Moral Anxiety after the Liberal International Order

Damir Mladić*

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ABSTRACT

The author examines two moral narratives and the moral anxiety they generate in the West during the period following the liberal international order. Current developments in international politics seem to foster more exclusive political and moral communities than in the past several decades of the global liberal order, with moral justifications often employed to support these trends. This has led to a clash between two distinct moral narratives: one that justifies the exclusivity of political and moral communities, emphasizing self-protection and the safeguarding of core values, and another that advocates for inclusiveness, promoting moral cosmopolitanism. Ultimately, the dominant moral narrative may play an important role in shaping the future of the global political order.

Key words: liberal international order; moral anxiety; moral narrative; populism; cosmopolitanism

With,
Without,
No one denies,
That's what the fighting's all about.

Pink Floyd, Us and Them, Dark Side of the Moon, 1973.

INTRODUCTION: THE END OF THE LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER?

It could be argued that, in a simplified yet statistically supported way, humankind enjoys a better life at the beginning of the 21st century than ever before. For example, despite our instinctive programming that tells us the world is getting worse, adopting a fact-based worldview shows that the world is better than it was in the past (Rosling et al., 2019). However, that does not mean it will remain that way or that this world is free

* Damir Mladić, assistant prof. Libertas International University, dmladic@libertas.hr

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of moral anxieties. Perhaps, like the Belle Époque before the First World War, future historians will refer to this period as the "golden age" of human history. Globally, people are more prosperous, educated, wealthy, healthy, interconnected, and peaceful than ever before (Pinker, 2011; 2018). Many believe that this success is attributable to the liberal international or rule-based order that has governed the world for the past several decades. From a moral perspective, the differences between political communities appeared less significant than their similarities. More than ever before, humanity was perceived as a moral community, and thinking of oneself as a citizen of the world was much easier, with the future appearing brighter. The belief in a common human destiny, along with shared interests and values of a universal human community – including human rights – has played an important role in official international discourse. For at least some time, this has been a liberal dream in the making.

However, after a few decades of liberal triumphalism (Fukuyama, 1989; 1992) and ensuing liberal complacency, something has changed. Recently, especially in the West, a growing number of people not only are losing faith in the liberal international order but also feel a repulsion toward liberal values at home. Among other factors, the insistence on greater inclusivity, combined with "woke" culture, is perceived by some conservative groups as emblematic of liberalism (Serwer, 2023). They tend to describe liberals as destroyers of the "true" national identity and institutions, and this characterization seems to resonate with the moral justification for the backlash against liberal values domestically. At the international level, the liberal international order appears to have been in retreat since the mid-2000s: the number of liberal democracies stopped growing and has declined since then, particularly after 2015. According to Mearsheimer, "the world became multipolar in or close to 2016, and that the shift away from unipolarity is a death sentence for the liberal international order" (2019: 8). For Mearsheimer, the liberal international order is doomed because it privileges international institutions and open borders over domestic considerations, putting it into direct conflict with the more powerful ideology of nationalism; this confrontation with a stronger rival sows the seeds of its own destruction (Mearsheimer, 2019).

But what comes after the liberal international order? By "post-liberal international order" I do not intend to define, describe, or predict its precise form; rather, I use the term to denote the period directly following the liberal (or rules-based) international order. From a moral perspective – central to my account of pervasive moral narratives – I regard it as a transitional phase in the West, marked by uncertainty and moral confusion that undermine faith in liberal values and the existing world order. During this period, new illiberal nationalist movements arise within the West (internal challenges), while successful authoritarian powers emerge externally (external challenges). To liberal observers, these phenomena may initially seem like overreactions to the flaws and injustices of the liberal international order; yet those very flaws have provided the foundation for a populist moral narrative.

Be that as it may, the rise of illiberal movements in the West – representing the strongest expression of dissent against the global liberal establishment – cannot be ignored and should not be considered merely a temporary overreaction. The rationale behind illiberal populism is gaining acceptance among many groups and individuals,

and not only conservative ones. In addition, in a world dominated by strong leaders such as Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, Narendra Modi, and others, authoritarian tendencies are also emerging in some Western countries. The end of the unipolar moment, the global financial crash of 2008, the migrant crisis of 2015, the rise of illiberal populist forces in the West, among other factors, all seem to suggest that "we are witnessing the end-times of the liberal world order" (Duncombe i Dunne, 2018: 25).

