

How can things so old be so new?

A critical analysis of the current debate on the crisis of the liberal international order

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Abstract

How can things so old be so new? The revival of debates on the fate of the liberal international order has reproduced discussions about what arguably are philosophical and theoretical tensions that have existed for a very long time. Taking a point of departure in Reinhart Koselleck's *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society*, this thesis aims to contribute with an understanding of how the contemporary crisis can be understood in the context of deep historical tensions, and the implications for the current debate. To fulfil this aim, I ask the question of how Koselleck's analysis of the structures emerging from modernity can cast light on the tension between modernity and the current crisis of the liberal international order. These structures are used, with an emphasis on the need for historical context and a critical stance towards the attempt to establish universal truths, to analyse selected material from oft cited and prominent scholars of the debate. By analysing their ideas in the light of these structures, I have found that some suggested solutions to these tensions reinforce what creates the tension from the start. Another finding is that the debate, in some ways, is constrained by dichotomies and underlying universal metaphysical principles, which potentially can limit the possibility for potential change. My conclusion is that a continued renewed interest in these historical tensions hopefully can be a pathway to move beyond some of the constraints the current debate revolves around.

Keywords: Liberal International Order, Modernity, Koselleck, Critique, Crisis, Academic debate, Ikenberry, Mearsheimer

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1 Introduction

Recent manifestations of global insecurity and uncertainty have revived debates about the liberal international order, both its character and its future. Rising levels of protectionism, inaction on transnational climate cooperation, democratic backsliding, and an increasing great power conflict point to an international order under pressure.¹ It seems that the emergence of a tougher international environment has led to a weakening of liberal optimism. We are being fed, mostly from realists, with consolations about what the realities and the true nature of the international system are.² Even some of the previously optimistic liberal advocates today show pessimistic and mournful predictions about the future of the liberal international order.

Various liberal and realist thinkers have presented theories on the current crisis of the liberal international order. Debates between idealist and realist theories are often presented in philosophical and conceptual dichotomies. In oppositional form, they argue, among other things, about community against anarchy or ethics against power. There is a sense of how these philosophical positions have been shaped within entrenched historical traditions in the grand opposition between realism and idealism. R. B. J. Walker argues that “As something like a founding myth, this polarity has come to be treated as a relatively unproblematic ground on which major theoretical disputes can be, if not resolved, at least codified and left in peace. Yet this codification... reduces a vast array of complex historical traditions and philosophical positions to a very simple opposition...”³

An underlying but recurring theme in G. John Ikenberry's article *The End of Liberal International Order?* is the impact of modernity on the world order. Ikenberry believes that the liberal order was created to dampen the great forces of modernity. Liberal internationalism was created, according to Ikenberry, as a way of thinking and responding to the possibilities and dangers of modernity. Ikenberry seems to suggest that the liberal order, both in its emergence and in its impending crisis, is reacting to and dealing with a crisis of modernity.⁴

¹ Finnemore, Martha, Kenneth Scheve, Kenneth A. Schultz, and Erik Voeten. “Preface.” *International Organization* 75, no. 2 (2021): iii-iv.

² Mearsheimer, John J. *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018.

³ Walker, R. B. J. *Inside/outside: International Relations as Political Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993, p.107

⁴ Ikenberry, G. John. *The End of Liberal International Order?*, *International affairs*, 2018, 94 (1): p.8-10

Ikenberry identifies dilemmas, or tensions, between rule-based order and the balance of power, hegemony and democratic community, autonomy, and universal human rights, as well as sovereignty and international authority.

The dilemmas that Ikenberry addresses look like typical contradictions between realist and idealist thinkers in international relations. It can also be seen as dividing lines between a Westphalian system and a liberal one. These are contested concepts. But to put it simply, Westphalian principles can be said to advocate the self-determination of states, in contrast, liberal principles advocate universal principles that go above states. Marcos Tourinho argues that liberal and Westphalian principles coexist in a permanent tension.⁵ Realist thinker John J. Mearsheimer argues that the liberal principles clashes with more fundamental values such as nationalism, national sovereignty, and identity. According to Mearsheimer, the solution, or rather the inevitable outcome of this, is a development towards a realist world order due to the superiority of nationalism in how it appeals to human nature.⁶ On the contrary, Daniel Duedney and Ikenberry describe it the following way: “Decades after they were supposedly banished from the West, the dark forces of world politics—illiberalism, autocracy, nationalism, protectionism, spheres of influence, territorial revisionism—have reasserted themselves.”⁷

Following Walker’s critique of the simple theoretical opposition between realism and idealism about these binary tensions, can we possibly understand their origin and recurrency differently? Could there be other deep, underlying structures from the rise of modern society that can help us understanding the tensions in the crisis of the liberal international order today?

1.1 Research problem

On one level, the dispute between realist and idealist scholars can be seen as a contradiction between universalist aspirations and particularist realizations. Throughout history, similar reactions to liberal failures have manifested themselves where resistance to realist claims is

⁵ Tourinho, Marcos. “The Co-Constitution of Order.” *International Organization* 75, no. 2 (2021), p.266

⁶ Mearsheimer, John J. *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018, p.17

⁷ Ikenberry, J., and D. Duedney. “Liberal World: The resilient order.” *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 4 (2018): P.16

often condemned for its utopian tendencies.⁸ Debates are recurring with the same types of tensions but in new formats. In contradictory ways, we seem to be stuck in “The either/or choice between the same old game played again and again”⁹ How can things so old be so new? Perhaps, a reengagement with deep historical structures can contribute new insights on why old tensions continue to influence the current debate on the crisis of the liberal international order.

1.2 Aim and research question

While most modern analyses seek to understand the current crisis in the liberal international order in terms of contemporary events, this essay attempts to find an understanding that goes beyond that. I am curious to look into something deeper, something more fundamental in the emergence of modernity that can help us understand the crisis of the liberal international order today. This study aims to form a deeper understanding of the tension between modernity and the crisis of the liberal international order.

To analyse the tension between modernity and the crisis of the liberal international order, I will start by looking at the political theory developed by Reinhart Koselleck in his doctoral thesis *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society*. Koselleck was a prominent intellectual in the 20th century who made ground-breaking contributions in various fields, perhaps most notably in conceptual history. However, what is less acknowledged are his insights into political theory and his efforts to provide a means of understanding the modern condition of world politics.¹⁰ Koselleck outlined what he believed was historical preconditions for our modern age and identified “structures” that he believed persistently influence world politics. Koselleck wrote primarily during the Cold War. In this paper, I want to contribute by putting Koselleck’s thinking in the context of the liberal international order. After that, in light of the structures identified by Koselleck, I will examine parts of the ongoing debate on the liberal international order. This leads me to the following research question:

⁸ Walker, R. B. J. “Realism, Change, and International Political Theory.” *International studies quarterly* 31, no. 1 (1987), p.68

⁹ Walker, R. B. J. *Inside/outside: International Relations as Political Theory*, P.80

¹⁰ Edwards, Jason. “Critique and Crisis Today: Koselleck, Enlightenment and the Concept of Politics.” *Contemporary Political Theory* 5, no. 4 (2006): 428-46.

- How can Koselleck's analysis of the structures emerging from modernity cast light on the tension between modernity and the current crisis of the liberal international order?

The ambition of this study is to make a theoretical contribution. Not in the sense of miraculously claiming to have found the exact historical, philosophical, or theoretical tensions behind the crisis of the liberal international order today. Instead, following Koselleck, the study is sceptical of the possibility to identify such unchanging discourses. The meaning of concepts changes depending on time, place, and the subjective interpretation. The study explores how the contemporary crisis can be understood in the context of deep historical tensions and the implications for the current debate. Even if a crisis cannot be linked to historical tensions, the possibility remains that the way we view or understand the crisis is characterized and constrained by these tensions. Therefore, a renewed interest in these historical tensions in the context of current debates, can lead to an awareness and a potential change in how we relate to and understand problems in international relations. My thesis is that by placing the current crisis in a historical context, we shall be better able to understand it and, potentially, move beyond some of the constraints the current debate revolves around.

1.3 Structure of the thesis

The thesis will begin with methodological standpoints that this thesis relies upon in its design and practice. I will try to justify and elaborate on certain methodological choices that I have made in relation to this thesis's aim and research question. Chapter three will introduce the political thinking of Koselleck, and the modern structures that he believed continues to influence global politics. Chapter four will follow from that, and through the lens of the structures identified by Koselleck, I will analyse prominent thinkers in the current debate about the crisis of the liberal international order. In the final chapter, I will draw conclusions from the previous chapters and endeavour to answer the research question and fulfil the aim of the thesis.

2 Method

This chapter will present methodological approaches and ontological positions that will permeate the thesis. It will begin with a standpoint on how political theory in international relations is used and viewed in this thesis, which will then be followed by a reflective discussion on the use of the specific political theory used in this thesis. Lastly, there will be a demonstration of how the material has been chosen regarding the current debate on the crisis of the liberal international order.

2.1 Political theory in international relations

In this thesis, I will attempt to use political theory as a method to look at international relations. The use of political theory, combined with international relations, involves certain ontological positions. One assumption that this thesis relies on is that theories in international relations are not ontologically distinct from political theories: international relations theory is political theory. This assumption is based on arguments famously made by R. B. J. Walker in his book *Inside/outside: International Relations as Political Theory*.¹¹

Beneath the traditional theories in international relations lies an attempt to define the boundaries of a political community. For example, ascribing a certain concept as an irrefutable essential feature of the “real” world can be seen as an attempt to establish a universalism within the framework of a particular political imagination with a language deeply formed by the discourse of the sovereign state. This can be seen in the context of Walker's argument that theories in international relations can be read “...as expressions of an historically specific understanding of the character and location of political life in general.”¹² Or as “...a crucial site in which attempts to think otherwise about political possibilities are constrained by categories and assumptions that contemporary political analysis is encouraged to take for granted.”¹³

Theories in international relations can be seen as a symptom of a modern political imagination that rests on certain dichotomies. More generally, it can be seen as a symptom of “the spatial

¹¹ Walker, R. B. J. *Inside/outside: International Relations as Political Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993.

