

Norbert Slenzok

University of Zielona Góra, Poland

LIBERTARIANISM AS AN INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL THEORY

 <https://doi.org/10.2478/ppsr-2025-0007>

► Received: 28 March 2024 ► Accepted: 7 October 2024

Author

Norbert Slenzok is assistant professor at the Institute of Political Science and Administration, University of Zielona Góra. His interests are political philosophy, international relations theory, and social science methodology.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4887-8416> n.slenzok@inpa.uz.zgora.pl**Abstract**

The present article reconstructs an often-neglected international political theory: libertarianism. In what follows, libertarianism is presented as a distinct branch of liberal theory, differing from both classical liberalism and, in particular, modern-day IR liberalism. To this end, the pillars of the libertarian outlook on international relations are reviewed: the sharp distinction between the incentive structures shaping the behavior of state and private actors in anarchy, a critique of public goods theory, the notions of decentralization and secession, and libertarian ethics of war. This reconstruction is followed by a juxtaposition of libertarianism with the major IR paradigms, especially liberalism. The article ends with several suggestions for future libertarian research.

Keywords

Murray Rothbard, Hans-Hermann Hoppe, international relations theory, anarchy, secession, public goods, war, national defense, pacifism

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank two anonymous referees of this journal, whose charitable and illuminating remarks have helped considerably improve the article.

Introduction

Libertarianism (anarcho-capitalism) is a political theory which postulates that society should be organized in a strictly free-market fashion, with all indispensable functions of government such as law-giving, adjudication, and security production being privatized (Barnett 2014; Hoppe 2003; Rothbard 2009, 1047–1057). This desideratum is derived from the precepts of a natural law justice theory predicated on the notions of self-ownership and private property in external holdings springing up from homesteading and voluntary exchanges. In terms of economic analysis, libertarianism draws heavily on the Austrian School of Economics (see Juruś 2012, 10; Kinsella 2009; Rothbard 2006, 27–44)¹.

¹ Better put, this is how libertarianism is understood throughout this paper. There are, of course, alternative, broader definitions of this concept, which in fact prevail in the literature. Some of them extend the notion so that it covers minarchism (the philosophy of a minimal, night-watchman state — see, e.g., Bartyzel 2004, 31–58; Van de Haar 2023, 143). Others inflate it so much that it becomes hardly distinguish-

Libertarian theory is virtually absent from contemporary discussions in International Relations. In mainstream IR textbooks, it does not even get a mention (see Burchill et al. 2005; Czaputowicz 2022; Nye 2007; Jackson, Sørensen 2003). On the other hand, in libertarian scholarship, there is not much conversation with IR literature either (for rare exceptions, see Crovelli 2007; Hankus 2014, 2016b; Huemer 2013). Worse still, no leading libertarian author has ever written a separate treatise on matters typically tackled by students of IR: interstate war and peace, interdependence, the effects of political systems, ideologies, and international institutions on enmity and amity between states, and the like.

This mutual neglect between libertarians and IR scholars is startling. After all, given the standard definition of International Relations as the study of social relations in the absence of a supreme authority (*i.e.*, under *anarchy* [Nye 2007, 3; Waltz 1979]), it would seem only natural for IR theorists and libertarians to learn from each other's work. Furthermore, in light of this definition, it becomes plain that libertarianism *is* in and of itself partly an IR theory, for what it investigates are precisely social relations that occur in anarchy.

The purpose of this article is to fill the aforesaid gap by critically reconstructing libertarianism as a conception that is best designated as an *international political theory*. In contradistinction to exemplary *IR theories* such as contemporary (neo)realism and (neo)liberalism, which by and large stick to the Weberian-positivist idea of scientific value-freedom, the distinctive feature of modern international political theories is that they are supposed to combine a firm grasp of social science with an explicit and serious treatment of philosophical-normative questions (Brown, Eckersley 2018; Van de Haar 2023, 3–6).² As shall be seen, that is exactly how international realities are probed through the libertarian lens.

able from classical liberalism (*e.g.*, Zwolinski and Tomasi 2023). As shall nevertheless be demonstrated, it is exactly the field of international theory where libertarianism, as it is conceptualized here, clearly parts company with other philosophies and theories that tend to be subsumed under the libertarian label. More important still, it is also the only kind of libertarianism whose claims on international matters are different from those of classical liberalism. In a word, anarcho-capitalism is the sole version of libertarianism that offers a distinct outlook on international politics. This justifies the use of a separate name better than the mere fact of the term “liberalism” having been taken over by advocates of egalitarianism and the welfare state, which underlies the broader understanding of “libertarianism” in the Anglo-Saxon public discourse. The following may therefore be read as a case for embracing the narrow definition of libertarianism adopted above at least in the realm of IR (see the conclusions).

² A pragmatic remark is in order at this point. The article has been designed to introduce libertarianism to the IR audience rather than familiarize libertarians and political philosophers with IR theory, which is obviously far too broad a field to be summarized in a single paper. Accordingly, while libertarian insights regarding international politics are explained in some detail, the basic knowledge of IR theory on the part of the reader is simply assumed. Given space limitations, I therefore often use various IR terms of art without providing explicit definitions. This applies in particular to terms whose specific IR definition differs from the one(s) employed in political philosophy. Thus, for instance, by “(neo)liberalism,” “(neo)Marxism,” or “constructivism” I always mean modern IR theories, and not whatever ideological or philosophical notions associated with these names by students of political thought. “(Neo)liberalism/IR liberalism” denotes thereby an IR theory premised on such concepts as interdependence, institutionalism, and democratic peace, as propounded by thinkers such as Joseph Nye, Robert Keohane, Robert Axelrod, and Michael Doyle. This approach is distinguished throughout the article from the international political theory of classical liberalism, which corresponds to the political philosophy known under the same name, propounded by Locke, Smith, Kant, Spencer, and other greats. “(Neo)Marxism” refers to a family of theories expanding upon the Hobson-Lenin notion of imperialism, particularly that laid out by Immanuel Wallerstein. “Constructivism,” in turn, means an approach to IR whereby the key concepts of the discipline such as national interest or the balance of power are considered cultural constructs rather than an

The major thesis advanced in the paper is that not only is libertarianism – as defined above – an international political theory but it is also to be clearly distinguished in this realm from both modern IR liberalism and, perhaps more surprisingly, classical liberalism. This claim will be borne out by, first, adumbrating the constituent ingredients of libertarian international political theory (henceforth: LIPT), and, second, by juxtaposing them with the established IR paradigms of realism, liberalism, Marxism, and constructivism, as well as with the international political theory of classical liberalism. Additionally, the article outlines several areas where LIPT clearly needs refinement. Given the introductory purpose of the paper, these remarks are aimed at opening a discussion rather than proposing any peremptory conclusions.

