

MISSING WESTERN HEGEMONY, ALIAS LIBERAL WORLD ORDER¹

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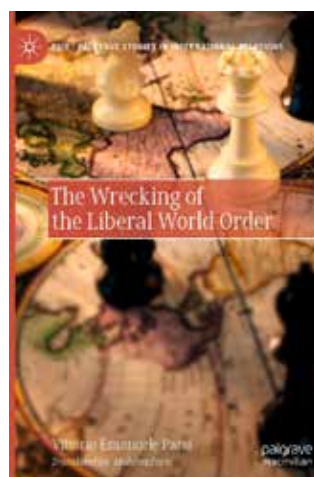
Vittorio Emanuele Parsi is no ordinary political scientist. A former rugby player, he is a commander (in the reserve) of the Italian Navy, having participated in international maritime security and peacekeeping missions. He is a Professor of International Relations at the Catholic University of Milan, where he heads the Alta Scuola di Economia e Relazioni Internazionali (ASERI). He actively participates in public debates in his country, in both television and the press. In his most recent book, and drawing on nautical metaphors, Parsi recounts the origins, the zenith, and the ‘wrecking’ of the liberal world order. He does it with extensive knowledge of the literature, and he has good reasons for it: not only he reads but he is also acquainted with its main authors, many of whom are his personal friends. Some, like John Ikenberry, Michael Mastanduno, Matthew Evangelista, Michael Cox and Joseph Grieco, visit ASERI every year as invited professors and endorse this book.

Parsi’s thesis is a simple one: the liberal world order is a global arrangement with a domestic base, which consists of the conjoining of democracy and the market economy. Soon, there will be no liberal world without liberal-democratic states building and sustaining it. According to his argument, the crisis derives from the

destruction of the balance to the detriment of democracy and in favour of the market. The collapse of the ‘social pact’ between capital and labour, which happened gradually from the 1970s, highlighted the internal contradictions of capitalism and gave rise to what Parsi terms the ‘neoliberal world order’. In his nautical imagery, this implied a change in course of the ship in which the West had been travelling since the end of the Second World War. He suggests that because of this change in course the liberal order hit a four-side iceberg, each of which would be able, on

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its own, to sink the Titanic (the liberal world order in his metaphor). These four sides are the crisis of the international leadership of the United States, combined with the rise of authoritarian powers Russia and China, the fragmentation of threats stemming from jihadist terrorism, internal revisionism in the United States, and a general disenchantment with democracy, squeezed between populism on one side and technocracy on the other. He adds that this happened against the background of a European crisis and was worsened by the pandemic. One could say that the liberal world order hit a quadruple iceberg in the middle of a perfect storm. Parsi clarifies that the liberal world order was two things at once: a power structure and an ideologic project. The structure derived from the configuration of the postwar period, which was characterized by American hegemony. The project consisted in combining, as harmoniously as possible, state sovereignty and free trade – or, as mentioned previously, (national) democracy and (then international) market. In this way globalization was born, and this is how it went from its liberal origins to its neoliberal present. In this context, one is faced with a trilemma suggested by Rodrik, the Turkish-American economist who argues that it is not possible to achieve at the same time popular democracy, state sovereignty and free international trade, also known as globalization: reality forces us to choose between two of the three options.

THE LIBERAL WORLD ORDER AS A MASK OF AMERICAN HEGEMONY

Parsi recognizes that the liberal world order is ‘the particular form which the

hegemony of the United States of America had assumed after 1945’, based on a political project which claimed Wilsonian principles (after President Woodrow Wilson, who led the United States during the First World War and the ensuing negotiations) and the whole of liberal thought. The immediate goal was the creation of an international arena ruled not by force but by law, even though the final goal was to make the international system similar to the democratic domestic system. This demanded the protection of the social order in each country from the disruptive influences coming from the outside, mainly from war. The five pillars of the new order would be: an open international market, able to contain the excesses of national sovereignty as well as those of international anarchy; using national sovereignty to curb the excesses of the market; erecting an international architecture to render interstate cooperation possible and advantageous; political, economic and cultural inclusion of the working classes, so as to strengthen the liberal institutions of the market economy and representative democracy; and, finally, creating a solid middle class, which would serve as the spine of the domestic political and economic systems. The expected result was a compromise, as imagined by Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Winston Churchill, between political realism and the transformative aspirations of liberalism.