¹² *Ibid*, p.5

¹³ *Ibid*, p.5

framing of the relation between an autonomous subject set apart from the objective world...for it resonates with the same modernist dichotomies that have been reified so smoothly within claims about state sovereignty and political realism.”¹⁴ Walker argues that dichotomies, such as inside/outside, self/other etc., have “permitted theories of international relations to be constructed as a discourse about the permanent tragedies of a world fated to remain fragmented while longing for reconciliation and integration.”¹⁵

Walker’s approach to international relations involves some serious challenges and limitations in the use of political theory to look at international relations. However, Walker makes it clear that “...to speak of world politics cannot involve a simple dismissal of all that has gone before. It does, however, require a re-engagement with the historically constituted limits of prevailing discourses about international relations/world politics...”¹⁶ This approach to historical and theoretical sources can be seen in Walker's own reading of Niccolò Machiavelli, for example. To Walker, the conventional reading of Machiavelli is arguably what has come to symbolise the realist tradition of international relations. But Walker argues that a reading of Machiavelli, that does not seek to find universal explanations but rather a historical contextualisation, can offer critical perspectives on contemporary issues in international relations.¹⁷

To relate Walker’s reasoning to this essay, the idea is not to use political theory to find comprehensive explanations or conceptualizations about historical change but rather to provide insight into a contemporary problem. What is central to the methodological approach of this thesis, is the emphasis on the need for historical context and a critical stance towards the attempt to establish universal truths. The challenge is to justify why a particular theory necessarily contributes in a certain way. Whether it is to elaborate, complicate or challenge the perceived problem. Crucially, one must be aware of the limitations of ideas with a specific historical context when applying them to a contemporary problem.

¹⁴ Ibid, p.8

¹⁵ Ibid, p.17

¹⁶ Ibid, p.21

¹⁷ Ibid, p.31

2.2 The usage of Reinhart Koselleck as a theoretical source

In this thesis, I want to make a theoretical contribution using a particular theorist's thinking in the context of a contemporary problem. I have chosen the political thinking of Reinhart Koselleck because I believe his ideas are relevant to the debate on the crisis of the liberal international order today. In this section, I want to clarify and discuss the choice of the theoretical source. First, I would like to make the reason for this essay's origin clear. The choice of the theoretical approach in this essay should not necessarily be seen as my endorsement of the theoretical arguments made by Koselleck. Having said that, I am aware that the theoretical perspective I am using is not an impartial choice, but the result of my reading of the literature. This study began with a genuine interest in and curiosity of how one could understand the research problem I had in hand. I had a relatively small previous knowledge of this academic field when I first encountered the book *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society*. The book deals explicitly with concepts of change and political authority: which can be seen as central in the concept of modernity. In addition, it could be argued that the specific historical context that influenced Koselleck is interesting in relation to the crisis of the liberal international order today. In the next chapter of this thesis, I will give a detailed introduction to the specific context Koselleck appeared in.

There are most certainly limits to the application of his ideas, and a valid critique can be made of Koselleck as a theoretical source. One common criticism is that he mistakenly views the Enlightenment as a unified movement. This Koselleck himself admits in the preface to the English translation of his book. There, he concedes that the inclusion of English and especially Scottish Enlightenment philosophers would have led him to another analysis of the Enlightenment.¹⁸ However, irrespective of how one chooses to value the credibility of Koselleck's analysis of the Enlightenment in this book, it is not necessarily a prime concern for this thesis. It is questionable whether it is possible to capture fully such concepts as the Enlightenment or "modernity". The ambition in this study is to find historical structures or tensions containing the seeds of modernity that could still influence global politics today. From that point of view, Koselleck's analysis of Enlightenment thought can be seen as a great theoretical source to understand a distinctly modern attitude partly. It is these modern

¹⁸ Koselleck, Reinhart. *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. 2000. P.3

mentalities, attitudes or behavioural patterns which can be of interest to put in context to the crisis of the liberal international order today. This is obviously with the assumption that these patterns have survived the special circumstances in which they arose and in one way or another continue to have an impact.

2.3 The debate on the crisis of the liberal international order

In this thesis, I will use the structures identified by Koselleck to analyze parts of the current debate on the crisis of the liberal international order. The debate is multifaceted; it contains perspectives from different schools of thought and has several angles on what problems or events can be linked to the crisis. Accordingly, I have had to limit my work and select carefully from the extensive material available to me.

I have chosen oft-cited works of several prominent scholars of the debate. For example, current debates about the liberal international order often begin from the efforts of Daniel Deudney and John G. Ikenberry to develop an account of “structural liberalism” as a counterweight to realist pessimism.¹⁹ They can be considered among the most established scholars to develop a theory of liberal international order that aims to capture its major structures, institutions, and practices.²⁰ Another strong voice in the debate on the crisis of the liberal international order is realist thinker John J. Mearsheimer, considered by some the most influential realist of his generation. His book, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*, contains a lengthy critique of the liberal international order.²¹ I have chosen these researchers because they can be said to clearly represent the dominant liberal and realist perspectives in international relations.

I have also chosen to focus on fairly new contributions in the debate. More specifically, the latest special issue of *International Organization* from 2021 which celebrates the journal’s seventy-fifth anniversary. The central question posed in the volume is whether the liberal international order is being challenged and why. David Lake, Lisa Martin, and Thomas Risse

¹⁹ Farrell, Henry, and Abraham L Newman. “The Janus Face of the Liberal International Information Order: When Global Institutions Are Self-Undermining.” *International organization* 75, no. 2 (2021), p.335

²⁰ Deudney, Daniel, and G. John, Ikenberry. “The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order.” *Review of international studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 179–196.

²¹ Mearsheimer, John J. *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018.

served as guest editors for this issue which includes articles with a rich array of views on both the past and future of the liberal international order.²² Together with the works of Ikenberry/Deudney and Mearsheimer, this constitutes my empirical material which I will consider in the light of the structures I identify from Koselleck.

²² Finnemore, Martha, Kenneth Scheve, Kenneth A. Schultz, and Erik Voeten. "Preface." *International Organization* 75, no. 2 (2021): p.iii-iv.

3 The political thinking of Reinhart Koselleck

3.1 A contextual background of Koselleck

Koselleck is perhaps best known as a practitioner of an approach in the history of ideas called *Begriffsgeschichte* (conceptual history). Conceptual history is an attempt to establish links between thought and practise from the mid-18th to the mid-19th century, when the meaning of many social and political concepts was transformed. This approach can be seen in Koselleck's essay *Futures Past* in which Koselleck asks: What kind of experience comes out by the emergence of modernity?²³

A work that has received less attention is his earlier work *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society*. Jason Edwards claims that this work is largely overlooked by political theorists and that the book is an important resource of contemporary political theory.²⁴ In the book, Koselleck outlined what he believed are the historical preconditions for our modern age. His main argument was that Enlightenment thought to its core is anti-political and utopian. Koselleck believed that the modern understanding of politics has become dangerously depoliticized. He wanted to highlight the persistent structures of the modern age. According to Koselleck this was central to the genesis of modern totalitarianism. To Koselleck, the essence of modern totalitarian ideology was "an exclusively moral vision, self-deluding in its blindness to its own political will to power and self-righteous in its refusal to grant moral legitimacy to "political" alternatives."²⁵

Critique and Crisis is a part of a literature developed during the post-war period which explored the connections between the Enlightenment and 20th century totalitarianism. Koselleck found totalitarianism rooted not in form of a response against Enlightenment rationalism but in Enlightenment thinking itself. Similarly, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno traced a tension between the Enlightenment and its

²³ Koselleck, Reinhart. *Futures Past on the Semantics of Historical Time*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

²⁴ Edwards, Jason. "Critique and Crisis Today: Koselleck, Enlightenment and the Concept of Politics." *Contemporary Political Theory* 5, no. 4 (2006): 428-46.

²⁵ La Vopa, Anthony J. "Conceiving a Public: Ideas and Society in Eighteenth-Century Europe." *The Journal of Modern History* 64, no. 1 (1992): P.83

desire to dominate nature through reason.²⁶ Another example is Hannah Arendt's book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, in which she perceives modern totalitarianism attitudes inherent in Enlightenment thought, for example, the view that was held by many Enlightenment thinkers of Jews as outsiders and barbarians.²⁷

However, it would be a mistake to view Koselleck's work solely as a study of the relation between the Enlightenment and totalitarianism. Koselleck rather sought to provide a means of understanding the modern situation of world politics. In the preface of his book, Koselleck tried to relate his interpretation of the Enlightenment to developments in global politics. The context was not only in the aftermath of the second world war, but also in the times of the Cold War. Koselleck thought that the anti-political Enlightenment is dangerous because it ultimately came to see civil war as a historically licensed necessity if the sphere of morality was to triumph over politics. As the conflicts between the Soviet Union and the United States toughened in the Cold War, Koselleck identified the binary opposition between two utopian scenarios for progress with both superpowers refusing to recognise the other as a legitimate opponent. Koselleck saw the potentially disastrous outcome of the Cold War as an example of a product of this way of thinking. When the sphere of morality wins, war can be justified in the service of ideology, regardless of a liberal–democratic or a communist governing.

3.2 Order, temporality, and finitude – Inspirations to Koselleck

Relevant to this study is the understanding of Koselleck's points of departure. Above all, this appears to be interesting when Koselleck's political theory is to be put in context with the crisis of the liberal international order. Where does Koselleck's position come from? And what impact does it have on an analysis of a liberal order?

Jürgen Habermas wrote a critical review of *Critique and Crisis* in 1960 and accused it of being made in a spirit of 'Counter-Enlightenment'. Habermas ended his assessment by pointing at what he regarded to be Koselleck's central theoretical source: the political thinking of Carl Schmitt.²⁸ There are clear links between Koselleck and Schmitt. Schmitt kept close

²⁶ Horkheimer, Max, Theodor W. Adorno, Edmund Jephcott, and Gunzelin Schmid Noeri. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020.