Methodologically, the article is a rational reconstruction of the views formulated by leading libertarian thinkers, most notably Murray N. Rothbard and Hans-Hermann Hoppe. That is to say, it distills the body of an international political theory from fragments interspersed throughout their written legacy by foregrounding their inner logic and, if need be, identifying flaws and inconsistencies (Lakatos 1981, Linsbichler 2017). Still more specifically, the following involves an immanent (internal) critique. What the article does not question therefore is the soundness of LIPT's first principles. Although the ethics of libertarianism or the economic methodology harnessed in its positive analysis are – like all philosophical propositions – open to various challenges, I simply take them at face value, instead addressing myself to ask what their corollaries are. When contrasting libertarianism with other theories, the comparative method has also been used. The choice of realism, liberalism, Marxism, and constructivism as points of reference has been dictated by two criteria: their prominent position in IR discourse and thematic commonalities with libertarianism. Classical liberalism, on the other hand, while meeting only the second criterion, is discussed as the approach closest to libertarianism, which best highlights the originality of the latter. In turn, the main subjects of comparison – perspectives on anarchy, public goods, secession, and just war – have been selected because of their significance for libertarian theory.

The article unfolds in the following way: section 2 recounts the libertarian case for the state being the primary source of strife in anarchy. In section 3, an overview of Austro-libertarian arguments against the notion of national defense as a public good is given. Section 4 deals with the libertarian idea of secession as a means of liberty and property protection. The focus is shifted still further in the normative direction in section 5, which tackles the libertarian account of just and unjust wars. Section 6 summarizes the reconstruction of LIPT against the background of competing approaches. Section 7 critically hints at areas where improvements on libertarian theory are desirable. The last section wraps up the points of the paper.

The state versus private enterprise in the state of nature

LIPT commences with a simple, conceptual truth about the state. As Hoppe (2021, 190) points out, given the Weberian definition of the state as the legal monopolist of coercion, two further properties follow: first, “the state is the ultimate arbiter in every case of conflict, including conflicts involving itself.... Second, the state is an agency that exercises

objective reality, as per Nicholas Onuf, Friedrich Kratochwil, and Alexander Wendt. This should be borne in mind when reading some parts of the text.

a territorial monopoly of taxation.” States are therefore not demand-responsive enterprises that provide goods and services for willing consumers. Rather, they acquire revenue in contradiction to demand, through confiscation and monopolization (Rothbard 1998, 161–200; 2006, 55–88; Hoppe 2006, 49–52). As Rothbard (2006, 57) explains, “In fact, if you wish to know how libertarians regard the State and any of its acts, simply think of the State as a criminal band, and all of the libertarian attitudes will logically fall into place.”

Thus, states and private companies are confronted with constraints of different kinds and severity. The size of a private enterprise is limited by consumer choices. To derive profit in the free market, it is requisite to offer something that other actors will, at least *ex ante*, find of value (Rothbard 2011a). And since entrepreneurs who are unable to meet the capricious demands of consumers are outcompeted and driven out of the market, the free market also tends to prove efficient *ex post*. States, as tax-funded legal monopolists, do not need to care about the valuations of their services’ recipients to the same extent (Rothbard 2009, 1069–1074; see also Mises 1944). The very presence of other states, however, produces a significant constraint on their actions. For as long as other territorial monopolists exist, citizens may move to them in search for more agreeable living conditions. The multiplicity of states thereby sets in motion a process of competition that leads to the decrement in revenue and the diminishment of coercive powers accruing to each government. It is, then, highly desirable for states to rid themselves of those boundaries. The more successful they are, the fewer competitors remain in operation and the greater their own profit and power (Hoppe 2006, 96–99). Relatedly, to conquer or, at a minimum, subjugate other states brings about at least two advantages: (a) it removes the external constraint on the exploitation of their own population, and (b) allows for enlarging their tax-base by absorbing additional resources of capital, land, and labor. In effect, states exhibit a perpetual tendency toward external expansion and aggression (Rothbard 2000a, 115–132; Hoppe 2021, 227–229).

Certainly, private firms are likewise interested in expansion. Their owners would doubtlessly benefit from eliminating competition and becoming world-scale monopolists, too. One could argue, then, that in statelessness, freed from the state’s control, they would likely seek expansion by the very same means that states employ, that is, through warfare. Yet the obstacles for bellicose conduct faced by states and private actors are different. First off, endowed with the right to tax, states are, *ceteris paribus*, capable of commanding resources far vaster than what private companies or gangs can dream of. Second, state leaders put at risk resources that they do not procure on a voluntary basis. Hence, while war offers them numerous benefits, a large fraction of the cost is invariably borne by the ruled. Third, come war, government is in a position to foist regimentation of the entire economy, which extends to price controls, production quotas, rationing of goods, mandatory deliveries, or even outright nationalization of businesses and industries. Fourth, the economic capacities of states are still further aggrandized by the control over the printing press, which allows for financing war effort through inflation. Fifth, by means of universal draft, every citizen can be conscripted into the military. Sixth, in contrast to criminal gangs, states are able to garner mass approval for their aggressive undertakings thanks to the very ideologies that underpin their legitimation. Typically, crooks and racketeers cannot appeal to the patriotic feelings of their subordinates and victims; statesmen can. Even the most oppressive of them may stimulate popular support by calling people to arms in defense of the homeland against threats, real and unreal. Finally, by controlling

the educational system and, especially in wartime, oftentimes also mass media, states are capable of fomenting and sustaining prowar sentiments on an unparalleled scale (Higgs 1987; Huemer 2013, 252–253, 200–238; Hoppe 2006, 100).

In sharp contrast, private actors lack the wherewithal to do any of the said things. Additionally, unable to externalize the costs of aggression, they have to be much more careful than states in doing their profit and loss calculations with regard to military conflict. Therefore, a war between private security agencies (or simply gangs) operating under anarcho-capitalism, repeatedly invoked in the literature as a grave threat to the system's stability, while certainly not impossible, proves less likely than interstate war (Huemer 2013, 200–238; Tannehill 1970; for a standard exposition of the gang war objection, see Thomas 2008).