These negative reactions to the liberal international "never better" world raise a very intriguing moral question: If the liberal international order promised to bring peace, freedom, and prosperity to many – and even advocates for a more just world and protection of individual human rights – how is it that more or less free and prosperous nations, or at least a significant portion of them, view the liberal international order as a morally corrupt and even existential enemy?

This article asks why a substantial portion of citizens in liberal democracies develops moral resistance to the liberal international order, and what roles moral narratives and moral anxiety play in that process. It aims to delineate two ostensibly conflicting moral narratives, analyze their core conceptual content, and explain how they generate moral anxiety and undermine confidence in liberal international values. Because I seek to understand why the populist moral narrative appeals to many while the liberal moral narrative repels them, my descriptions are necessarily asymmetric: I present the values of liberal elites both as significant portions of the Western public perceive them and as those elites commonly profess them to be.

This article does not address the economic, political, or social drivers of rejection of the liberal international order or domestic liberalism. Rather, it concentrates on the moral reasoning that underpins these illiberal tendencies and investigates whether – and how – moral anxiety features within that moral narrative.

For this article, I use the concept of a moral narrative to mean a more-or-less coherent story that a society – or a segment of it – uses to distinguish right from wrong and good from evil, to guide its actions, and to judge those of others. In this article, I attempt to describe two distinct moral narratives – populist and liberal – to identify the sources of contemporary moral anxiety.

The phenomenon of moral anxiety is intrinsically linked to uncertainty, and contemporary conditions are marked by profound and pervasive uncertainty. It is "an aversive emotional response to uncertainty about the correctness of a moral decision one is contemplating (or has made)" (Kurth, 2015: 178). According to Linklater (1998), even in the heyday of the liberal international order, moral anxiety arises from the current state of political and moral development in the West. It happens "when duties to fellow citizens clash with duties to the rest of humankind" (1998: 150). As a critical theorist, Linklater believes that the exclusivity of current political communities, or sovereign nation-states, fosters feelings of shame and guilt associated with the privilege of residing in free and affluent societies that exclude others from that privilege. Such sentiments could diminish with the establishment of more inclusive political communities and a reduction in "us-versus-them" divisions (Linklater, 1998). However, the growing liberal emphasis on inclusiveness and openness has provoked

a populist backlash in the West, redefining "the people" in exclusionary terms and excluding outsiders, liberal elites, and marginalized groups. Rather than feeling shame and guilt, "the people" have grown more morally confident and now declare that "the others" – those they define as outside "the people" – should be ashamed. Following this logic, not only do we withhold moral consideration from those outside our country, but the moral obligation to our fellow citizens is also called into question: some are regarded as true members who share our values ("the real people") and thus deserve moral consideration, while others – liberal elites and other perceived corrupt elements of society – do not. Therefore, the rupture is not only between the nation and the rest of the world; it is also internal to the nation itself. The central criterion of the rupture, be that domestic or international, appears to be corruption understood as a moral category. But how can a morally promising liberal international order – one that calls for universal duties to all human beings – be rejected because it is morally corrupt?

To address the question of rejection of the liberal (international) order through the lens of moral narratives, let us assume that there is a conflict between two different types of moral obligations – one toward those with whom we share most of our values or "the real people", and another toward those with whom we do not share our values but whom we still have a moral obligation to treat as moral beings, whether as fellow citizens or even as fellow human beings. This conflict of duties, it seems, creates multiple levels of uncertainty that lead to moral anxiety in the post-liberal order. First, let us attempt to describe the distinct narratives that underpin these divergent moral duties.