²⁷ Arendt, Hannah. *The origins of totalitarianism*. Duke University Press, 2007. P.46

²⁸ Habermas, Jürgen. *Verrufener Fortschritt – Verkanntes Jahrhundert. Zur Kritik an der Geschichtsphilosophie*, *Merkur* 147, no. 14, 1960, :477.

relations with several students from the University of Heidelberg. It is also possible to find conceptual similarities such as Koselleck borrowing Schmitt's idea of civil war. Habermas observed that the implication of Schmitt's thought was that civil war could now be overcome only "in the form of the totalitarian state".²⁹ Habermas' assertion was not only centred on a particular reading of the book, but also a recognition of what he saw as a new conservative intellectual community that had been built up around Schmitt: a community that embraces the standpoint of anti-liberalism and Schmittian neo-Hobbesianism.³⁰

Not everyone agrees with Habermas. Niklas Olsen discards the idea of necessarily placing Koselleck in one of these groups. Even though it is obvious that Koselleck was influenced by Schmitt, it is not an easy task to place Koselleck in any specific political camp. It is easy to dismiss Koselleck as a counter-enlightenment figure and merely a product of Schmitt's thinking. Olsen points out that the way Koselleck, for example, treats John Locke's ideas and his partly critical distancing from the absolutist state show how it is difficult to place Koselleck in any particular group.³¹ Jan-Werner Müller argues that many of Koselleck's political positions "turned to a prudential practical liberalism."³²

The few passages of *Critique and Crisis* that Olsen points at do not represent arguments to make it a text favourable to a moderate Enlightenment advocate. Many arguments in the text are pointing in the opposite direction. On the other hand, it must be said that the book does not explicitly take sides with a Counter-Enlightenment position. I can see why a reader of *Critique and Crisis* would get the impression that it is the political teaching of Hobbes that Koselleck sees as the ideal and essential feature of politics. However, I do not believe that he necessarily wanted to restore any particular doctrine of either Hobbes or Schmitt. To my mind, Koselleck's intension in *Critique and Crisis* was not to legitimize an undemocratic Leviathan state but through a historical understanding of the Enlightenment raise the awareness of a blindness to certain historical contexts and tensions that still influence global politics. As Anthony J. La Vopa says:

²⁹ Ibid, p.363

³⁰ Quélenec, Bruno. "'Light on the Enlightenment' or 'counter-enlightenment'?: Rereading Reinhart Koselleck's *Critique and Crisis* in Its Context(s)." *History of European Ideas*, 2021, 1-16.

³¹ Olsen, Niklas. *History in the plural: an introduction to the work of Reinhart Koselleck*. Berghahn Books, 2012. P.54-56

³² Müller, J.-W. *A Dangerous Mind: Carl Schmitt in Post-War European Thought*, New Haven: Yale University Press. 2003, p.112

On one level Critique and Crisis can be read as the modern liberal's defense of politics against the metapolitics-or, perhaps better, the antipolitics-of all varieties of totalitarian ideology. Koselleck's point is that the only way to avoid civil war is to accept the reality of political interests and conflicts and to remain aware that all the players are making a bid for power. And yet Critique and Crisis is also an attack on the secular justifications for individual freedom (including freedom of conscience) to which modern liberalism traces its origins.³³

The debate between Martin Heidegger and Ernst Cassirer was another source of inspiration for Koselleck. In the spring of 1929 Heidegger and Cassirer met for a public conversation in Davos. They were arguably the most important thinkers on the European continent at that time and their meeting was a big moment in the history of continental ideas. The meeting took place in a time where a lot had been written about the crisis of European culture following World War 1. Already before the war was over, Georg Simmel warned of a “crisis of culture” that was deeper than the war itself which no treaty could heal.³⁴ The German defeat led to conservative and nationalistic mourns over what they saw as the decline of Western culture. Another example is Marxist crisis theories of interwar inflation, like Eugene Varga’s *The Crisis of the Capitalistic World Economy*.³⁵ In 1925, sociologist Alfred Weber diagnosed his time as *The Crisis of the Modern Idea of the State in Europe*.³⁶

A distinctive trait of continental philosophy is the sense of an “acute consciousness of its own historical condition”. Immanuel Kant was perhaps the first philosopher demonstrating this attitude as he believed his age to be an “age of critique”³⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche took a different stance by proclaiming his insights about the death of God too advanced for his own time.³⁸ In different ways, both Heidegger and Cassirer saw themselves as philosophers whose work emerged from, and was responsive to, the crisis of the modern condition. They sought to “explain this crisis, to diagnose its problems, and to disclose prospects for a different and more salutary manner of historical meaning.”³⁹

³³ La Vopa, Anthony J. “Conceiving a Public: Ideas and Society in Eighteenth-Century Europe.”, p.85

³⁴ Georg Simmel, “Der Krisis der Kultur“ FZ, February 13, 1916, Drittes Morgenblatt, pp.1-2

³⁵ Eugen Varga, Die Krise der kapitalistischen Weltwirtschaft (Hamburg: Kommunistischen Internationale, 1921)

³⁶ Alfred Weber, Die Krise des modernen Staatsgedankens in Europa (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1925)

³⁷ Kant, Immanuel. *The Critique of Pure Reason*. S.I: The Floating Press, 2009. p.894

³⁸ Williams, Bernard. “Nietzsche: The Gay Science.” In *Introductions to Nietzsche*, 137–151. Cambridge University Press, 2012.

³⁹ Gordon, Peter E., n.d. *Continental divide*. 1st ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012 p.4

The core of the debate was a fundamental contest between two normative images of humanity. Cassirer saw humans as equipped with a special capacity for spontaneous self-expression: “to be human is to create in complete freedom whole worlds of meaning, and these self-created worlds become in turn the objective spheres we experience as beautiful, moral, and true.”⁴⁰ Cassirer’s idea of human’s constructivist or formative capacity was clearly inspired by Kant’s theory of transcendental conditions. Cassirer called this worldmaking capacity by its original Kantian name, “spontaneity”, a term whose meaning is both epistemological and ethico-political.⁴¹ In contrast to Cassirer’s view, Heidegger believed that human beings primarily can be understood by our finitude “...we discover ourselves in the midst of conditions we had no share in creating and cannot hope to control.”⁴² According to Heidegger, to be human is to be gifted with a special sort of receptivity or openness to the world and this lies at the very core of human existence. The philosophical dispute between Heidegger and Cassirer can be seen as a fundamental distinction between the human capacity for worldmaking against the idea of our openness to the world and finite existence.

The debate is a great illustration of a philosophical reflection on the constitution of humanity in space and time. Heidegger’s criticism of the approach towards the Enlightenment embraced by Cassirer, influenced Koselleck. The background was Cassirer’s neo-Kantian defence of Enlightenment thinking in his book, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, in which he appealed to objectively valid, necessary, and eternal truths arising in both moral experience and mathematical natural science.⁴³ Koselleck instead adopted Heidegger’s insistence on the unavoidability of human finitude and the historicization of meaning that Heidegger identified, linking a past, present, and future that are understood in terms of each other.⁴⁴ Under the influence of Heidegger, but also other hermeneutic philosophers like Hans-Georg Gadamer, Koselleck’s work stressed the importance of how conceptions of historical time constituted the present and the way in which their meaning remains stable or is transformed in different contexts.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p.6

⁴¹ Ibid, p.6

⁴² Ibid, p.7

⁴³ Cassirer, Ernst. *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment: Updated Edition*. Princeton University Press, 2009.

⁴⁴ David Carr, *Review of Futures Past*, *History and Theory* Vol. 26 (1987) pp. 197–204 .

3.3 The political structure of Absolutism as the precondition of Enlightenment

Koselleck's theoretical basis has its starting point in the work of Thomas Hobbes. To Koselleck, Hobbes is the key thinker for understanding early modern Europe and the evolving modern state.⁴⁵ The Absolutist state emerged as a product of the religious civil war in Europe and its political structure was a direct response to overcoming the intense religious conflict. The core question was: How to make peace considering the religion-bound factions and civil warfare? The political structure of the absolutist state became the historical answer. It was supported by the military, the establishment and developed a supra-religious sphere of action that was defined by the policies of the state.⁴⁶ The monarchies remained completely constrained within their traditional stratification but strove to eliminate all independent, competing institutions. The economic system of mercantilism was subject to political planning and state guidance.

Hobbes introduces the state as a structure in which private mentalities are deprived of their political effect. In his constitutional law, private states of mind do not apply to the laws, and the laws do not apply to the sovereign. The public interest, about which the sovereign alone has the right to decide, no longer lies in the jurisdiction of conscience. Conscience, which becomes alienated from the state, turns into private morality.⁴⁷

According to Koselleck, this was the political system that laid the foundation of the Enlightenment. Because the alternative at that time between civil war and an Absolutist state order, morality and politics coincided.⁴⁸ From the objective of achieving peace, every command from the sovereign is at the same time a moral command. The main source of moral laws was in this stage not primarily from God, but in the temporal power that prevents civil war. It is only in relation to civil war and its specific historical context that Hobbes system becomes logically conclusive.⁴⁹ The concept of absolute sovereignty is built on a historical premise of civil war. Subjects submit to the ruler and the ruler puts an end to civil war. By doing so, the ruler fulfils the supreme commandment of morality. The moral qualification of the sovereign in this context consists in the political function: to make and maintain order.