Against public goods theory

Modern mainstream IR has been profoundly influenced by modern mainstream economics (Brown 2018, 553–554). It therefore comes as no surprise that theorems which earned near-unanimous approval across the economic profession are hardly ever called into question by IR scholars (Marxists being an obvious exception). One such theorem, tacitly or explicitly embraced as of the highest relevance for the entire discipline, is public goods theory. In a nutshell, the theory, first propounded by Paul Samuelson (1954), has it that there exist goods the provision of which is best or even necessarily vested in the hands of government. This is supposed to be the case by virtue of the distinctive feature of those goods: non-excludability.³ In the perhaps most frequently cited example of national defense, the tax-avoider (or the conscious objector, if you will) cannot be deprived of the services of the military. As long as he remains within a state's territory, the armed forces protect him whether he pays or not. As a result, powerful incentives for free-riding are generated, and hypothetical private production of defense is rendered suboptimal. Arguably, it is the notion of public goods that, as a background theory of today's IR, accounts for its leading lights scarcely entertaining non-state, in particular market, anarchy as a conceivable alternative for the current order composed of nation states.⁴

Informed by Austrian rather than mainstream economics, LIPT takes a decidedly different position toward the production of public goods in general and security in particular. According to the Austrians, public goods theory represents nothing but a remnant of the pre-subjectivist-marginalist era in the history of economics (Hoppe 2006, 9, f. 12). As Walter Block (2003, 309) points out, "one man's meat is often another man's poison." Goods, security included, are valuable not because of their objective features but, ultimately, in the eye of the beholder. If, therefore, there is at least one objector (a libertarian, an anarchist, a pacifist, etc.) who would rather not be protected at all than have security supplied by the state, the public production of security cannot be said to be universally beneficial in the first place (Block 1983, 12). The same is true of any other non-excludable good: if there is anybody displeased by its provision, it simply does not count as a good for

³ For the sake of brevity, I skip the discussion of the second public good criterion: non-rivalrousness in consumption. All the following objections apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to it as well.

⁴ For one laudable exception, see Bull 1995, who nonetheless inspects only historical stateless orders and the state of nature as described by the classical social contract theorists, not the theory of anarcho-capitalism.

that person. Speaking more generally, no resource or service can be deemed a good unless it is demonstrated to be one by an agent voluntarily opting to use it.

Furthermore, public goods theory ignores the very starting point of all economizing: scarcity. Stated more precisely, whether to produce goods like military defense or not is not exactly the problem with which we are confronted. For even if those things are desirable, they still must compete with other goods that require the same factors of production. Hence, it remains an open question how much of the putatively public goods is to be produced in comparison to the alternatives. What needs to be decided is what quantity of gasoline, oil, steel, rubber, manpower, etc., is to be employed for the purposes of defense and thus withdrawn from competing industries. To resort to government decree in settling the issue is to unilaterally declare the output a good rather than to address an otherwise existent demand for it (Hoppe 2006, 14).

Moreover, from the vantage point of subjectivist-marginalist economics, there is no such thing as “security” *per se*. Instead, there exist multifarious services subject to separate valuations on the part of consumers, reflected in the market prices. Put differently, the very notion of defense – or any other so-called public good, for that matter – must be dehomogenized (Hoppe 2021, 214–216). Contrary to the public goods theory, it is manifestly not the case that all the people residing across the whole territory of a state benefit from the provision of national defense in the same way. Inhabitants of the capital city are certainly more likely to be bombed by invaders than persons living in a small town located far away from the border with an enemy state. Estate owners have far more valuable possessions to be protected than the homeless. Inlike manner, people’s individual preferences vary greatly as regards specific threats and security services versus competing goods. A lonely, childless fellow expecting to die before reaching the age of sixty because of a genetic disease may be reasonably interested in having the police look after his apartment. He may, however, prefer spending income on luxury holidays to it being invested in the buildup of a standing army deterring a remote threat unlikely to materialize while he is still around. In the free market, insurance policies would then have to cover a wide variety of different security packages instead of the artificially homogenized “national defense.”

Last but not least, it cannot be emphasized enough that state borders are not objectively given. Instead, they represent a historical artifact that itself brings the commonality of security interests into existence (to the extent that it obtains to begin with) rather than responds to it. The region of Silesia, for instance, the majority of which now lies in Poland, would switch hands a number of times between Czechia, Poland, Austria, Prussia, and Germany. Regarding any point in history, then, it would be absurd to conclude that the security interests of its people objectively converged with those of their Czech, Polish, Austrian, Prussian, or German compatriots, to which the provision of defense by the respective states was a scientifically justified response.⁵

Decentralization and secession

As many prominent libertarians argue (see the essays collected in Gordon 1998), the more monopolists of coercion (states) are in operation, the better in terms of economic pros-

⁵ Space constraints prohibit me from delving into more specific ideas as to how military defense could be produced in a purely free-market, stateless system. For this, see Hoppe 2021, 209–214; Huemer 2013, 288–320; Hülsmann 2003; Murphy 2017.

perity and individual freedom. *Political* disintegration fosters *economic* integration. The smaller states are, the easier it becomes to migrate between them. Out of fear of losing their productive population and capital, states are thereby forced to compete with one another by creating livable regimes. This gives rise to internal liberalization. For over a long period of time, it is the more pro-market nations that are capable of guaranteeing a more business-friendly environment and a higher standard of living (Hoppe 2007, 115).

Moreover, fragmentation of states reduces their ability to pursue policies of protectionism. Bigger countries like the US, mainland China, or Russia can afford cutting economic ties with foreign partners thanks to the resources they possess at home. By contrast, San Marino's or Liechtenstein's adopting protectionism would likely wind up in mass starvation (Rothbard 2000b, 83–84).

Lastly, with the growing number of states and national currencies, transaction costs and exchange rate risks increase. As a result, political decentralization engenders incentives for the institution of one international currency, which facilitates further tightening of economic bonds between nations (Hoppe 2007, 116). According to Austrian school economists, such a universal medium of exchange is supposed to be a commodity (gold, silver, etc.) money arising out of free market dealings rather than a fiat paper money issued by government (see the classic discussion in Mises 2009).

