Bishai, "Liberal Empire," *Journal of International Relations and Development*, vol.

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7, no. 1(April 2004): 48-72, and Daniel Green, "Liberal Imperialism as Global-Governance Perspective," in *Contending Perspectives on Global Governance: Coherence, Contestation and World Order*, Alice D. Ba and Matthew J. Hoffmann, eds. (New York, NY: Routledge 2005), pp. 231-248.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid, 212-213. See, for example, Robert O. Keohane, "International Liberalism Reconsidered," in *The Economic Limits to Modern Politics*, John Dunn, ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990), and Mark W. Zacher, and Richard A. Matthew, "Liberal International Theory: Common Threads, Divergent Strands," in *Controversies in International Relations Theory: Realism and the Neoliberal Challenge*, edited by Charles W. Kegley, Jr.,ed. (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1995).

<sup>iii</sup> Michael W. Doyle, "Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 12, no. 3 (Summer, 1983) 206.

<sup>iv</sup> Quoted in Smith, "Liberalism," Ibid, 206.

<sup>v</sup> Smith, "Liberalism," Ibid, 214.