If the liberal world order was North-American hegemony by other means, the domestic weakness and international withdrawal of the United States are the main causes of its crisis. The Donald

Trump administration fed both deficits, domestic and external. While pursuing a narrowly conceived national interest, the superpower gave up on the international system it had created. Parsi claims that this is where China comes in, its material infrastructure – the Belt and Road Initiative – overcoming the ideological infrastructure which sustained the world order. In this passage one can clearly see the idealist leanings of the author, who claims that the solidity or fragility of values allows for either the advancement or retreat of material interests. The rise of China thus happens as a consequence of Western errors of judgment, and not as a by-product of the development of its productive or material forces – nor, certainly, because of the superiority of its values.

This moment shows the difficulty, on the part of the West, to understand its relative decline. The book cites few non-Western authors, and does not make a substantial effort to understand how the liberal world order, overtly shaped by American hegemony, is perceived in other regions of the world. Therefore, even though the diagnosis gets it right when it comes to the Western front, it ignores a lot about the Eastern front – and everything about the Southern front. In the West, economic insecurity combined with cultural anxiety fed political extremism, weakening the pillars of the liberal world order: that is correct. But in the rest of the world, this order was never seen as a public good, only as a good of the club at the most. Whereas a public good benefits all who desire to consume it, regardless of whether they participated in its production, a good of

the club only benefits those who are accepted in the group – allowing therefore for the exclusion of those who are not desired by the governing board. A good number of Asian and African countries, and also some in Latin America, are not very interested in importing Western ideologies or accepting conditionalities imposed by supposedly common institutions. For many of these countries, the Western liberal order is in crisis – and that is a good thing, they add.

THE FUTURE OF THE LIBERAL WORLD ORDER, BETWEEN DESIRES AND LIMITS

Consciously or not, the association between liberal world order and the West is explicit throughout the book. Parsi believes that China does not reject ‘our’ globalization, as long as it can lead it. Therefore, ‘we’ are faced with the task of reconciling democracy with market economy in the 21st century, ‘something that can only be achieved through a renewed transatlantic partnership’. A leading role on the part of Europe is thus in order, in tandem with American leadership. This analysis glosses over the structural causes of the ongoing power transition to the Asia-Pacific, namely demographic weight and economic growth. Disclaimer: lest the origins of the author of this review be seen as the cause of this criticism, I emphasize that the growing irrelevance of Europe in the international scenario only lags behind that of Latin-America.²

According to Parsi, the alternative to the reconstruction of the liberal order is the relaunching of a Chinese-style technological globalism, one in which liberalism

and democracy are trumped by national traditions in the name of a false common prosperity. The author does not envisage the possibility that the world order is replaced by several regional orders (or by a global disorder), but simply fears that the neoliberal order, the product of the wrecking of the liberal order, is eventually replaced by an illiberal order. It comes down to fighting for the adjective (liberal or not), given that the name (order) would be ensured. The wrecking of the liberal order would not lead to anarchy, but to its replacement by toxic nationalism – read ‘Trump’ – or by technocratic globalism – read ‘China’.

The main contribution of this book is its call for a reframing. Without denying the existence of interests and incentives, the author thinks – and speaks to us – on the basis of values. Parsi claims not only that it is possible to change the world, but that the direction of change depends upon us. According to him, intellectuals and academics have the duty, not only of helping to understand, but also, and above all, of calling for action: yes, we can! In Gramsci’s words, this work was not written with the pessimism of reason but with the optimism of the will – and the author would certainly agree. [Rd](#)

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² MALAMUD, Andrés; SCHENONI, Luis L.; PAES, Lucas de Oliveira – ‘L’America Latina è diventata irrilevante?’. In *Vita e Pensiero*. No. 3, 2022, pp. 29–37.

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