That being said, the overall significance of state secession in libertarian international theory, albeit high, should not be overstated. Most importantly, in libertarian justice theory – which constitutes the very foundation of libertarianism as a whole – there is no such thing as collective rights, including the right of nations or subnational groups to self-determination in the sense of creating a statehood of their own. All states, also minuscule ones, are said to exist only owing to infringements upon individual rights. Thus, whatever the merits of smaller polities, they still can be viewed as a mere lesser evil. There exists no right to establish them that would follow deductively from the first principles of libertarianism, some renowned libertarian scholars to the contrary notwithstanding (cf. Block 2007).

Furthermore, the libertarian case for secession is made under the *ceteris paribus* clause. That is to say, it could be that in a particular situation, the universal benefits of secession described by LIPT will be outweighed or undermined by some less favorable contingencies. Did, for instance, a secessionist movement aim at establishing a communist republic or perpetrating a genocide, supporting it could hardly be considered a reasonable libertarian policy. And if the goal of the separatists is not to maintain their own state but rather to join a larger entity (as is the case with the pro-Russian groupings in Georgia or Ukraine), then, needless to say, none of the above-outlined arguments for secession applies to their cause. Accordingly, the libertarian outlook on international politics does not consist in blindly supporting each and every separatist movement, irrespective of its actual politics. The backing of any such movement must be preceded by a meticulous context analysis and prudential weighing of the costs and benefits of a particular act of secession.

On the other hand, the libertarian sympathy for the small need not always produce an opposition to the nation-state. At times, it may also prompt libertarians to defend it against greater centralizing forces. The libertarian perspective on contemporary international realities is then marked by a fierce criticism of international organizations and imperialism (or, what libertarians see as imperialism). In particular, all the foremost libertarian thinkers portray the post-Cold War unipolarity and the US-led liberal world order

as a global tyranny on an unprecedented scale, with Washington DC superimposing its agenda across the globe through military interventions, orchestrated coups, and Dollar imperialism (see Block 2018; Hoppe 2006, 77–116; Rothbard 2006, 347–353). Similarly, libertarians are skeptical of the European Union, and vehemently reject any attempts to transform it into anything more than a common market, or into a federal state, for that matter (Bagus 2010; McMaken 2022, 94–95).

Are there any just state wars?

One field where libertarian antistatist radicalism comes to light most pronouncedly is the question of just war. In the American public discourse, libertarianism is traditionally associated with an isolationist, *America First!* type of policies (Van de Haar 2023, 153). This is in no small part due to the prominence of Ron Paul, a two-times (2008, 2012) libertarian candidate in the Republican Party presidential primaries known for his staunch opposition to all US foreign intervention (who also happens to have been profoundly inspired by Rothbard's thought). In Paul's opinion, not only is foreign intervention nothing other than a massive redistribution scheme whereby the Beltway foreign policy establishment, the industrial-military complex, and foreign governments benefit at the expense of the American taxpayer but it also jeopardizes international peace and the security of the US itself. There is, however, one legitimate role to play for the US military forces: the defense of American citizens (Paul 2007).

Yet as pointed out by Fernando Tesón (2022, 444), this position is hardly libertarian. In fact, it seems to be animated by a mixture of classical liberalism and nationalism: the government is expected to protect "us," i.e., the domestic population (taxpayers) of a country. But from the purely libertarian standpoint, there is no such thing as "us" in the sense of a national unit endowed with rights. The sole right-holders are individuals. (Moreover, in light of the Austrian criticism of the public goods theory, there is no territorial unit to be defended from the economic perspective either.) Consequently, domestic tax-recipients are in no better position to expect defense at the expense of taxpayers than foreigners. Conversely, if domestic tax-recipients may be protected for some reason (should a war come, the costs of maintaining military forces will have been borne already anyway), then why not help victims of aggression abroad?

However, as Rothbard (1998, 189–200; 2000a, 116–130; 2006, 329–370) argues, there exist truly principled grounds that preclude any modern state war, including a strictly defensive one, as justified. First off, since states' claims to the lands they control are necessarily illegitimate, premised on the contravention of genuine, individual rights, no analogy obtains between the right to self-defense held by individual persons and the putative right of the state to wage defensive wars (Rothbard 2006, 334–335). Hence, if a state is to launch a just war, it has to be a war in defense of individual victims of rights violations (*ius ad bellum*). Now, says Rothbard, for such a war to be just, three further conditions would have to be met in terms of *ius in bello*: "(a) weapons limited so that no civilians were injured in their persons or property; (b) volunteer rather than conscript armies; and also (c) financing by voluntary methods instead of taxation" (Rothbard 2006, 336). Let us note that (b), while frequently violated, in particular during defensive campaigns, may well be (and often is) satisfied. In turn, (c) would be fulfilled by a minimal, tax-free state as advocated by minarchists (such as Nozick, 2001; Rand, 1964) and radical classical liberals (such

as Herbert, 2012). Moreover, it is indeed highly unlikely, albeit not impossible, that the conduct of a particular war will result in no tax burden added to the otherwise imposed sum. The decisive libertarian argument against modern state war therefore lies in (a).

Contemporary wars between states involve the use of weapons which incontrovertibly cannot be deployed in such a fashion that no innocent person or their property be harmed. This fact alone renders today's state warfare ethically impermissible for the libertarian (Rothbard 2000a, 130). The standard escape route from this conclusion invoked in the modern literature on just war is the double effect doctrine (DED). On DED, harming innocents is morally excusable provided that (1) it represents collateral damage, i.e., it is not intended (it may be foreseen, though), and (2) it is necessary to avoid a greater evil (see Walzer 2015, 183–185). Libertarians dismiss DED on both counts. Insofar as (1) is concerned, purpose does not matter. What has a bearing on moral judgment is only whether individual rights have been deliberately infringed upon. Premise (2) does not hold either, because in the libertarian ethics, there is no room for value-weighting; the whole theory revolves exclusively around individual rights, which are conceived of as inviolable (Tesón 2022, 445). Thus, Rothbard (2000a, 126), concludes, the libertarian policy toward modern state warfare must be one of unwavering pacifism: "The libertarian objective, then, should be, regardless of the specific causes of any conflict, to pressure States not to launch wars against other States and, should a war break out, to pressure them to sue for peace and negotiate a cease-fire and peace treaty as quickly as physically possible." Concomitantly, Rothbard insists that all third-party states abstain from any engagement in a conflict by declaring strict neutrality (Rothbard 2006, 333). In other words, libertarian justice theory proscribes the formation of any alliances, offensive and defensive alike.

