H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert Teigrob, Colin McCullough. *Canada and the United Nations: Legacies, Limits, Prospects.* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016. 264 pp. $34.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7735-4825-1.

Reviewed by Pierre Lizée

Published on H-Diplo (September, 2017)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

Canada and the United Nations could not have been published at a more propitious time. The Canadian government made public in the spring of 2017, after much delay and debate, a threefold review of its foreign, defense, and aid policies. Its stated intent was to realign Canada's outlook on the world with the tenets of liberal internationalism. All the usual tropes were there, from the need to build up the rule of law at the international level to the way in which values rather than *realpolitik* should serve as the guideposts of a responsible and sustainable foreign policy.

But there was one twist. In a world where Donald Trump is president of the United States, the government argued, where US global leadership is giving way to a more inward-looking sense of self-interest, and where American military power can no longer be counted on to underwrite international stability, others have to step in. This is what the Canadian government would do from this point on. And thus Global Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland announced a considerable amount of new funding for the Canadian military, along with the long-term and unrelenting support to the military that this commitment of funds entailed.[1]

In all of this, many questions remained unanswered. How will it be possible, for instance, to sustain the global liberal order, if the one key funder and defender of that order, now walks away from it? Conversely, to what extent has the global liberal order now become self-sustaining, even without US leadership? And is Canada simply playing Trump's game by becoming a more military-oriented, *realpolitik*-driven power even as it professes to be the great promoter of liberal internationalism?

Against this background, this book is fascinating for two reasons. First, it is very clear in its intention to make the case for liberalism in international affairs. The book is a compilation of papers presented at a conference, held in mid-2015, which aimed to examine how the Conservative government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper drew from a certain "temperament" in its interaction with the United Nations. This was mostly done through a "desire to line up opinion and policy against the designated offender rather than broker a mutually suitable and face-saving bargain"; an "effort to constrain those members of Canadian civil society who might frustrate the Conservative's [*sic*] foreign aims"; and an "emphasis on tightly controlling the government's message by giving its diplomats scripts rather than the freedom to exercise personal discretion" (p. 4). In that context, the book argues, the "Harperites" (p. 4) engineered nothing less than

the "willful dismantling of Canada's legacy of peacekeeping, multilateralist internationalism, and UN leadership" (p. 6). Every page of this book makes the case, implicitly or explicitly, that this has been a tragic miscalculation, and that the long-held Canadian tradition of liberal internationalism is something to be celebrated and emulated.

At a second level, this book provokes a very interesting thought experiment. The Liberal government of Justin Trudeau is in power in Ottawa--score a victory against the Harperites and all those who doubt the worth and resonance of liberalism in international affairs. But again, the Trump experiment is under way at the White House, with all its "America first" bluster and the uncertainty it sows about the post-1945 global liberal order. So then, all the proud tradition of liberal internationalism outlined in the pages of this book, the tradition the Trudeau government now claims as its own, does it ultimately provide long-tested arguments and lines of reasoning able to counter Trump's *realpolitik*? Or if not, does this show that there are inherent flaws in the established tenets of liberalism, and that liberals now have to resign themselves to the fact that Donald Trump has laid them bare?

This is where this book gets to be thought-provoking. Most of the contributors are historians. They focus on specific developments in Canadian diplomatic history, and they highlight how real people made decisions when they were confronted to very concrete consequences for Canada and the world. They write, for instance, about the decisions in Ottawa which led to key moments in the evolution of peacekeeping, the role of women in international organizations, or the interactions between civil society organizations (CSO's) and the United Nations. By approaching the issues in this fashion, the contributors get at the core of liberal internationalism by bringing to light the common aspirations and strategies of all these people working in different times and circumstances.

The two best texts in this regard are by Kim Richard Nossal and Kathryn White. There has never been a clearer-eyed observer of Canadian foreign policy than Kim Richard Nossal. In his chapter, he examines "the pursuit of Canadian romanticism in foreign policy" (p. 161). This tendency to push ideals and values on the global stage, in opposition to the raw quest for national power, has underlain the "motivation that many Canadian leaders have had in trying to effect political change at a systemic level" and it has fit within a broad definition of Canada's interests and priorities (p. 176). Values and ideals have been seen in this regard by Canada as potent agents of change in the world, but just as long as they were pitched in a politically palatable and convincing way--and this is what Canada has tried to do at the UN. This is part, Nossal contends, of what liberal internationalism must look like.

And also, liberal internationalism is not only a choice made by states, as the text by White counters, it is also a choice made by people. Her short afterword underscores the extent to which the "role of civil society in the present and future of the UN is unique, essential, challenging, and here to stay" (p. 221). She writes with great authority (as the president of the United Nations Association of Canada), and she shows how civil society is changing and how, in turn, these changes are transforming the UN system and the broader liberal internationalist project itself. This is also part of what a forward-looking understanding of liberalism in global affairs should look like.

But then again, there is the issue of context. Canadian liberal internationalism did not emerge or exist in a vacuum. The United States decided in 1945 to underwrite a global architecture of institutions and diplomatic habits with the power of its military and its economy. It is within the interstices of that global architecture that Canada was then able to develop the language and practice of liberal internationalism. Again, this is why Donald Trump matters so much today--if the US walks

away from its global leadership role, what will remain of the liberal internationalist project propounded by Canada and others?

This is where this book falters somewhat. It describes well what Canada did regarding this or that issue area related to the promotion of liberal internationalism. It does not consider, however, the broader global context in which Canada acted. The analysis, then, is incomplete. We do not know what Canada did on the basis of its interpretation of the tenets of liberal internationalism, and what was imposed on the country from the outside, through circumstances and conditions not of its own choosing. And the exact lessons of Canada's experience for the wider logic of liberal internationalism and the future of the UN are then harder to decipher.

In that sense, the book does not quite deliver on its subtitle--*Legacies, Limits, Prospects.* The nature of international politics is changing. The rise of China, the resurgence of Russia in Europe as the Trump White House looks the other way, Brexit, and certainly Donald Trump's reticence to endorse either the ideas of America's exceptionalism or American global leadership--all these are creating a world of regions, rather than a globalized world, where the universal values and the worldwide institutions created under the umbrella of the UN will most likely lose their power and their appeal. In that context, the values and the institutions which will underlie the future of liberal internationalism, and that of the UN itself, are difficult to discern at the moment. And what Canada will be able to accomplish at the UN as these changes unfold--what its legacies, its limits, and its prospects are--remains unclear, and certainly so after reading this book.

The world, to repeat the well-worn slogan, needs more Canada. This book has a sense of nostalgia about the days when this was true, and when Canada was a crucial player at the UN and on the world stage. As to the future, we still do not know if Canada will be able to play the same role, and if so, if it will be by returning to old habits and cherished traditions. And this book only leaves us wondering.

Note

[1]. The speech can be found at https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2017/06/address_by_ministerfreelandoncanadasforeignpolicypriorities.h Also see Fareed Zakaria's comments on the speech: Fareed Zakaria, "What Happens When Liberty Fails to Deliver?" *New York Times*, July 25, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/25/books/review/the-retreat-of-western-liberalism-edward-luce.html?_r=0.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo

Citation: Pierre Lizée. Review of Teigrob, Robert; McCullough, Colin. *Canada and the United Nations: Legacies, Limits, Prospects.* H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. September, 2017.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=49562