THE MORALITY OF SELF-PROTECTION OF "THE PEOPLE" AGAINST "THE CORRUPTED"

The primary targets of the new nationalist and right-wing populist movements typically include the core beliefs of the liberal international order: the free movement of ideas, goods, capital, and people around the world. These principles and the accompanying global liberal arrangements are perceived as the root cause of various troubles faced by many people in the West. For instance, populist nationalism often argues that multiculturalism, immigration, and job-exporting trade agreements negatively impact ordinary citizens in the West. Corrupted, power-hungry liberal elites are responsible for promoting these institutions and ideas, and thus they are to blame for the suffering of "the people". They have lost connection with their fellow citizens, with "the people," and, as a cosmopolitan elite without roots, have become "citizens of nowhere" (Appiah, 2019). This is not only an ideological struggle but primarily a moral one. As Cas Mudde points out, "populism is not the only ideology that sets "the people" against "the elite" – the key distinction is morality. Populism is based on morals and that creates a whole different interaction, because if you are "pure" and the other person is "corrupt", compromise leads to corruption of the pure. Corrupt people are not legitimate opponents, and that is an important difference" (Hanso, 2023). Liberal corrupt elites, often combined with marginalized segments of society and immigrants, are viewed not only as parasites undermining the domestic productive working classes but also

as groups who actively erode national identity by opening borders excessively to new ideas, cultures, products, and the like – factors that supposedly enable "them" to corrupt "us." According to these illiberal populists, something must be done to address this issue. In this primarily moral struggle for the soul of "the people", "populist portray their political competitors as part of the immoral, corrupt elite… whoever does not support populist parties might not be a proper part of the people – always defined as righteous and morally pure" (Muller, 2016). In this moral narrative, those elites, marginalized segments of the political community, and immigrants are not considered part of "the people," and, being viewed as immoral, can be dismissed. In other words, the "people" in the West should protect itself from its own creation: the liberal (international) order. Therefore, it is not surprising that various forms of protectionism are increasingly regaining popularity in the West. This mirrors the actions of other anti-liberal powers, such as Russia and China, which protect themselves from external influences and exert control over their populations. It seems illogical and self-destructive for the West to adhere to the rules of the liberal international order when other major powers in a new post-liberal world do not.

This moral narrative of self-protection, self-defense, or self-preservation is highly compelling. It appears almost self-evident that human beings not only have the right to defend themselves but also have a natural inclination to shield "us" from "them." In other words, we feel a special loyalty – to members of our group or nation – that we do not extend in the same way to the rest of humanity. Tribalism has a biological and psychological basis, "Our brains distinguish between in-group members and outsiders in a fraction of a second, and they encourage us to be kind to the former but hostile to the latter... The human mind's propensity for us-versus-them thinking runs deep." (Sapolsky, 2019: 42). While humans recognize that the division between "us" and "them" is often arbitrary and fluid, and we even attempt to control and overcome it, the biological and psychological foundations for this division continue to persist. Although the world is a better place today than it was thirty or eighty years ago and more inclusive than ever before, it is not better for all groups, so tribalism is likely to persist for the foreseeable future. The situation suggests that there are also "victims" who feel resentment toward the liberal international order, as they feel somehow excluded from it, and at the same time, seek recognition (Fukuyama, 2018). However, it should be noted that these "victims" are not helpless or devoid of the dignity typically associated with victims. In democracies, they are seen as connected to the power of "the people" and believe they should take action to improve their circumstances. So, there is a kind of moral pressure that demands immediate "action" and is even willing to justify the unwanted consequences of such action by saying something like, "At least he's doing something!" Moral beliefs demand moral actions that stem from these beliefs. On the other hand, these groups and individuals see it as justified to seek support from their government and the state institutions, but they also demand justice for themselves – including punishment for those responsible for their situation in the first place. For the unintended consequences of their own decisions and actions, populists are prone to blame their liberal predecessors or existing liberal institutions. They do not see themselves as responsible for their own circumstances, even in a

meritocratic liberal society; quite the opposite, they believe that the domestic liberal order, liberal elites, and the liberal international system they have established are to blame for their suffering. And not only in economic or social terms. For them, the fight against the liberal order is, in fact, an act of self-preservation of their identity and the very values it embodies. Why is this background story important for the moral narrative of self-protection?