To forestall any misunderstandings, libertarian pacifism is by no means universal. Tesón (2022, 445) aptly dubs this stance "contingent pacifism." First, as already mentioned, libertarians do espouse the right of the individual to defend themselves. Indeed, they see the power of enforcement as part and parcel of what having a right means in the first place (Dominiak, Wysocki, Wójtowicz 2023; Rothbard 1998, 77–84). Second, as Rothbard (2006, 332; see also Hoppe 2007) admits, ancient, medieval, and early modern conflicts could meet all the libertarian criteria for just war owing to the use of weaponry that enabled pinpointing the target and confining damage to the fighting armies. Third, even today, the libertarian just war tenets may, at least in principle, be fulfilled by partisan warfare (Hülsmann 2003; Rothbard 2006, 336–337).⁶

⁶ Certainly, the libertarian war ethics may be critiqued from various angles. Some may find its absolutism untenable in and of itself. This, however, boils down to a debate over the very philosophical foundations of libertarianism. On the other hand, an internal criticism may be raised against the libertarian prohibition of state wars of defense by pointing to something along the lines of the human bullet example famously discussed by Robert Nozick (2001, 34–35). One may argue that there exists a conflict of rights between individuals under attack and the innocent noncombatants whose rights cannot but be violated if the defense is to be successful, as is often the case with modern warfare. To insist upon the full protection of the innocents' rights, it might be held, is to effectively deprive the defenders of their right to self-defense, which in turn entails that their property rights as such are extinguished. Conversely, if the defenders had the right to defend themselves even by infringing upon the rights of the innocents, that would (trivially) implicate the abridgement of those rights. If that were the case, the libertarian justice theory would face a genuine paradox, one requiring the abandonment of rights absolutism. After all, absolute rights cannot be mutually incompatible — if they are, they cannot be honored simultaneously, which puts paid to their absolutism (see analogous ponderings with regard to individual self-defense involving harm to third parties in Dominiak and Wysocki 2023). But again, that would be tantamount to a revision of the libertarian

Libertarianism versus major IR and international theories

Having thus reconstructed the four core ingredients of LIPT, let us now juxtapose it with the established IR paradigms. As shall be demonstrated, LIPT offers an original account of the anarchic realities, unlike any renowned IR school, even though it does bear certain resemblances with them.

On the face of it, libertarianism appears to be entirely at odds with the state-centric and pessimistic worldview of the realists. In sharp contradistinction, libertarians proffer contingent pacifism in regard to modern interstate war. They also emphasize the peaceable potential of (non-state) anarchy. Most remarkably, libertarianism offers a thought-provoking argument against realism. It is not anarchy or the wolfish nature of man that in and of itself accounts for the incidence of war. Contrary to the time-honored claims put forward by both classical social contract theories and realism, whatever the perils of anarchy or human nature are, the incentive structure characteristic of private anarchy is less bellicose than that of interstate anarchy. In a virtual debate with the realist, the libertarian anarchist may therefore bite the bullet by accepting even the most dismal realist vision of the international arena, as defended by John Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism. For even if it is the case that actors operating under anarchy are incentivized to pursue offensive strategies in response to uncertainty regarding the intentions of other actors (see Mearsheimer 2001, 45), the uncertainty that pervades private anarchy is subject to the moderating effects of private property which states haplessly lack.

Even so, there are areas where libertarianism and realism converge. At the end of the day, both find *interstate* wars inevitable. Hence, libertarians can learn a great deal from the literature on power politics that has long been developed in the realist tradition. Specifically, given that libertarianism presents aggressive proclivities as inherent to all statism, states' policies of balancing, be it through the buildup of their own power or alliance formation, become just as understandable as they are from the realist perspective (see the classic treatment in Walt 1990). This, in turn, may cast doubt on the efficacy of the neutrality policy prescribed by libertarian theorists on moral grounds (more on this in the next section).

On the other hand, the Austro-libertarian criticism of the public goods theory impugns the standard economic case for the existence of an objective national interest defined in terms of power and security, which underlies much of contemporary IR theory, particularly in the realist tradition (see Morgenthau 1954). Admittedly, not all IR schools are gainsaid by the Austrian challenge. The concept of national interest is essentially absent in Marxism. Constructivists such as Nicholas Onuf and Alexander Wendt derive it not from

first principles, something which, as said at the beginning, is beyond the remit of this article. Nonetheless, let me at least indicate that I myself am inclined to adopt the orthodox, Rothbardian position. Briefly put, I suggest that the exercise of a jural position, *e.g.*, the power of enforcement with respect to an entitlement, may sometimes be effectively compromised by factual contingencies without the position itself being thereby negated. Suppose you have lost your only comb. Even though you are now actually unable to comb your hair as you please, formally (legally and morally) nothing has changed: as a self-owner, you are still free to do so in the sense of so-called vested liberty, *i.e.*, in that others are invariably duty-bound not to interfere with your combing. Likewise, that you have lost your only comb does not give you a title to use somebody else's comb without their permission. By the same token, that harming a third party *happens to be* the only way you can defend yourself in a *particular situation* does not mean that any conflict of rights occurs: the innocents still have their rights left intact and so you have yours. It is only that permissible means of exercising your rights *happen to be physically unavailable*.

rational choice theorems or any other application of methodological individualism but from a methodologically holistic notion of socially constructed identity to which supraindividual interests can be ascribed (see Wendt 2003). If brought up against their position, the Austro-libertarian case against public goods theory would clearly beg the question. Accordingly, the controversy between libertarians and constructivists would have to be decided by examining the very philosophical foundations of their theories. Still, the critique of public goods theory furnishes a powerful counterargument against all approaches that, as IR liberalism and realism do, try to sustain the idea of national interest along methodologically individualist lines.