⁴⁵ Koselleck, Reinhart. *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society*, p.23

⁴⁶ Ibid, p.16

⁴⁷ Ibid, p.30-31

⁴⁸ Ibid, p.33

⁴⁹ Ibid, p.33

To Hobbes, it was reason that achieved the end of civil war: “the ending of religious civil wars is ‘reason’”⁵⁰

Reason, rising from the chaos of religious warfare, is at first a product of the earlier warfare and founds the state as the solution. Koselleck saw this as a part of Hobbes’ failure to understand the Enlightenment spirit. Hobbes did not know that reason has a gravitation of its own and that the Enlightenment enables reason to free itself. It was not until the state had suppressed religious conflict that progressive reason could embark.⁵¹ For an emerging society, threatened by civil war, there is no separation between politics and ethics. What happened when the absolutist state succeeded in its transformation of society and peace was secured? Paradoxically, Hobbes attempted solution, in altered form, created the same dichotomy which, by the means of the state, he wanted to eradicate in the first place.⁵² The former religious morality of divine dispensation during the civil wars in Europe was now replaced by the emergence of new forms of morality. The modern Hobbesian state’s resolution bore the seeds of its own destruction.

The achievement of ending civil war through the emergence of the Absolutist state transformed the division between politics and morality. The disruption appears in the sovereign and in the individual who is divided into human being and citizen: “Hobbes’s man is fractured, split into private and public halves: his actions are totally subject to the law of the land while his mind remains free, in secret free”⁵³ The dichotomy of man into private and public spheres was, according to Koselleck, intrinsic to what would later be expanded by the Enlightenment: “The dialectic of mystery and enlightenment, of mystification and unmasking, was already one of the roots of the Absolutist State. It was the heritage of the religious wars whose consciously accepted duality gained it admittance to the principle of that State”.⁵⁴

The point of departure for the Absolutist state was the religious civil war. The modern state fought its way out of it. A second civil war, the French revolution, brought the Absolutist state to a sudden end. It was the political structure of Absolutism from which Enlightenment

⁵⁰ Ibid, p.34

⁵¹ Ibid, p.34

⁵² Ibid, p.35

⁵³ Ibid, p.37

⁵⁴ Ibid, p.38

evolved, initially as the inner consequence of an Absolutist political structure, and later as a dialectical counterpart and antagonist.⁵⁵

3.4 The emergence of a secularised form of Christian eschatology

Another noticeable structure that Koselleck identifies is the emergence of a secularised form of Christian eschatology. Koselleck argues that Leviathan, which he saw as the main agent of secularization, transformed the theological distinction between good and evil into a political alternative between peace and civil war.⁵⁶ In this context, “moral progress was a product of political stability. Yet this stability in turn rested on a political constitution to which morality necessarily had to be subordinated.”⁵⁷ In Koselleck’s view, this eventually turned into a revolutionary process in which Enlightenment thought was sustained by an evolutionist and dualistic philosophy of history. This new vision modernises the concept of war as a precondition for moral progress. History becomes a unified process with a predictable direction and endpoint.

Koselleck saw the legitimation of war on the basis of representing an enlightened humanity as a consequence of this revolutionary process. It created a structure “which turned the world into a stage of opposing forces... such as reason and Revelation, freedom and despotism, nature and civilisation, trade and war, morality and politics, decadence and progress, light and darkness...”.⁵⁸ Koselleck viewed the philosophy of history or secular progress as a modified form of Christian eschatology: “...Gnostic-Manichean elements submerged in the dualism of morality and politics, ancient theories of circularity, and finally the application of the new laws of natural history to history itself – all contributed to the development of the eighteenth-century historico-philosophical consciousness.”⁵⁹

The philosophy of progress offered a kind of certainty that indirect political plans would be fulfilled, and that rational and moral planning could determine the course of history. The philosophy and utopian vision of progress could be justified behind the scenes and planned by those who understood the course of history. Since this process mostly happened behind the

⁵⁵ Ibid, p.15

⁵⁶ Ibid, p.25

⁵⁷ Ibid, p.49

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 100

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 130

scenes, it allowed decision makers to avoid taking responsibility for political decisions. The position of moral innocence, combined with the assumption of historical inevitability, veiled the political nature of crisis. Koselleck saw this as the very failure to confront political realities. Crisis was at this stage not a central concept in the century of criticism and moral progress. This meant that the road into the future was not tantamount to unlimited progress, but that the future held the open question of a still unresolved political decision.⁶⁰

Loans without collateral are constantly being drawn on the future. In the pursuit of the fiction of a rationally planned reality the revolution will continue on its course, just as it will continue to give birth to dictatorship in order to redeem unsecured bills.⁶¹

According to Koselleck the utopian philosophy of history became a “politically unsecured loan”, and the French revolution was the first event to mark the loan being called in.

3.5 Criticism under the guise of universality

Koselleck discerned a distinct form of criticism in the early modern Europe: “If the line drawn between morality and politics was the precondition and expression of the indirect assumption of power, we now find that this very drawing of lines formed the basis of the ostensibly non-political criticism.”⁶² Koselleck argued that this distinct form of criticism, coming from a supposedly neutral position, turned into hypocrisy. It is inherent in the concept of criticism that a separation takes place. Criticism is the art of judging. In the process of criticism “the true is separated from the false, the genuine from the spurious, the beautiful from the ugly, right from wrong.”⁶³ According to Koselleck, the critical conscience of the Enlightenment was what gave birth to modern crisis because in its dialectical confrontation with absolutist politics, it could not confront its own political will to power. This was connected to what Koselleck saw as the then dominant dualistic world view.

⁶⁰ Ibid, p.158

⁶¹ Ibid, p.167

⁶² Ibid, p.98

⁶³ Ibid, 103

In its historicity the dualistic vision of the world into a sphere of morality and a sphere of politics is the precondition and consequence of political criticism. Criticism thus appears not only where it is explicitly voiced; it is the basis of the dualistic world view that marked that era. The mutual polarisation of all eighteenth-century concepts is given meaning and inner cohesion by the critical function inherent in all dualisms as, conversely, the political criticism could be based only on an historical reality in which morality and politics were separated. Absolutism, which consciously separated the two spheres, gave rise to a criticism which by polemicising about an established situation found the appropriate response to Absolutism.⁶⁴

The self-confidence in criticism was connected to the truth that was yet to be discovered. According to Koselleck, criticism transformed the future “into a maelstrom that sucked out the present... In these circumstances there was nothing left for the critic but to see progress as the temporal structure...”⁶⁵ The self-made connection to the future allowed the rational judge to be a critic of the present. It also allowed the critic a certain freedom: a truth that is claimed to not appear until tomorrow frees the critic of all guilt today. Koselleck believed that this created a “forward looking, non-partisan sovereignty.”⁶⁶

The non-political criticism could not confront its own political will to power. Even when the criticism reached out into politics “it did not renounce its unpolitical, that is, its rational, natural, moral claim to assure the primacy of truth.” Under the guise of universality, the critique continued to resort to polar positions.⁶⁷ The critic was caught in the web of dualism and could not see the historical significance that was in motion. Koselleck saw the critic as a leader who knows how to draw certain distinctions – “between truth and opinion, right and authority, duty and interest, virtue and renown.” All these concepts had in their dualistic formation an inherent political problem. But according to Koselleck they had already been moved over to only one side.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Ibid, p.102

⁶⁵ Ibid, p.109

⁶⁶ Ibid, p.110

⁶⁷ Ibid, p.116

⁶⁸ Ibid, p.118

3.6 Summary

In this chapter, I have tried to identify specific structures emerging from modernity based on Reinhart Koselleck's book *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society*. In this section I will summarize the key elements of this chapter. The chapter has presented three modern structures in *Critique and Crisis*: (1) Absolutism as the precondition of Enlightenment, (2) The emergence of a secularised form of Christian eschatology, and (3) Criticism under the guise of universality.

Critique and Crisis can be seen in the context of the connections drawn between the Enlightenment and 20th century totalitarianism and in the context of the Cold War conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States. There is an ongoing debate on how Koselleck's political position can be interpreted. One inspiration to Koselleck was Carl Schmitt, especially his concept of civil war. Another inspiration was the debate between Martin Heidegger and Ernst Cassirer, and particularly their disagreement on the Enlightenment and their discussion of the human capacity for worldmaking against the idea of our openness to the world and finite existence.

Koselleck's starting point in his theoretical thinking is the work of Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes is, according to Koselleck, the key thinker for understanding the early development of the modern state. One identifiable structure in *Critique and Crisis* is the political structure of Absolutism as the precondition of Enlightenment. Koselleck argued that it was the political system of Absolutism that laid the foundation from which the Enlightenment started out. The ending of civil war through the emergence of the Absolutist state transformed the division between politics and morality. It was not until the state had suppressed religious conflict that progressive reason could embark. In this way, Enlightenment evolved, initially as the inner consequence of an Absolutist political structure, and later as a dialectical counterpart and antagonist.

The emergence of a secularised form of Christian eschatology is another structure that can be identified from Koselleck. Koselleck argues that Leviathan transformed the theological distinction between good and evil into a political alternative between peace and civil war. Eventually, Koselleck argued, this turned into a revolutionary process in which Enlightenment thought was prolonged by an evolutionist and dualistic philosophy of history and veiled the

political nature of crisis. This meant that the future held the open question of a still unresolved political decision. An identifiable structure is also what Koselleck argued to be the emergence of a neutral criticism turned into hypocrisy. Koselleck saw this as a criticism that was under the guise of universality. The non-political criticism could not confront its own political will to power and was, under the guise of universality, caught in the web of dualism that continued to resort to polar positions. In the next chapter, I will analyze the current debate on the crisis of the liberal international order on the basis of these identified structures.

4 The liberal international order and its current crisis

In the previous chapter, I identified different tensions arising from modernity based on my reading of *Critique and Crisis*. As stated in the method section, it is questionable whether these tensions can represent a valid conceptualization of modernity or are universally applicable. However, these tensions may be seen as old but a re-engagement with them might show that they, in one way or another, remain effectful today. For that reason, I would like to look into these particular tensions and how they might manifest themselves in the current liberal international order debate. Are they still relevant factors in international relations discussions? Are they reconstituted in any way? Are there indications that we are moving beyond them?

