

Explain the key features of the liberal approach to global politics. (15 Marks)

The liberal approach to global politics involves a belief in cooperation between nation-states in order to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes. In contrast to realist and neo-realist theory, liberal theorists focus on absolute - rather than relative - gains, which would imply that nations care more for beneficial outcomes than their place in the international sphere; for liberals, international politics is not necessarily a zero-sum game. This has best been illustrated by the liberal vision of the UN, allowing nations to cooperate without focusing on violent solutions to global problems. This aspect of liberalism was promoted in an early form by Immanuel Kant, who theorised a cosmopolitan world in which countries could cooperate to reduce international divisions.

The liberal approach to global politics also focuses on the individual in two ways; their sovereignty and their non-aggressive human nature. Liberal philosopher John Locke was a heavy proponent of individual sovereignty, even above that on the state: "every man has a Property in his own Person". This has been seen in more modern times in the emergence of human rights and globalisation eroding national sovereignty in favour of the rights and sovereignty of the

individual. The liberal approach to human nature, similarly, is more optimistic than that of realist theorists. Unlike Thomas Hobbes's pessimistic view that the state of nature is "nasty, brutish and short", liberals focus on the fact that we may cooperate naturally and that - when translated to the international sphere - nations are not in a constant 'state of war'. This has been seen most prominently perhaps in the Cuban Missile Crisis, where two diametrically opposed superpowers avoided nuclear war, despite having no common ground. As such, liberal theorists insist that war is not inevitable, and that a peaceful human nature may prevent many such conflicts from arising.

Moderate accounts of globalisation acknowledge that 'nation-states continue to be key players in the contemporary global economy' (Dicken, 1998: 7). Radical versions of the thesis, however, stress the decline of the state as an autonomous decision-making body.

Such radical theories include writers who embrace globalisation, and who argue that it is multinational companies (MNCs) and not states that are the most effective providers of economic prosperity (O'Brien 1992; Ohmae, 1995). They also come from staunch critics of globalisation who nonetheless accept that globalisation has led to dramatic social change (Korten, 1995; Sklair, 1995).

The radical globalisation perspective stresses the following factors:

1. The development and wide availability of low-cost telecommunications technology such as fibre-optic cables, fax machines, digital transmission and satellites, which has meant that the populations of states are increasingly becoming subjected to a 'global culture' that is beyond the power of individual governments to control.

2. The rise of MNCs which now have the resources to rival many states, but unlike states are not rooted in geography and are easily able to relocate their plants according to shifting demand and the availability of local advantages such as cheap wage costs, low business taxes and weak trade unions.

3. The increasingly global nature of trade, which has rendered states unable to develop effective economic policies. States increasingly have to respond to factors beyond their control such as imperatives of MNCs and the

^ as imperatives of MNCs and the fluctuations of the world's financial markets. Overall, it is claimed that world markets and MNCs are more powerful forces in international affairs than states and that these new forces of globalisation cannot be effectively governed.

Such alleged trends have become almost hegemonic in their influence on management theorists, business leaders and neo-liberal politicians during the 1990s. Two key figures from the business world who have contributed to the radical globalisation thesis are the Japanese business guru, Kenichi Ohmae, and the President of The People-Centred Development Forum, David Korten.

^ In 1995 both writers produced key texts, which set out in stark terms the huge impact globalisation is supposedly having upon the power of the state. As examples of the radical globalisation thesis, written in jargon-free prose, they are hard to beat and therefore merit some close attention.

Despite their very different conclusions concerning the desirability of global change, both writers broadly agree on the main areas of social life where globalisation has impacted, and their books provide a useful framework through which we can explore the evidence that supports, or contradicts, the globalisation thesis.

Ohmae (1995: 2-5) defines global change in terms of what he calls the four 'I's': investment, industry, information technology and individual consumers. He argues that investment via financial markets has grown rapidly in