Stated more generally, constructivism is the IR theory which is the most difficult to compare with libertarianism. This is because constructivism is largely a philosophy, or a methodology, of IR rather than a theory of international politics. And as has already been observed, the gulf between constructivism and libertarianism in the field of methodology is as huge as that between methodological holism and individualism.⁷ This, however, does not mean that libertarians negate the constitutive influence of ideas on the identity of IR actors. Quite the opposite, they see ideas as an underlying factor of all international politics and war. On the one hand, initiation of violence requires justification. To this end, every state disseminates ideas (religious, nationalist, etc.) that create a divide between „us” and „them.” On the other hand, ideology is the second – apart from the competitive pressure from other states – constraint on the politics of exploitation. If libertarian or pacifistic beliefs are widespread in a society, it may refuse to heed the authority (Hoppe 2006, 53–53; Rothbard 2000a, 61–62). After all, rulers are always in the minority. Hence, in order to stabilize their authority, they must reign not only by force but also through convictions. In short, they have to seek legitimacy. Contrariwise, if anarcho-capitalism ever comes to be, its emergence will have to be preceded by a massive change in public opinion. As Hoppe (2007, 43) puts it, “Ultimately, the course of human history is determined by ideas, whether they are true or false.”⁸

The significance of ideas and ideological shifts notwithstanding, what remains constant is, on the libertarian view, that foreign policy represents a continuation of domestic policy that helps preserve and extend exploitative practices originally established at home. In this respect, the libertarian approach is akin to Marxism and opposed to realism. It belongs in Kenneth Waltz’s “second picture,” which identifies the domestic arrangements

⁷ The rationalist (axiomatic-deductive) and economic methodology, borrowed by libertarians from the Austrian School, certainly brings them closer to neoliberals and structural realists in IR. There nevertheless exist substantial points of contention between the Austrians (and Austro-libertarians) on the one hand, and the economic mainstream (on which mainstream IR theorists build) on the other. These include perspectives on empirical falsifiability (Austrian apriorism versus mainstream empiricism), economic agency (Austrian *homo agens* versus mainstream *homo economicus*), mathematical formalism and modeling (embraced by mainstream economists but rejected by Austrians), and subjectivism (as illustrated by the discussion of the public goods problem). For succinct overviews of those disputes, see de Soto 1998; Wiśniewski 2014. However, the questions of methodology are broad and intricate, and both economists and IR scholars are so divided on them (even within particular schools), that comparing libertarianism to other paradigms in this respect merits another article. Here, I have therefore focused solely on substantive matters.

⁸ This contention is no coincidence. It is anchored in the Austrian theory of human action (praxeology), according to which the point of departure for social science is the fact that human beings behave in a purposeful manner (*i.e.*, they act). This, in turn, entails that they act on their convictions (see Mises 2007).

of international actors as the root cause of conflicts (Waltz 2018, 80–158).⁹ In the same vein, and again similarly to Marxists, libertarians often underline the state's being instrumentalized by politically-connected fractions of private business (called *crony-capitalists* or *cronies*) in reaping the fruits of redistribution (Hoppe 2006, 130–133; Long 2018). This encompasses foreign policy analyses, where the behind-the-scenes machinations of the industrial-military complex or the banking sector are frequently cited as a key factor (Rothbard 2011b).

Funnily enough, the libertarian outlook on decentralization and secession is also not quite unlike the neo-Marxist view, laid out most elaborately by Immanuel Wallerstein, except that neo-Marxists do not find the outcome to their liking. For they, too, perceive the nation state, and the micro-state, for that matter, as a linchpin of capitalism in what they refer to as the modern world-system. Private business, they argue, benefits from the multiplicity of states by taking advantage of their relative weakness and the resultant inability to impose higher taxation and heavier regulations (Wallerstein 1984). Of course, these affinities do not alter the fact that libertarianism and Marxism are poles apart in terms of their philosophical foundations, and that the key notions shared by them (e.g., class and exploitation) are conceptualized differently (Hoppe 2006, 117–138; Long 2018).

Interestingly, libertarianism plainly diverges from IR liberalism (neoliberalism) (Hankus 2016b). In the first place, the received neoliberal view on anarchy is the exact opposite of the libertarian approach: the commonplace outlook on stateless anarchy as inevitably permeated by conflict is taken for granted, while the hopes for peace among states are high. These are based on the three major peace theories: democratic, commercial, and institutional (see Mearsheimer 2018). Institutional peace is rejected by libertarians explicitly and unanimously. Although international law and organizations might be beneficial, many such organizations surpass even the nation-state in their centralizing scope. To top it all off, collective security organizations such as the League of Nations or the UN either do not serve their purpose of punishing aggressors or, if they do, may aggravate conflicts by internationalizing them (Rothbard 2006, 334).

Theories of commercial peace are not directly targeted by libertarian critics of modern-day liberalism (nor are they explicitly embraced by them). Likewise, in the Austro-libertarian literature, not much has been written on which forms of government facilitate peace, and which produce belligerence. The only libertarian thinker who has written on the topic extensively is Hoppe (2006, 102–107; 2007; 2021, 229–232). This author holds that states which are most liberal domestically simultaneously tend to prove most efficient at fighting wars. For thanks to the relatively moderate degree of exploitation of their own populations, they, *ceteris paribus*, command the most prosperous economies. And since relatively liberal states stand a better chance at success, it is also they that are more likely to wage wars (Hoppe 2006, 102–107). Additionally, Hoppe famously argues that democracies are more bellicose than monarchies because of the tragedy of the commons phenomenon. To Hoppe's mind, monarchs, being private owners of their realm, are incentivized not to risk the value of their estate by launching wars, and, if war comes, not to ravage the foreign lands they seek to appropriate. Democratic politicians, on the other hand, are

⁹ Not surprisingly so, as the theory of class conflict developed by classical liberals, forerunners of modern-day libertarianism, predates that of Marx (Raico 1993). On the affinities between Marxism and libertarianism and the role played by the notion of class conflict in the latter, see also Hoppe 2006, 117–138; Long 2018.

merely temporary caretakers of their countries, so the cost of war is immaterial insofar as their economic interest is concerned (Hoppe 2007; 2021, 229–232; for a case against Hoppe’s argument, see Slenzok 2024b).

Be that as it may, libertarians are not inclined to put much trust in liberal peace theories for the simple reason that they doubt the very possibility of enduring peaceful coexistence between states. The warlike proclivities of states may perhaps be alleviated, but they will never vanish. Furthermore, as libertarian thinkers stress on sundry occasions, ideas originally designed to hamper the power of the state are not infrequently turned into rationales for its growth (see the criticism of the checks and balances doctrine, in particular the position of independent judiciary, in Rothbard 2000a, 70–77). The same applies to the notions of commercial and, even more so, democratic peace. It was they that supplied the justification for American involvement in both world wars and the fateful post-Cold War interventions in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, and Iraq (Hoppe 2021, 232–237; for a similar critique by a mainstream IR theorist, see Mearsheimer 2018). As Hoppe (2021, 233) observes, the practical conclusion from the democratic peace theory is often that “[t]oday, many states are not democratic and resist internal democratic reform. Hence, war must be waged on those states in order to convert them to democracy and thus create lasting peace.”