From writings of G. John Ikenberry, I will analyse whether the liberal international order potentially can balance the forces of modernity in section 4.1. In section 4.2 the focus will be on the debate of the alleged return of borders, territoriality, and national sovereignty in the West. Section 4.3 will cover the realist critique of idealism and utopianism. The final section in this chapter, 4.4, will explore a discussion on the subversion of truth and the role of international institutions.

4.1 The liberal international order as a way to balance the forces of modernity

According to Ikenberry, an international order is understood as the “explicit principles, rules, and institutions that define the core relationship between the states that are party to the order.”⁶⁹ However, this description has been criticized by some people for being too narrow and not taking orders that do not explicitly need intentional agreement on principles, rules and institutions into consideration.⁷⁰ What is even more contested is the concept of a liberal international order. It can be argued that the liberal international order, sometimes termed “the liberal hegemonic order”, started out following the end of World War II and the establishment of institutions such as NATO, the World Trade Organization and the United Nations.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Ikenberry, G. John. *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001. p.23

⁷⁰ Schweller, Randall L. “The Problem of International Order Revisited.” *International security* 26, no. 1 (2001): Pp.169–173

⁷¹ Ikenberry, G. John. *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011.

Another argumentation could be that it was after the Cold War and the formation of a unipolar world order that the liberal international order began since “Liberal international orders can arise only in unipolar systems where the leading state is a liberal democracy.”⁷²

Regardless of how one might see the emergence of the liberal international order, it can at least be argued that the term “liberal international order” has been used more broadly and frequently since the end of the Cold War. The end of the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet Union symbolised increased optimism in the potential outcome of a more established liberal order. Perhaps most notably in this regard, the American political scientist Francis Fukuyama who at this time declared the end of history. Fukuyama believed that liberalism and the market economy had won since there was no competing system that could threaten, and that liberalism eventually would be embraced by the whole world.⁷³ From this optimistic perspective, the liberal international order was an order with the potential to solve problems on a global scale. This included objectives such as defending and promoting democracy worldwide and establishing global cooperation between states to combat terrorism and the threat of climate change. Protection of human rights, commitment to the economic growth of developing countries and limits on weapons of mass destruction were also parts of the idea of what an international liberal order could accomplish on a global scale.⁷⁴

In recent times, another idea of something that has reached its end flared up. However, this time it is the crisis of the liberal international order that has been a popular issue among scholars. Various political developments in the world have started to seriously challenge the legitimacy of liberal ideas and the foundation that the international liberal order is based upon. The crisis has generated much debate among international relations academics on the status and survival of the liberal order. The debate has not only meant an occurrence of already established liberal critics, but it has also led to a self-examination by liberal thinkers. Is the liberal international order under threat?

⁷² Mearsheimer, John J. “Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order.” *International security* 43, no. 4 (2019): P.7

⁷³ Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of history*, *The National Interest*, 1989, 16: 3-18

⁷⁴ Mazarr, Michael J. *Understanding the Current International Order*, Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 2016. Pp.15-16

An underlying but recurring theme in G. John Ikenberry's article *The End of Liberal International Order?* is the impact of modernity on the world order. Ikenberry believes that the liberal order was created to dampen the great forces of modernity. Liberal internationalism was created, according to Ikenberry, as a way of thinking and responding to the possibilities and dangers of modernity. Ikenberry seems to suggest that the liberal order, both in its emergence and in its impending crisis, is reacting to and dealing with a crisis of modernity.⁷⁵ This is an opportunity to examine Ikenberry's ideas about modernity and its connection to the liberal international crisis with Koselleck's structures emerging from modernity. This is both in the dilemmas Ikenberry diagnoses and his proposed solution to them. Ikenberry identifies dilemmas, or tensions, between rule-based order and the balance of power, hegemony and democratic community, autonomy, and universal human rights, as well as sovereignty and international authority.

The liberal project, in all its various manifestations, is animated by a vision of a one-world system of rule-based order. But the emergence of law and institutionalized cooperation in the modern era has also rested on a West-phalian system of balanced power and sovereign states. These traditional pillars of realist international order are, for liberal internationalists, both a blessing and a curse. Today, the balance-of-power underpinnings of the system have diminished, and this is a problem for liberal internationalism.⁷⁶

Ikenberry seems to see the crisis of the liberal international order in terms of the fading foundations of the order. "The foundations of liberal order are weakened—or at least thrown into question—in a second sense."⁷⁷ This can be compared to the relationship Koselleck saw between the Absolutist State and the Enlightenment. Absolutism as a precondition to Enlightenment which in its dialectical confrontation with Absolutist politics, could not confront its own political will to power. From the relation between the two systems, the Westphalian and liberal, Ikenberry sees tensions of a contradicting nature, for example between state sovereignty and universal principles.

⁷⁵ Ikenberry, G. John. *The End of Liberal International Order?*, *International affairs*, 2018, 94 (1): p.8-10

⁷⁶ Ikenberry, G. John. *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order*, P.284

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, p.285

Liberal internationalism has been a great champion of state sovereignty and self-determination. At the same time, it has also offered grand visions of a global order united by universal rights and protections—universal principles that are potentially quite subversive of the legal and political claims of state sovereignty. Therein lies the tension.⁷⁸

According to Ikenberry, these are tensions that have never been fully resolved in any of the great eras of the liberal ascendancy: “They are always lurking under the surface.”⁷⁹ Ikenberry presents it in terms of what the liberal international order really prioritises. Is the liberal international order fundamentally committed to the rights of nations sovereign self-determination? Or is it committed to transcendent universal rights and aspirations? It seems that we are dealing with seemingly incompatible, but at the same time binding, oppositions set against each other. It can be seen in comparison to the dualistic worldview Koselleck described as a structure which turned the world into a stage of opposing forces. The dualistic forces cannot be understood without each other, because they constitute each other. They formulate a problematic tension between universalism and particularism. With these tensions in mind, how does Ikenberry see the future of the international liberal order? Following Walker, one can question whether the striving for a universal aspiration can be made while retaining the same spatial differentiation between the inside and outside. Can a resolution about political community be found with an alternative solution to the relationship between universality and particularity to that formalised as state sovereignty?⁸⁰

As Ikenberry sees it, the challenge for the liberal international project is to find new ways to reconcile these conflicting visions of universal principles and state sovereignty. The next era of liberal international order will necessarily need to cope with these dilemmas in a new round of negotiations and bargains over rules and institutions. “The shape and character of liberal order in the next era will be determined in part as states grapple with these dilemmas and tensions.”⁸¹ According to Ikenberry it is especially the recent global financial crisis and economic downturn that has revealed these destabilizing dangers and exposed the tensions between the international openness and national stability. For that reason, Ikenberry finds that the best pathway forward for liberal international order “is, perhaps ironically, to emphasize

⁷⁸ Ibid, p.287

⁷⁹Ibid, p.281

⁸⁰ Walker, R. B. J. *Inside/outside: International Relations as Political Theory*, p.75

⁸¹ Ikenberry, G. John. *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order*, P.284

rules and institutions that strengthen the state. A rule-based international order will be more stable if its rules enhance rather than erode the ability of states to protect their borders and govern their economies and societies.”⁸² At the same time, Ikenberry stresses that liberal internationalism should continue to embrace a universal vision of its principles and practices. “If rights are universal, the global political order must be organized in a way to protect and advance these deep and fundamental aspects of humanity.”⁸³ It becomes particularly noticeable in Ikenberry's proposal of a solution to the crisis: the United States and other democracies must regain a progressive political direction.

Based on what Ikenberry outlines, one might wonder how these paradoxical contradictions are intended to be resolved. Ikenberry acknowledges that these tensions were never fully resolved and are always lurking under the surface and that it is necessary to cope with these dilemmas in a new round of negotiations and bargains over rules and institutions. Though, in Ikenberry's idea of a new progressive direction, the paradox remains. The global political order should, according to Ikenberry, continue to value and strengthen state sovereignty and at the same time universal principles to protect fundamental aspects of humanity. This points quite clearly to some of the modern structures Koselleck identified. The liberal international order can only function with the Westphalian order as a foundation. The aims of the liberal international order are opposed to those of the Westphalian order, but at the same time constrained by it. The progressive political direction cannot effectively deal with the inherent political tensions but only negotiate a politically unsecured loan that is being drawn to the future. The tensions continue to be unresolved and lurking under the surface. From this point of view, the liberal international order appears as not a direct solution or departure from these structures and contradictions, but possibly something that temporarily keeps it in balance or below the surface. With these tensions unresolved, Koselleck would say that repetitions of these crises are irresistible, even if succeeding in drawing them to the future.