This perspective – that of fighting to protect one's identity – is seen not only as morally acceptable behavior but also as a moral duty to uphold the loyalty of the political community to its members. Consequently, there is a strong nativist push to create a more exclusive community that prioritizes "us" over "them," consolidating "our" unity to defend "our" community across all battlegrounds – moral, ideological, institutional, and economic. Phrases like "Build the walls, protect our jobs, keep our values!" are primarily perceived as morally justified acts of self-preservation. However, there is a price to be paid. In this simplified and somewhat romanticized vision of the political community, all members share the same values, perspectives, and trust in the leadership's solutions to the issues they face. As a result, when confronted with the reality of diverse perspectives within the actual community, those who do not share most of our values or are different in any relevant way from us (according to our own standards) are not truly considered part of "the people" or "us" and are often excluded and dismissed on the grounds of immorality and corruption. Besides the problem that every instance of excluding another human being from moral consideration is morally questionable, this new demand to exclude certain fellow citizens in order to preserve the pure core of "the people" can only generate further moral anxieties – partly because the identity of "the real people" encompasses many sets of values and lacks clear boundaries that can be easily used as criteria for exclusion. For example, what does it mean to be a member of "the real people"? Or, who has the right to exclude legal citizens from "the real people," and on what grounds? It is not surprising that, lacking clear criteria, "the people" often turn to a strong leader for answers. For ordinary citizens seeking clear standards, the uncertainties surrounding these questions produce more – not fewer – moral anxieties.

At the international level, "they" (other states, international organizations, and immigrants just to mention the most important ones) are perceived as individuals and groups who seek to exploit "us" – taking advantage of the delusions and the readiness of our liberal elites to adhere to international rules, including the principles of universal morality, and our willingness to make sacrifices for "them." The narrative suggests that "us" are the good but tough guys, with a right to prioritize taking care of our people first. It also acknowledges that other states have the same right to prioritize the interests of their own "people." Therefore, it is not surprising that populists support populists in other states. Nevertheless, it would be foolish to allow others to take advantage of "us" – especially when we are strong enough to defend ourselves or impose our will. Essentially, the self-protectionist moral narrative can be summarized as follows: It is our moral duty to protect "us" from being exploited or destroyed or corrupted by "them". In the populist view, "they" refers to all those who successfully exploit the global liberal order, both abroad and at home, often at the expense of "the people".

As such, their behavior is perceived as morally unacceptable and must be stopped at all costs. It appears that this moral narrative provides a kind of moral high ground that justifies not caring much about those outside our "pure" political communities. Even fellow citizens are not necessarily considered part of our "pure" people. Many populist politicians in the West employ this moral narrative – replete with vaguely defined enemies such as "corrupt elites" or "globalists" – to gain popular support, and for many people this moral stance matters more than facts, such as the absence of any real exploitation of "us" or the failure to define the enemy precisely. Basically, this means that populist moral stories primarily focus on delineating moral differences between "us" – on the right side – and "them" – on the wrong side – assuming that each side is homogeneous and mutually exclusive, with a clear notion of what is right and wrong – at least on the "right side."

If we treat illiberal and anti-liberal moral stances as impervious to the facts of complex modern liberal democracies – an attitude captured by "we may be wrong in the details, but we are right in the overall view" – can ethics critique populist moral narratives, adjudicate the conflict between duties to "the people" and duties to every human being (even a corrupt one), and dispel moral anxiety? Because ethics seeks to ground moral claims in universality, objectivity, and practicability, it is difficult for populists to justify, on moral grounds, the exclusion of "the others". Before addressing this problem of justification, let us first consider principles of liberal and cosmopolitan morality as articulated by various thinkers and ask: who are these supposedly "corrupt" members of the liberal elite?

IS THE COSMOPOLITAN, UNIVERSAL MORAL NARRATIVE TRULY A (CORRUPT) ENEMY?

Unlike nationalistic populists, liberals view the self-protective moral narrative as excessive. They consider it an overreaction to primarily internal problems of the liberal system that should not be labeled as existential threats but rather as minor setbacks. While there are pressing and significant issues that need to be addressed in the liberal world, such as increasing inequality, these problems, according to liberals, are not fundamentally connected to the core principles of the liberal order; instead, they are seen as challenges related to our ability to learn, adapt, change, and grow. However, after years of expansion during the triumphalism of the 1990s and complacency in the first decade of the 21st century, the liberal international order, facing internal and external threats, is now adopting a more defensive stance. It seems that liberal ideology has lost its *élan vital* and some of its appeal. The self-satisfaction associated with liberal triumphalism has rendered it ideologically passive, and liberal ideas no longer inspire people as they did in the 1990s. Not all people are happy with the freedom that disconnects them from their fellow human beings, from their old, structured communities that were destroyed. In addition, although liberal democracy promises to create a society of politically, legally, and morally equal citizens with equal minimal degrees of freedom and respect, it does not necessarily guarantee that people will be genuinely