As regards classical liberalism, dissimilarities to libertarianism are less striking but still noticeable.¹⁰ To begin with, it was precisely classical liberals (and their predecessor Hobbes) who set forth the standard accounts of the state of nature (stateless anarchy) as more perilous than interstate anarchy. Moreover, although most classical liberals could not have been aware of the public goods theory, they nonetheless believed that there is something to such essential services as national defense that makes it impossible for them to be efficiently provided by any entity but the state. By the same token, classical liberals (and libertarian minarchists) cannot adopt the prohibition of all interstate war (including a defensive one) characteristic of libertarianism, since that would contradict one of the core postulates of their political theory, that is, the idea of a defensive state protecting its citizenry from foreign aggression.

Perhaps less obviously, the typical classical-liberal outlook on secession starkly contrasts with that of libertarianism. As Eric Hobsbawm (1992, 34) notes, liberals of the 19th century tended to favor larger states over smaller ones. For the former appeared to represent the forces of progress and socio-economic integration, whereas the latter were considered vestiges of the premodern feudal order. Hence the presence of German and Italian liberals in the unification movements of their nations was not a coincidence but a rendition of their systematic commitments (see Langewiesche 1999).

Regardless of these differences, classical liberalism is doubtless the IR approach that is closest to libertarianism. Despite displaying a soft spot for larger, “historical” nations, classical liberals did endorse the anarchic plurality of sovereign nation-states as a prerequisite of individual freedom, and some of them – like Richard Cobden and Herbert Spencer – were known for activism against the imperialism of their own nation, thereby foreshadowing the later libertarian position (Van de Haar 2023, 143–146). Consequently, in contrast to IR (neo)liberals, classical liberals were – and their modern continuators still are – highly skeptical of foreign humanitarian interventions and international organiza-

¹⁰ I draw here on Edwin Van de Haar’s exquisite contribution (2023). This scholar plausibly argues that international political theories of classical liberalism and IR (neo)liberalism should be delineated from one another.

tions unless their scope was strictly limited to, respectively, extreme human rights violations and the prohibition of protectionist policies (Van de Haar 2023, 90–96; see also a paradigmatic argument in Hayek 2001, 225–244). In short, just as libertarians, classical liberals believe in “universal rights, enforced locally” (McMaken 2022, 15), only that libertarians brought this idea to the extreme. Equally importantly, as international political rather than IR theorists, classical liberals ground their views on international politics in an individualist political philosophy and ethics, a perspective which has virtually vanished from contemporary debates in the field of IR.

The standpoint of LIPT *vis a vis* the other IR schools under discussion is concisely summarized in the table below¹¹:

Table 1. Libertarianism versus rival theories of international politics

Theory	Anarchy	Public goods	Secession	Just war
Libertarianism	Warlike under statism, potentially peaceable in statelessness	Nonexistent	Desirable in principle	None under contemporary statism, retaliatory under statelessness and early statism
Classical liberalism	Relatively warlike in statelessness, relatively peaceable under statism	Provided by states	Conditionally justified, often unwelcome	Defensive, foreign humanitarian interventions justifiable <i>in extremis</i>
IR liberalism (neoliberalism)	Relatively warlike in statelessness, relatively peaceable under statism	Provided by states	Conditionally justified, often unwelcome	Defensive, foreign interventions justifiable for the sake of human rights protection
Realism	More or less warlike	Provided by states	Undesirable as destructive for international stability	Both defensive and aggressive – if and only if instrumental for the national interest
Neo-Marxism	More or less warlike	Provided by states	Desirable when done by revolutionary nations, often suspicious as potentially conducive to the interests of capital	Of class and/or national liberation
Constructivism	<i>What states make of it</i> ¹²	Provided by states	–	–

Source: Author.

¹¹ I have taken the liberty of not discussing some of the issues mentioned in the table in the main text. I assume them to be common knowledge.

¹² This famous phrase is obviously due to Alexander Wendt (1992).

Problems

Before this article is concluded, let me end it on a more critical note by raising three broad issues that I believe should be addressed by future libertarian IR scholars.

First, and most important, there is an elephant in the room inhabited by the otherwise mutually consistent four libertarian claims. To wit, there appears to be a tension between libertarian secessionism on the one hand, and the belief in the bellicose nature of the state coupled with the stringent prohibition of virtually all state war on the other. To put it bluntly, what is the point of seeking to have as many states as possible if the means of defending their independence are so limited and threats so ubiquitous? As intimated above, in view of the dangers of interstate anarchy, the choice of neutrality may prove suicidal for small states that face a powerful bully. Policies of armaments and alliance formation traditionally recommended by realists appear far more prudent. Libertarians, therefore, seem to be presented with a tragic dilemma: what is suggested by prudence is at the same time proscribed by justice.¹³

As with every dilemma, libertarians may approach this predicament by tackling either of the dilemma's horns. Yet jettisoning contingent pacifism would probably come at a great philosophical cost, as it would arguably require truncating the absolutism of individual rights. In other words, it would take a substantial change in the very foundations of libertarian theory. State secession does not occupy such a central place in it. Libertarians may, then, follow the path indicated in this paper: consider support for state secession a rule of thumb rather than a keystone of their grand strategy.¹⁴ Another promising option would be to in some way attenuate the claim that all states are belligerent by nature, irrespective of their ideology, political system, or social makeup. If conditions that considerably reduce the bellicosity of states exist, then deterrence may at least sometimes be unnecessary, and the justice versus prudence dilemma might be alleviated.