4.2 The alleged return to borders, territoriality, and national sovereignty

A major theme in the crisis of the liberal international order debate is the rise of protectionism and nationalistic forces within the order. According to many debaters, this particular crisis is remarkable in the way that it is not only manifested in external threats but also significantly

⁸² Ibid, p.287

⁸³ Ibid, p.290

by the magnitude of internal threats within the order. There is a belief that the order is under challenge from threats that are primarily internal to states that are considered the essential components of the order: Western liberal industrial democracies.⁸⁴ In these countries, populist forces construct political discourses that are antagonistic to liberal principles. Deudney and Ikenberry explain the emergence of these forces in the following way:

Decades after they were supposedly banished from the West, the dark forces of world politics—illiberalism, autocracy, nationalism, protectionism, spheres of influence, territorial revisionism—have reasserted themselves. China and Russia have dashed all hopes that they would quickly transition to democracy and support the liberal world order. To the contrary, they have strengthened their authoritarian systems at home and flouted norms abroad. Even more stunning, with the United Kingdom having voted for Brexit and the United States having elected Donald Trump as president, the leading patrons of the liberal world order have chosen to undermine their own system. Across the world, a new nationalistic mindset has emerged, one that views international institutions and globalization as threats to national sovereignty and identity rather than opportunities.⁸⁵

In this quote it is clear that one way to understand this particular part of the crisis is by seeing it as an emergence and a return of dark and evil forces. It reinforces the idea that Koselleck saw as the creation of a world as a stage of opposing forces. From this perspective the world is viewed as fundamentally divided into good and evil, right and wrong, light and dark. It is also seen as a new phenomenon, “a new nationalistic mindset”, or rather something that really belongs to the past, something we should have evolved from since “they were supposedly banished from the West”.⁸⁶

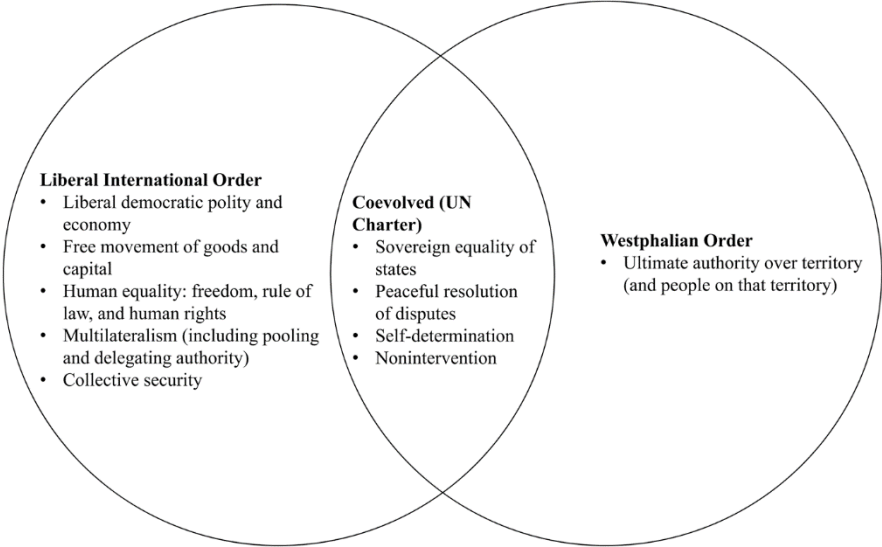
David A. Lake, Lisa L. Martin and Thomas Risse take a slightly different view of the recent emergence of nationalism and protectionism. By examining how the Westphalian order and the liberal international order have co-constituted one another over time they argue that the challenges to the liberal international order arise from the nature of liberalism itself: the neoliberal form of economic globalisation, different subversions of liberalism developed

⁸⁴ Tourinho, Marcos. “The Co-Constitution of Order.” *International Organization* 75, no. 2 (2021): 258–81.

⁸⁵ Deudney, D., & Ikenberry, G. J. (2018). Liberal world: The resilient order. *Foreign Affairs*, 97. Retrieved from <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2018-06-14/liberal-world> [Web of Science®] (Received 2021-12-14) .P.16

⁸⁶ Ibid, p.16

through its own political openness and the contradictory nature of the construction of liberalism through in some ways illiberal means. Liberalism, both in its economic and political forms, challenges notions of national identity.⁸⁷ In the picture below they illustrate how they believe the liberal international order and the Westphalian order have coevolved with partially overlapping sets of norms and practices.



A. Lake et al. argue the liberal international order coexists with the Westphalian order, but that both have a problematic relationship with each other. They think the liberal international order differs from the Westphalian model in multiple ways and therefore modifies or sacrifices some of its principles. An example where they believe the two orders differ is the respect for human rights or rights of collective intrusion to protect liberal values.⁸⁸ The more liberal values increase that is contradictory with the Westphalian order, they believe the tension with the Westphalian order increases.

Beth A. Simmons and Hein E. Goemans examine a similar path⁸⁹ and point to a tension between the older sovereign territorial order, founded on the interest of group identities, and the liberal international order, which in contrast privileges individual universality at the expense of group rights. The central divergence in the tension, they argue, can be found in liberalism’s commitment to universalism and individual utility on the one hand, and theories

⁸⁷ Lake, David A., Lisa L. Martin, and Thomas Risse. “Challenges to the Liberal Order: Reflections on International Organization.”, p.237

⁸⁸ Ibid, p.229

⁸⁹ Even though they reject the term “Westphalian Order”.

that assign power and meaning to locale, groups, and bordering on the other: “Liberalism’s commitment to universality underlies its relative silence on bordering, group determination, and spatial attachments. Liberal trade theory largely ignores space and dissolves boundaries.”⁹⁰

These examples show how strongly entrenched ideas or imaginations about fixed categories are in the question of change. It shows how central the idea is of how the international system is based on an idea of a system of rational, sovereign states as a foundation and how this in turn is linked to our understanding of change. From this perspective, the fundamental conflict in the crisis is between the Westphalian order and the liberal international order and its conflicting symbolic categories. It reproduces ideas of tensions between universalism and particularism, tradition and modernity, primitive and developed etc. Viewing the crisis through these tensions and categories limits our ability for alternative understandings or approaches to the crisis.

The articles from A. Lake et al., A. Simmons and E. Goemans illustrate how Koselleck’s idea of Absolutism as a precondition to Enlightenment still is prevalent in discussions of change and crisis in the field of international relations. Especially in terms of what Koselleck saw as the relation between Absolutism and Enlightenment as a dialectical counterpart and antagonist. This relationship seems to be crucial in the perception and understanding of the extent to which change is possible. From a perspective, where these two components can only exist in relation to each other and not independently, would mean that “real” change is not imaginable. It reinforces Walker's idea of how theories in international relations are “constructed as a discourse about the permanent tragedies of a world fated to remain fragmented while longing for reconciliation and integration.”⁹¹ This means that the attainable change must be within the relationship and constraint between these two components where no chance of a dialectic resolution or transcendence is possible. They are assumed to guarantee each other.

Against this background, a relevant aspect is also how much of a change this alleged return to particularism, national identity and territoriality really is. What a merger of a liberal

⁹⁰ Simmons, Beth A., and Hein E. Goemans. “Built on Borders: Tensions with the Institution Liberalism (Thought It) Left Behind.” *International Organization* 75, no. 2 (2021): p.393

⁹¹ Walker, R. B. J. *Inside/outside: International Relations as Political Theory*, p.17

international order and a Westphalian order means in practice is that the order cannot be based on pure universalism, but only on the universal within the imagination of particular political communities. With these foundations and established discourse, it becomes understandable why a striving for a linear universal goal is seen from the beginning as unattainable and naïve.

4.3 The realist critique of idealism and utopianism

One person who emphasizes how the liberal international order was originally doomed to fail from the beginning is the realist thinker John J. Mearsheimer. Mearsheimer identifies three fundamental weaknesses in the liberal order. The first flaw is the interventionist agenda of spreading liberal democracy around the world. Engaging in social engineering on a global scale and trying to change states to become democracies are doomed to fail and ultimately undermines legitimacy. According to Mearsheimer, nationalism almost certainly grows in such attempts inside the countries aimed for a regime change.⁹²

The second flaw that Mearsheimer brings forward is that the liberal international order eventually causes serious political conflicts inside the liberal democracies themselves, because of the clash with nationalism. Liberal institutions control the decision-making authority of the nation-states who are part of it. Mearsheimer believes this will inevitably result in issues related to state sovereignty and foster the growth of nationalism. The liberal international order adopts policies that clash with national identity and Mearsheimer sees nationalism as the most powerful ideology on the planet.⁹³

The third argument is that Hyper-globalization causes major economic problems in Western democracies. This includes job losses, lower wages and increased income disparities. The economic problems have political consequences, which also undermines the liberal international order. The international economy has given a boost to countries such as China and Russia, which means the end of the American liberal order, according to Mearsheimer.⁹⁴ Mearsheimer believes that a return of a liberal international order is not possible in the foreseeable future. This is because the world's unipolar time is over and there is neither a will

⁹² Mearsheimer, John J. *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018. P.30-32

⁹³ *Ibid*, pp.34-35

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, p.31

nor a confidence in a new liberal order. According to Mearsheimer, the remaining question is what realistic order will take over in a new multipolar system.⁹⁵

In some ways, Koselleck and Mearsheimer have a similar critique. Both oppose what they mean are utopian attempts to strive for an objective, universal and thus a "non-political" ideology. For Koselleck, in a Cold War context, it can be viewed in terms of the danger he saw in "an exclusively moral vision, self-deluding in its blindness to its own political will to power and self-righteous in its refusal to grant moral legitimacy to "political" alternatives."⁹⁶ Mearsheimer argues similarly, but is more focused on the impossibilities of implementing such a universal ideology. "From the beginning, however, liberal hegemony was destined to fail, and it did. This strategy invariably leads to policies that put a country at odds with nationalism and realism, which ultimately have far more influence on international politics than liberalism does."⁹⁷

However, in other ways Mearsheimer can be seen as strongly representing and reproducing many attributes of what Koselleck saw as the distinctively modern understanding of politics, where criticism is presented under the guise of universalism and in a dualistic form. In his arguments, Mearsheimer often relies on setting up certain dichotomies and underlying metaphysical principles. For example, his prediction of nationalism triumphing liberalism whenever these forces clash in liberal democracies. In the construction of a dialectic, these dichotomies converge in a grand opposition between political realism and utopianism or nationalism and liberalism. This is usually with a set-up of something that is static and a starting point, for example, the idea of human nature: "...the crucial universal traits of humankind lead us to a world distinguished by its particularism."⁹⁸

Mearsheimer constructs an argument in which part of the failure of liberalism is due to its deep assumption that the individual takes precedence over the group in comparison with his own assumption of man as part of a collective as the natural state of being.⁹⁹ This argument can be viewed in relation to Koselleck's view of a criticism established under the guise of universalism. "The mutual polarisation of all eighteenth-century concepts is given meaning

⁹⁵ Ibid, pp.12-15

⁹⁶ La Vopa, Anthony J. "Conceiving a Public: Ideas and Society in Eighteenth-Century Europe.", p.83

⁹⁷ Mearsheimer, John J. The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities, p.viii

⁹⁸ Ibid, p.17

⁹⁹ Ibid, p.44

and inner cohesion by the critical function inherent in all dualisms as, conversely, the political criticism could be based only on an historical reality in which morality and politics were separated.”¹⁰⁰ Mearsheimer’s use of dichotomies such as the one between individualism and collectivism can also be understood in terms of Walker’s idea of the necessity to consider how claims of political realism have been produced within a specific disciplinary discourse.