equally respected by others or by their government (Fukuyama, 2018). So the need for respect remains strong in liberal democracies. Liberalism, as an ideology, and liberal elites, as a successful part of society that successfully tamed their *thymos* with status, wealth and consumerism, have distanced themselves from ordinary people. Once popular liberal narratives have become, if not outright unpopular, then at least somewhat worn out. According to populists, liberal elites that are successful within the liberal international order have lost their roots and connection to "us", and they are not part of "the people" anymore. As this liberal narrative transcends specific national interests and aligns with a universal moral and political understanding of the human condition, its justifications increasingly seem disconnected from the realities of "the people". This liberal universal moral narrative seems to be too abstract, too far away from the home, too disconnected from the reality of the political community.

Consequently, the target of populist nationalism is often the so-called cosmopolitan or international elite – citizens of the world whom "the people" perceive as caring more about abstract humanity and distant strangers than about their own neighbours or compatriots. Members of the liberal elite are usually identified as bureaucrats in international institutions, cultural and academic elites who promote progressive ideas, journalists from various media who defend liberal principles, politicians from established pro-EU parties across Europe, and executives of international companies and bankers. Populists and nationalists often portray members of this liberal and cosmopolitan elite as power and money-hungry – or even as useful idiots – afflicted by liberal delusions and serving international entities, whether secret or overt, rather than the interests of the people. These individuals are deemed morally corrupt because they are seen as outsiders to the people – members of a privileged international elite that promotes, sustains, and exploits the liberal international order, often at odds with the interests of ordinary people in the West. According to populist politicians, therefore, corrupted cosmopolitans do not have a moral right to lead the people and should be dismissed.

However, as Appiah (2006, 2019) argues, this is not an accurate way to define cosmopolitanism, and furthermore, cosmopolitanism and nationalism are not mutually exclusive – at least not in their less extreme and more realistic forms. "The cosmopolitan task, in fact, is to be able to focus on both far and near. Cosmopolitanism is an expansive act of the moral imagination. It sees human beings as shaping their lives within nesting memberships: a family, a neighborhood, a plurality of overlapping identity groups, spiraling out to encompass all humanity. It asks us to be many things, because we are many things" (Appiah, 2019: 20). At the core of cosmopolitanism is the belief that "Everybody matters" (Appiah, 2006: 144). Therefore, the first cosmopolitan belief is that every individual bears some moral responsibility for all others and that no human being is morally irrelevant. But that does not mean that everybody has the same moral obligations for everyone. The second cosmopolitan belief worth mentioning is that everyone has a right to live their lives as they see fit, and that differences among people are not only acceptable but also "cool". From a cosmopolitan perspective, there is no absolute certainty about one's values; cosmopolitans tend to exhibit moral humility.

Hence, the universality of moral responsibility and pluralism are fundamental tenets of cosmopolitanism. However, it does not mean that cosmopolitanism excludes "the people" in favor of distant others or the broader human community, nor that love for a distant stranger should prevail over love for family or country. Appiah believes that "it would be morally wrong not to favor my relatives when it comes to distributing my limited attention and treasure" (2019: 25). Cosmopolitans can also be good family members, neighbors, and patriots. Being a member of what is often called the liberal elite does not mean that one cannot be a moral person, a caring leader, a good employer, a respectful neighbor, a responsible citizen, or an honorable soldier.