This last issue becomes all the more urgent given another problem arising from the combination of libertarian secessionism and pessimism with respect to interstate peace. If all states are naturally inclined to wage wars, then, plain and simple, more states equals more wars. To make things worse, if the purpose of warfare is to eliminate competition and aggrandize one's tax base, then small states are incentivized to fight each other more than large states do, for it is they whose vulnerability to competition is particularly high and tax base small. At the end of the day, this dynamic is exactly what libertarians see as the root of the historical process of centralization (Hoppe 2007). As Przemysław Hankus (2016a, 32) notes, the interplay between secession and expansionism would thus set in

¹³ Still, the solution implied by libertarian ethics — that is, the choice of justice — is not one of the Kantian “let justice be done, though the world perish” kind. Balancing policies are ultimately aimed at preserving states’ independence, not peace, to which the shortest way is surrender (see Kissinger 1994, 21). Did, therefore, policymakers all of a sudden embrace Rothbardian war ethics, there would, at worst, be less independence and freedom in the world, but it would not “perish.”

¹⁴ The present discussion pertains to state secession. What sometimes escapes the attention of scholars is that in libertarianism, there are in fact two distinct secessionist strategies: (1) the postulate that existing states be dissolved into smaller ones and (2) the idea of stateless secession, *i.e.*, of an immediate leap to anarcho-capitalism through the creation of a stateless territory (see Slenzok 2024a). The latter conception is by all means central to libertarianism. (An anonymous PPSR reviewer objects that this usage of “secession” is atypical, as the word normally denotes the establishment of another state. That is correct, but in so saying, libertarians simply follow in their own tradition of the right to secession stretching as far as to the level of “every individual person,” which dates back to Ludwig von Mises [1985/1927, 110].)

motion a vicious circle whereby big states are dissolved only to arise again out of the small ones' imperialism.

Second, and related, what remains unclarified in the libertarian literature is the extent to which international politics is shaped by ideational structures. While libertarians purport to view them as a pillar of all politics, this does not seem to be fully reflected in their views on interstate relations. A more comprehensive exploration of the role of ideas in informing international politics would have to consist, *inter alia*, in pondering the question of which ideologies foster peace, and which induce war between states. For if, as libertarians ceaselessly reiterate, ideas matter, then it cannot be the case that states are equally warlike their prevailing ideologies notwithstanding.

This brings us to the third, and final, point. To wit, it is apparent that libertarians need to somewhat redirect their attention from comparative analysis of state and stateless anarchy to one focusing on the workings of the former. Although the libertarian anarchy theory no doubt provides a number of valuable and inspiring insights, its relevance to the world we live in, i.e., a world divided between nation states, remains limited. As has already been indicated, the most striking gap in the libertarian analyses of interstate relations is the lack of a thorough treatment of war-inducing and war-preventing factors. To remedy this shortcoming, libertarians are well-advised to draw on those schools that devoted a large chunk of their legacy to these problems, i.e., liberalism and realism.

In doing so, libertarian theorists should in particular engage more intensely in the liberal peace debate. Whereas, as has been seen, Hoppe rejects the notion completely, his critical stance is not a subject of consensus among libertarian authors. Rothbard, for his part, did not take any position on the question whether forms of government vary in terms of bellicosity. In turn, Michael Huemer (2013, 303–305), an anarcho-capitalist philosopher writing outside of the Rothbardian tradition, takes the democratic peace theory at face value. At any rate, the libertarian scholarship on the topic is sparse and inexhaustive, even though the problem itself is by all means germane to libertarian politics. If democratic peace theory does hold after all, it might predict serendipitous conditions for state secession or the emergence of a stateless order should these take place in the vicinity of liberal-democratic states (Huemer 2013, 303–305). Admittedly, democratic peace theory does not maintain that democracies never fight (or aggress). All it claims is that they do not fight each other (Doyle 1986), and stateless, free market territories are certainly not democracies. Nonetheless, and related to the previous point, if some democratic peace theorists are correct in arguing that the reason there are no (or few) wars between liberal democracies is not so much democracy as liberalism, especially the shared belief in the liberal values of peace and cooperation (Doyle 1983), then peaceful coexistence between secessionist Liechtensteins, libertarian anarchic territories, and adjacent liberal-democratic states might be no more of a utopia than peaceful coexistence between Germany and France. (In fact, the real Liechtenstein and other micro-states did refuse to participate in “security competition,” and yet survived unattacked; there must be a reason for it.) By contrast, in the doom and gloom, all-states-are-hardwired-to-war picture drawn by Rothbard and Hoppe, the prospects of secession look far grimmer, as secessionists would be likely to confront a foreign invasion in any circumstances wherein a state still existed in the neighborhood.

Conclusions

This article has reconstructed libertarianism as an international political theory comprising four quintessential components: (1) the market-anarchist account of private vs. interstate anarchy, (2) the critique of public goods theory, (3) the embrace of decentralization and secession as means to promote liberty, and (4) contingent pacifism with respect to modern state war. Understood thusly, libertarianism has been compared to other, better-established IR paradigms and international political theories. This juxtaposition helped distinguish libertarianism not only from its obvious rivals such as realism and Marxism but also from IR (neo)liberalism and classical liberalism. The importance of the latter upshot lies in the rejection of the commonplace tendency to equate libertarianism with classical liberalism. In the area of international relations, libertarianism, as propounded by Rothbard and his followers, proves to be a distinct international political theory. This finding contributes to the old debate over the boundaries of libertarianism and its demarcation from other varieties of liberalism (see Juruś 2012; Kinsella 2009; Nowakowski 2016). Since anarcho-capitalism is the only liberal theory that rejects statism altogether, it is also the only one that, unlike classical liberalism and minarchism, contains (1) and (4). Regarding (2), even though the embrace of market anarchism does not logically presuppose the rejection of public goods theory (see a case for anarcho-capitalism that actually comprises it in Friedman 2014), the latter certainly adds to an anarchist worldview, and is absent from any other international theory. Finally, insofar as (3) is concerned, while classical liberals and minarchists may be inclined to support state secession on the same grounds libertarian anarchists do, historically it has scarcely been so.

In the critical section of the article, three problems of LIPT have been brought up. First, the libertarian just war theory, secessionism, and the thesis about the uncorrectably warlike nature of the state are hardly reconcilable with one another. To uphold the others, at least one must be eschewed or mitigated. Second, in line with their general assertions, libertarians should pay more attention to the role of ideas in international politics, especially in pacifying or galvanizing conflicts. Third, focused on contrasting interstate anarchy with statelessness, libertarianism does not have much to offer insofar as comparisons between different statist arrangements (both domestic and international) are concerned. This, as the paper submits, should be remedied by drawing on those schools in IR that specialize in this very kind of analysis, in particular on liberalism and realism.

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