The most obvious way of understanding the overall coherence of the theory of international relations is in terms of a series of specific conceptual and philosophical differentiations, posed for the most part in oppositional form... As something like a founding myth, this polarity has come to be treated as a relatively unproblematic ground on which major theoretical disputes can be, if not resolved, at least codified and left in peace. Yet this codification, this embalmed substitute for serious theoretical reflection and critical engagement, reduces a vast array of complex historical traditions and philosophical positions to a very simple opposition...¹⁰¹

The claims, such as the one Mearsheimer does on human nature, can be viewed in terms of how it has been selected, codified, and reproduced in a creation of a dualistic opposition between realism and utopianism. As in previous sections, Koselleck’s idea of Absolutism as a precondition for Enlightenment is evident here. Mearsheimer believes it is fully possible for liberalism to exist but only within the context of a nation-state. “It is impossible to have a liberal state that is not a nation-state and thus nationalist to its core. Liberalism, in other words, operates within the confines of nation-states.”¹⁰² According to Mearsheimer, we live in an omnipresent nationalistic world of nation states and liberalism without nationalism is impossible. “Both nationalism and realism, meanwhile, are in sync with human nature...”¹⁰³

Again, we ought to be reminded of Walker's idea of how theories in international relations are constructed as a discourse about the permanent tragedies of a world fated to remain fragmented. Change has come to be understood in terms of the desirability, or as Mearsheimer would put it: “the impossible dream”. This discourse certainly provides “a powerful and familiar ground on which to argue that, because universal human community is not in sight,

¹⁰⁰ Koselleck, Reinhart. *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society*, p.102

¹⁰¹ Walker, R. B. J. *Inside/outside: International Relations as Political Theory*, p.107

¹⁰² Mearsheimer, John J. *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*, p.84

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, p.7

the world remains more or less the same.”¹⁰⁴ The current debate on the crisis of the liberal international order is no exception. We are being fed with consolations and discourses about what the realities and the true nature of the international system are. Throughout history, similar reactions to liberal failures have manifested themselves where resistance to realist claims is often condemned for its utopian tendencies.¹⁰⁵ In Mearsheimer’s critique of the liberal international order, as in the case of human nature, some of the potentially complex discussions of inherent problems and tensions in the current debate are reduced to a construction of simple oppositions.

4.4 The subversion of truth and the role of international institutions

Another part of the debate is the question of truth and the open and free distribution of information. The idea of a free flow of information was an early ideal of the Enlightenment in the search for truth and liberation. What was believed to be the major contribution in this direction was the changing structure of political authority. The question of political authority can historically be linked to the division between the political state and the public bourgeois sphere that took place during the Renaissance in Western Europe. Conventionally, this division is considered to have led to a liberating modernization of society where people could publicly act as a critical counterweight to the political authority from the state.¹⁰⁶

Koselleck argued that modern criticism is a matter of distance or externality. According to Koselleck, the formation of an Absolutist state meant that the conscience and faith moved to the private sphere. This division between politics and morality developed a new kind of criticism. Through the growing criticism a new situation arose. An experience that said that what is, is not necessarily the way it should be. Koselleck saw this as a revolutionary expectation that was growing. Morality was the component that assured progress. Historical change was necessary, bound by law, called for, and made existing realities available for change.¹⁰⁷ The claim of objectivity and impartiality boosted the process of criticism to the same extent its end goal was not in sight. The self-confidence in criticism was connected to

¹⁰⁴ Walker, R. B. J. “Realism, Change, and International Political Theory.” *International studies quarterly* 31, no. 1 (1987): p.80

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, p.68

¹⁰⁶ Habermas, J., Burger, T., & Kert, L. The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society, *Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press*, 1989.

¹⁰⁷ Koselleck, Reinhart. *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society*, p.32

the truth that was yet to be discovered. According to Koselleck, criticism transformed the future “into a maelstrom that sucked out the present... In these circumstances there was nothing left for the critic but to see progress as the temporal structure...”¹⁰⁸ This is how one could understand Koselleck’s argument that reason has a gravitation of its own.

In today's debate on the crisis of the liberal international order, discussions about truth and reason are recurring. Among the things that characterize the debate on crisis of the liberal international order is the internal development in the Western world of authoritarian, nationalist, and non-liberal forces. This development can be seen in Britain's withdrawal from the EU, the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States and the increase of populist forces in liberal democracies. A common discussion derived from this development is the idea of post-truth.¹⁰⁹ The idea is that rationality and truth have been replaced with falsehoods and emotions. Matthew d’Ancona describes it as “the resurgence of emotional narrative”.¹¹⁰ Here it is possible to identify a problematic and simplistic dichotomy. The implication is that the suggestion that an era of truth politics has been replaced by an era of post-truth politics implies that we used to live in a world guided by truth. This in turn reproduces ideas of fundamental contradictions between rationality and reason versus emotion and feeling.

Emanuel Adler and Alena Drieschova argue that populist leaders subvert truth for political domination and see such practices as a significant source of the current pressure on the liberal international order. They define truth subversion as “a set of specific practices, technologies, and norms that illiberal leaders use to spread messages into the public domain to erode the notion of truth as an ideal, which had formed a core foundation of the LIO.”¹¹¹ According to Adler and Drieschova, these practices encourage people to believe their opinions to be more important than facts and support the creation of groups of likeminded people. They see that the danger in an emotional and antiscientific approach is that empirical evidence will not cause changes in perspectives and allegiances because reasoned arguments across different communities become impossible.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p.109

¹⁰⁹ Lee McIntyre, “Post-Truth.” *European Journal of Communication* 33, no. 5 (2018): 574–575.

¹¹⁰ D’Ancona, Matthew. *Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back*. Ebury Press, 2017. P.31

¹¹¹ Adler, Emanuel, and Alena Drieschova. “The Epistemological Challenge of Truth Subversion to the Liberal International Order.” *International Organization* 75, no. 2 (2021): P.360

The dangers in this development that Adler and Drieschova emphasize are not entirely different from the risks that Koselleck described in the abolition of the Absolutist state but are of course placed in different contexts. In both cases, the threat is perceived to be a development with increasing fragmentation and a possible risk of war. This connection is perhaps most evident in how Adler and Drieschova describe the threat to the Westphalian dimension of the liberal international order: "... truth-subversion politics can potentially threaten the Westphalian dimension of the international order because it makes rational communication among international political actors impossible. It therefore increases uncertainty, which heightens the security dilemma, and could in extreme circumstances lead to war."¹¹² As also mentioned in previous sections and especially in regard to the tension A. Lake et al point to, the Westphalian dimension is also present here as a fundamental part in the discussion of the crisis. This again underpins Walker's idea of how universal aspirations can be understood in relation to the particular forms they were originally created in. The threats Koselleck saw in the groups that organized themselves against the absolutist state can be compared with the groups Adler and Drieschova now believe threaten the Westphalian dimension in the liberal international order. Common to both scenarios is the risk they see in a disturbance to the fundamental structure of rational international actors.

De Vries et al. argue that international institutions are increasingly being challenged by domestic opposition and nationalist political forces. In the article *Politicizing International Cooperation: The Mass Public, Political Entrepreneurs, and Political Opportunity Structures*, the authors explore the causes and consequences of the politicization of international cooperation. By politicization they refer to the process of making an issue political which, according to the authors, is debating it in the public sphere as an issue of public contestation.¹¹³ The article explores the changing role of the mass public in international politics. This process is not entirely different from the process Koselleck examines in the establishment of a private sphere with critical movements trying to oppose the Absolutist state. However, this time the critical movements are apparently directing its criticism at international institutions.

¹¹² Ibid, p.361

¹¹³ De Vries, Catherine E., Sara B. Hobolt, and Stefanie Walter. "Politicizing International Cooperation: The Mass Public, Political Entrepreneurs, and Political Opportunity Structures." *International Organization* 75, no. 2 (2021): P.308

The articles by Adler and Drieschova and De Vries et al show how tensions that characterize the liberal international order today are similar in some ways to the tensions that Koselleck describes in the emergence of modern society. The tension is reconstituted in terms that it is not any longer a critique primarily directed at the Absolutist state, but rather at international institutions. What Koselleck saw as the role of the critic to see progress as the temporal structure becomes, in fact, rather constrained within the framework of the dialectical relationship between the Absolutist state and Enlightenment, or the relationship between the Westphalian dimension and the liberal international order. It reproduces what Walker believes is the impossibility of radical change in the prevailing international relations discourses. “Presence and absence, politics and relations, community and anarchy, historical progress and eternal return: such are the spatial conditions under which the possibility to change and transformation can be envisaged and sustained”¹¹⁴ Once again, discussions about the crisis are constrained within dichotomies and relationships between components where no chance of a dialectic resolution or transcendence is possible.

¹¹⁴ Walker, R. B. J. *Inside/outside: International Relations as Political Theory*, p.142

5 Conclusions

In this chapter, I will discuss the results of my analysis in relation to the aim and research question of this thesis. Thereafter I will summarize the thesis before coming up with some suggestions on future research.

5.1 Discussion

In this thesis, I have aimed to contribute to the debate of the liberal international order by forming a deeper understanding of the tension between modernity and the crisis of the liberal international order. To fulfil this aim, I have asked the question of how Koselleck's analysis of the structures emerging from modernity can cast light on the tension between modernity and the current crisis of the liberal international order. This question has been considered based on the three structures identified in Koselleck's book *Critique and Crisis:*

Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society: (1) Absolutism as the precondition of Enlightenment, (2) The emergence of a secularised form of Christian eschatology, and (3) Criticism under the guise of universality. These structures have then been used to analyse selected material from Ikenberry/Deudney, Mearsheimer and authors in the special issue of *International Organization* from 2021. My ambition is now to answer and discuss the research question in this thesis. How can Koselleck's analysis of the structures emerging from modernity cast light on the tension between modernity and the current crisis of the liberal international order?