On the other hand, the genuine and reasonable cosmopolitanism described above is not always what the populist moral narrative has in mind when it criticizes liberal elites. So, who are the actual "cosmopolitans" that nationalist populists have in mind? They "are part of a meritocratic order that transforms difference into similarity, by plucking the best and brightest from everywhere and homogenizing them into the peculiar species that we call "global citizens." This species is racially diverse (within limits) and eager to assimilate the fun-seeming bits of foreign cultures – food, a touch of exotic spirituality. But no less than Brexit-voting Cornish villagers, our global citizens think and act as members of a tribe" (Douthat, 2016). According to this and similar descriptions, actual people who see themselves as cosmopolitans are a kind of tribe that does not recognize itself as a tribe but as someone who transcends the limits of nationalistic narrow-mindedness and despises all who think and feel in those terms. However, being members of a tribe does not necessarily make them so different, open-minded, or willing to accept a genuine and reasonable cosmopolitanism, as Appiah describes it. According to this account, there is little moral humility among members of this particular cosmopolitan tribe, and the inclusivity of that tribe can also be questioned. One must be deemed worthy to become part of the liberal elite.

Moreover, within a meritocratic vision of the liberal international order, successful liberal elites may at times seem to regard the common people as losers who do not always deserve respect. Liberalism, as an individualistic ideology, considers meritocracy to be a just principle that should guide the distribution of material and social rewards in both domestic and international spheres. According to this moral global story, common people in the West had a better starting position than most individuals in the rest of the world (for example, better than many workers in underdeveloped economies); however, not all of them were prepared to make the most of it. To put it very simply, it is not the liberal system that is responsible for your misfortunes; rather, it is you as an individual who did not take advantage of your initial better starting position in this global competition. As an individual competing with others, you are not a victim of the liberal system; rather, you are an individual failure and, as such, responsible for your own misfortune. According to this harsh, oversimplified, and arguably unjustified interpretation of individual accountability for success or failure, little respect remains for those who lose in global competition. The state and society are here to provide assistance, but you, as an individual, are called upon to change, adapt, and understand that you cannot live, work, and think as you once did. Unfortunately, many people in the West were unable to do so and feel betrayed by their more successful fellow citizens.

Liberal elites do not fully understand this, especially the idea that the system in which they are successful might be perceived by others as unjust. And populist nationalism surely presents it as unjust from their own perspective.

Generally speaking, within the core ideas of the liberal international order or rule-based order lies a moral narrative that values moral universalism, individual freedom for all human beings, human rights, international cooperation over conflict, agreements based on reciprocity, multilateral deals freely accepted by states, just institutions, the rule of law, and free trade, which promotes global prosperity and peace. None of the features of the liberal moral narrative appears morally corrupt or even morally contestable in itself, but some of their unintended consequences are resented. How can these morally promising principles cause so much trouble for the world and generate such strong negative reactions at home? Universal morality, applicable to all humans in all corners of the world and in all situations, has a strong appeal and there seems nothing wrong with that. After all, we all want to be treated as morally relevant. Respect for human rights and liberties is widely regarded as the morally right way to treat our fellow human beings – and also to be treated in the same manner. But though the world has made a lot of progress in that direction, it still has not made the world full of individuals and groups who are equally respected and treated, who genuinely care about each other, or who accept their differences. At least for now, liberal promises appear unrealized – and nationalist populists argue that, because of liberal elites' corruption or even the very foundations of the liberal order, they never will be. Despite these reactions both within and outside liberal democracies, liberalism remains strong among political elites in much of the West, albeit more passive and less confident in its moral narrative.

CONCLUSION: MORAL ANXIETY IS HERE TO STAY?

Populist and cosmopolitan moral narratives are different and serve different purposes - one to protect "the people" from corruption, and the other to show that every human being matters. However, they are generally not incompatible – at least from the genuine and reasonable cosmopolitan point of view. The impulse to reject liberal moral narratives, now widespread in many Western countries, rests on a simplified moral image of "the pure people" who must be protected from a caricatured, "corrupt" liberal elite. They should not mix; compromising with the "corrupt" does not purify them but corrupts the pure. But this simplistic story does not correspond to the complex social and political reality. The political and moral identities of individuals are more complex than the images of "the pure people" and "liberal elites" in the populist narrative usually suggest, and they do not easily withstand empirical scrutiny. Additionally, although the concept is highly useful to populist politicians – serving as a moral justification for their actions and the demonization of opponents – it can be easily used to excuse any action by populist leaders and their unintended consequences, always leaving open the possibility of blaming "the others" for failures, since "the others" are perceived to retain influence over the political and social environment. According to this narrative,

"the people" can hardly make moral mistakes. And if we judge populist politicians by their proclaimed intentions in their moral narrative (protecting the people), and not by their results, how can we tell what they are really doing?

From the narrative described above, the populist must ask himself the following question: If I compromise with "the corrupted," won't that compromise also corrupt me and "the people"? Is compromise – often regarded as necessary in real political life of democracy – a way of undermining "the people"? In other words, how can one resolve the conflict of moral duties – one toward those with whom I share most of my values, problems, and experiences, and another toward those with whom we do not share values, problems, and experiences, but who are part of my political community or citizens of my state?

On the one hand, there is nothing morally wrong with caring more about your own people, but it is politically and morally troubling to insist that political leaders owe moral obligations only to "the real people" and not to the rest of the political community, or that "the real people" should follow only leaders who are not part of the liberal elite. On the other hand, being a cosmopolitan who believes that every human being matters does not necessarily mean that we have the same moral obligations to everyone – that would be too demanding for limited beings like us. In Appiah words, "It's not that my family matters more than yours; it's that it matters more to me" (2019: 25). We are beings with limited attention and resources and it would not be reasonable to ask from us to fulfill all those universal obligations. But if I favor people that are close to me, that does not mean that I have to dismiss the others that try to shape the world for themselves as corrupted.

The Western world is faced with at least two moral narratives that offer us justifications for our decisions and actions. These two moral narratives raise two different moral demands – one that insists on a moral duty to our people and the other that insists on moral duty towards every human being. Exclusive insistence of one of these two moral principles leads to moral anxiety. This clash of moral narratives represents an age-old dilemma in a new context of transition from liberal to post-liberal world. But, is it possible to embrace both? In accordance with the nationalist populist view, J. D. Vance alludes to the idea that a Christian concept of love can be described as a form of love and compassion that begins "with family, then extends to neighbors, then to the nation, and finally – and least – reaches fellow human beings as such" (Müller, 2025). Does this imply that love and care for other human beings must follow a specific prioritizing order? Or should we remain open to "a love that builds a fraternity open to all, without exception"? (*Letter of the Holy Father to the Bishops of the United States of America (10 February 2025)*, 2025).

Most individuals likely aspire to pursue both loyalties: to be committed to their local community and nation, while also striving to be morally responsible citizens who help those in need on a global scale. The current struggle over moral narratives, usually combined with the idea of mutual exclusivity and the evident hostility between groups supporting one or the other, is shaping the future of the post-liberal world. It is a time of great moral anxiety because, in an interconnected world where we are aware of

each other's suffering, it has become difficult to ignore the moral needs of others by simply justifying ourselves with love and care only for "the people," or to dismiss the need to respect fellow citizens by claiming that they deserve their situation because they are not successful in a meritocratic world, or because they are narrow-minded relics of the past. These two moral narratives not only shape domestic politics and divisions but also significantly affect the international stage, gradually transforming the global landscape from the liberal international order into what we may call the post-liberal international order – a reality that, for now, lacks a precise form. The moral anxiety resulting from the conflict between these two narratives need not culminate in perpetual trench warfare; after a reality check, it can lead to the difficult but necessary mutual recognition of the moral significance of both perspectives. Until then, moral anxiety is here to stay.

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Moralna tjeskoba poslije liberalnog međunarodnog poretka

Damir Mladić

SAŽETAK

Autor analizira dva moralna narativa te moralnu tjeskobu koju oni izazivaju na Zapadu u razdoblju nakon liberalnog međunarodnog poretka. Noviji razvoj događaja u međunarodnoj politici čini se promiče isključivije političke i moralne zajednice nego što je to bio slučaj u prošlih nekoliko desetljeća globalnog liberalnog poretka, pritom koristeći moralna opravdanja za te trendove. To je dovelo do sukoba između dva različita moralna narativa: jedan koji opravdava isključivost političkih i moralnih zajednica, naglašavajući samo-obranu i zaštitu temeljnih vrijednosti te drugi koji zastupa veću uključivost i promovira moralni kozmopolitizam. U konačnici, dominantni moralni narativ može imati važnu ulogu u oblikovanju budućeg svjetskog poretka.

Ključne riječi: liberalni međunarodni poredak; moralna tjeskoba; moralni narativ; populizam; kozmopolitizam