A common notion of the liberal international order, and closely related concepts such as human security, is that they are products inherited from the Enlightenment. Conventionally, this points to the role of institutions, political relationships, and economic interdependence as a way to strengthen peace and cooperation among nations in an anarchic system. Liberal scholars usually emphasize the possibility of overcoming what they see as natural tensions between states with structures that operate above and independently of the political relations between states and interest groups.¹¹⁵ From this perspective, there is a possible idea of the liberal international order as a manifestation of Enlightenment ideals put into practice. The

¹¹⁵ Tadjbakhsh, Shahrbanou, and Anuradha M. Chenoy. *Human Security: Concepts and Implications* Abingdon, Oxon [England]: Routledge, 2007. P.86

idea of a post-national global society often expresses the Kantian desire for a world order governed by moral laws.

The prospect of how a liberal international order should be able to overcome states' will for sovereignty is strongly questioned in the debate. That was something that appeared in the analysis of the debate on the crisis of the liberal international order. The pursuit of structures that operate over and independently of the political relations between states and interest groups is seen as something unrealistic. Most notable is the link between the Westphalian order and the liberal international order. This was most clearly illustrated in the article from A. Lake et al. But how these two related systems affect the crisis is something that all selected thinkers remark on. For example, liberal thinker Ikenberry is explicitly considering that the best pathway forward for the liberal international order “is, perhaps ironically, to emphasize rules and institutions that strengthen the state...”¹¹⁶ At the same time, Ikenberry emphasises that liberal internationalism should continue to embrace a universal vision of its principles and practices. To achieve this, Ikenberry suggests that the liberal international order necessarily needs to cope with these dilemmas in a new round of negotiations and bargains over rules and institutions.

In the example above, with Ikenberry's proposal of a regained progressive political direction, a perspective from Koselleck can be useful. One can assume that what Ikenberry indicates, “a new round of negotiations and bargains over rules and institutions”, is that freshly negotiated rules and institutions effectively can grapple and satisfy the tensions between the Westphalian order and the liberal international order. Here, one can draw certain conclusions based on Koselleck's idea of “Absolutism as the precondition of Enlightenment”. The idea, that the principles of a Westphalian and liberal system over time can be negotiated and synchronized, Koselleck would find utopian. Koselleck argued that Enlightenment ideals rest on the political structure of Absolutism. They constitute each other in a dialectical and an antagonistic relationship.

Attempts to reconcile ideas of these two, like state sovereignty and universal principles, are not successful, because the possibilities for universal principles are in this scenario constrained within the framework of the Westphalian principle of state sovereignty. An

¹¹⁶ Ikenberry, G. John, and G. John John Ikenberry. *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order*, p.287

attempt to maintain the vision of this dynamic of state sovereignty but to still aim for atemporal universal principles would not weaken tensions. In the context of Koselleck's structures, the solutions from Ikenberry can be seen as what largely create the tension right from the start. For example, considering the inability for the liberal international order to universalise its own rights, it could mean a permanent continuation of what Koselleck saw as a legitimization of war on the basis of representing an enlightened humanity that is always generating new emergences under new conditions. This would be Koselleck's idea of a secularized form of Christian eschatology: The fictional pursuit of a rationally planned reality and thereby advancing political problems to the future which then ultimately leads to crisis. From this perspective, it can be questioned if the future of emancipatory politics really can be contained within a combined structure of Westphalian and liberal principles. This is one way in which Koselleck can be used to cast light in the current debate on the crisis of the liberal international order. It is reminiscent of what Hannah Arendt saw as a major paradox already during the drafting of the Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Arendt argued that the Declaration itself expresses a contradiction in which the Declaration demands that states uphold universal human rights while the international order is based on the principle of national and territorial sovereignty.¹¹⁷

Another way Koselleck can bring relevance to the current debate is how much the debate is shaped by what Koselleck saw as a distinct modern understanding. The different perspectives on the crisis of the liberal international order are characterized to a large extent by an understanding of the world as a stage of opposing forces. More specifically, an understanding based on simple sets of oppositions coined against each other. This is what Koselleck saw as a critique under the guise of universalism. A specific modern form of critique, with a leader who knows how to draw certain distinctions: "between truth and opinion, right and authority, duty and interest, virtue and renown."¹¹⁸ This is most evident in the analysis of Mearsheimer and his critique of idealism and utopianism. In his arguments, Mearsheimer relies on setting up certain dichotomies and underlying universal metaphysical principles. But it was also notable throughout all thinkers in the analysis. The common idea is that there is some kind of a static starting point. Viewing the crisis through these tensions and categories limits our ability for alternative understandings or approaches to the crisis. Our understanding of change

¹¹⁷ Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New ed. with added prefaces. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1979

¹¹⁸ Koselleck, Reinhart. *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society*, p.118

is then constrained within static dichotomies and relationships between components where no chance of a dialectic resolution or transcendence is possible. The tensions will continue to intensify and be repeated, paving the way for new crises of similar character.

The overall understanding of the crisis of the liberal international order is the shared idea of the foundations in the international system. The central idea is how the international system inevitably needs to be based on an idea of a system of rational, sovereign states as a foundation. A weakening of the foundation is viewed to seriously threaten the liberal international order. The liberal international order is not seen with a possibility to be separated from its imagined foundation. A perspective from Koselleck would be that this is heavily linked to our understanding of change. Our understanding of the past directs the prospects for the future and the change attainable is dependant on the specific understanding of the past. Following Walker, the extent to which change is possible can perhaps best be described in the following way: “Presence and absence, politics and relations, community and anarchy, historical progress and eternal return: such are the spatial conditions under which the possibility to change and transformation can be envisaged and sustained”¹¹⁹ What an understanding of the structures emerging from modernity identified by Koselleck leads to, and what I hope to have shown in this thesis, are insights into why we seem to be stuck within some of these old tensions and why it seems so difficult to go beyond them. A renewed interest in these historical tensions, can hopefully be a pathway to move beyond some of the constraints the current debate revolves around.

5.2 Summary

This study began with a research problem concerning the revival of debates on the crisis of the liberal international order and discussions on philosophical and theoretical tensions that have existed for a very long time. How can things so old be so new? I have aimed to contribute to the debate of the liberal international order by forming a deeper understanding of the tension between modernity and the crisis of the liberal international order. To fulfil this aim, I asked the question of how Koselleck’s analysis of the structures emerging from modernity can cast light on the tension between modernity and the current crisis of the liberal

¹¹⁹ Walker, R. B. J. *Inside/outside: International Relations as Political Theory*, p.142

international order. I have presented methodological approaches and ontological positions based on R. B. J. Walker's book *Inside/outside: International Relations as Political Theory* and reflected on the choice of theory and material. I identified structures emerging from modernity in Reinhart Koselleck's book *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society*: (1) Absolutism as the precondition of Enlightenment, (2) The emergence of a secularised form of Christian eschatology, and (3) Criticism under the guise of universality.

These structures have been used to analyse selected material from Ikenberry/Deudney, Mearsheimer and authors in the special issue of *International Organization* from 2021. In the analysis, I have focused on four topics in the current debate. (1) The liberal international order as a way to balance the forces of modernity, (2) the alleged return to borders, territoriality, and national sovereignty, (3) the realist critique of idealism and utopianism, and (4) the subversion of truth and the role of international institutions.

In light of the structures identified from Koselleck's *Critique and Crisis*, I have found that some suggested solutions, specifically from Ikenberry, can be seen to reinforce and entrench what created some of these tensions right from the start. Another finding was that the debate is constrained by dichotomies, underlying universal metaphysical principles and is very much dependant on the idea of how the international system inevitably needs to be based on an idea of a system of rational, sovereign states as a foundation. With this outcome, the study has achieved a deeper understanding of how Koselleck's analysis of the structures emerging from modernity can cast light on the tension between modernity and the crisis of the liberal international order. My conclusion was that a continued interest in these historical tensions hopefully can be a pathway to move beyond some of the constraints the current debate revolves around.

5.3 Limitations and future research

In this section, I will discuss the limitations of this study and come up with suggestions for future research. The conclusion, that a continued interest in these historical tensions can be a pathway to move beyond some of the constraints, is very much linked to what I see as a considerable limitation to this particular study. This essay deals with some large and abstract concepts. A difficulty is the discrepancy in the meaning of concepts between different time

periods. This places enormous demands on the interpreter of these concepts, especially when they are put in another context. An evident criticism is that my reading of these concepts ultimately is influenced by my own thesis. This is undoubtedly a risk, at least when dealing with a philosophical inquiry and given the incredible amount of material available. Nevertheless, as stated in the method section, the use of political theory should in this study be seen as a means to provide insight or cast light of a contemporary problem, not to find comprehensive explanations or conceptualisations.

My suggestions for future research would be a continued exploration of other or similar historical tensions or structures. The ones I identified were largely based on my own particular reading of Koselleck. There can be a number of different interpretations that could offer critical perspectives on contemporary issues in international relations. It could undoubtedly be other thinkers than Koselleck, situated in other contexts, relevant for this task. Koselleck was largely shaped by the times of the Cold War and the binary opposition between the Soviet Union, the United States and their vision for progress. Thinkers with other historical backgrounds could be interesting to put in context with the crisis of the liberal international order. However, I agree with Jason Edwards that *Critique and Crisis* can be seen as an exciting resource in contemporary political theory. There are also many interesting aspects of the debate on the crisis of the liberal international order that have not been addressed in this study. It could be interesting to include thinkers outside the dominant realist and liberal perspective and see how their views can relate to historical contexts.

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