

Classical Liberalism and International Relations: *Bedankt en Doei*

by Brandon Christensen

I first came across Edwin's scholarship on international relations in 2012, when his "Hayekian Spontaneous Order and the International Balance of Power" was published in *The Independent Review*.¹⁵⁹ It was a breath of fresh air in a world of stale takes on Cold War-era Rothbardian "non-intervention." It was bold, new, different, and entirely wrongheaded. I was so excited to see international relations tackled by a non-American classical liberal that I tracked him down and invited him to be a contributor to a group blog, *Notes On Liberty*, that I had founded in 2012. Edwin was gracious enough to accept my invitation and for one glorious decade many fruitful, unresolved dialogues took place out in the open for all to see.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ Van de Haar. 2011. "Hayekian Spontaneous Order and the International Balance of Power" *Independent Review*.
https://www.independent.org/pdf/tir/tir_16_01_6_vandehaar.pdf

¹⁶⁰ Check out Edwin's blogging here:
<https://notesonliberty.com/author/edwinvdhaar/>

Edwin has garnered a bit of a reputation, among those who read his arguments and scholarship, for plucking quotes out of context and smashing those quotes into conclusions that he has already drawn, and my 2021 article is yet another victim of Edwin's approach to international relations scholarship. It has been difficult to even get him to engage with his classical liberal or libertarian contemporaries, as he opts instead to tackle easier targets: left-wing intellectual histories that are venomous toward Mises and Hayek.

I'll give readers two examples: firstly, Edwin purposely ignores the American example. Since my 2021 article is literally titled "the American Proposal," and deals with the example of the U.S. compound republic as a states-system and blueprint for a federal-republican world order, you would think my interlocutor would have to engage with the American federal experience. Instead, he ignores it ("leaving American specifics aside"¹⁶¹), which actually strengthens the American Proposal and ties it in well to my criticism of Hayek and Mises: they didn't engage with the *Federalist Papers*, or the

¹⁶¹ Van de Haar (2026), pg. 389

federal-republican traditions of the Americans, or the idea that the U.S. itself is an international order.

Up second is a classic example of Edwin's unique methodological approach, and particularly his use of Hayek's supposed disavowal of international federalism:

Hayek was crystal clear in the late 1970s: 'I am thoroughly opposed to world government..... of any form'¹⁶²

The problem – and make no mistake, this is a big problem for classical liberals and libertarians - with this plucked quote is that Hayek never wrote it. He stated it in the middle of a 1978 interview with Swedish economist Axel Leijonhufvud at UCLA, when he was 79 or 80 years old.

¹⁶² Van de Haar (2026), pg. 391. Van de Haar also cites this in a 2026 article published in a journal, *Journal of International Political Theory*, that has never published anything focused explicitly on Hayek or his scholarship. Ironically, he accuses intellectual historians on the Western political spectrum's far left of "cherry-picking" quotes.

Context is that which is scarce¹⁶³

Leijonhufvud and Hayek were discussing the evolution of institutions when the former broached the topic of world government.¹⁶⁴ Hayek ended the verbal discussion of world government in the context of evolution and the state of world affairs at the time (again 1978) with a brusque response to his interlocutor's proddings, and Leijonhufvud, no doubt picking up on Hayek's reluctance to verbally engage in a topic that he had long been known for engaging in, switched topics. It is no secret that Hayek (and Mises, among others) did not approve of most of the international institutions that had emerged from the ashes of World War II. In fact, in 1979, Hayek put this bluntly in writing:

in this century our attempts to create an international government capable of assuring peace have generally approached the task from the wrong end: creating large numbers of specified authorities aiming at

¹⁶³ see Tyler Cowen's short blog post "Context is that which is scarce" for more

<https://marginalrevolution.com/marginalrevolution/2022/02/context-is-that-which-is-scarce-2.html>

¹⁶⁴ This is all freely available online:

<https://static.library.ucla.edu/oralhistory/text/masters/21198-zz0008zd21-4-master.html#SessionLeijonhufvud2a>

particular regulations rather than aiming at a true international law which would limit the power of national governments to harm each other.¹⁶⁵

This is where Edwin's unique methodology runs into compliance problems with Hayekian approaches to social science. While it may seem like Hayek's verbal statement, coupled with the above written statement, is a slam dunk case against 20th century libertarianism's attempt to keep its interstate federalist tradition alive, the previous three sentences to Hayek's lament suggest just the opposite. Here are the first two of the three:

Though I had wished at the end of this work to give some indication of the applications of the principles developed for international affairs, I find it impossible to do so without letting the exposition grow to undue length. *It would require further investigations which I am loathe to undertake at this stage.*¹⁶⁶

The emphasis is mine. This writing was done at the end – literally the last section prior to an epilogue – of a three-volume book about liberal political economy that took 15 years to complete, and his

¹⁶⁵ Hayek 2021 (1979) pg. 505

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., pg 505

approach is markedly different from the one taken in the Leijonhufvud interview. The tiredness and reluctance are both there, and understandably so, but in the above reference you can see just how important international federalism is to Hayek's liberal world order. Indeed, here's that third sentence I was referencing above:

I believe the reader will have no difficulty in seeing in what manner the dismantling of the monolithic state, and the principle that all supreme power must be confined to essentially negative tasks - the powers to say no - and that all positive powers must be confined to agencies which have to operate under rules they cannot alter, must have far-reaching applications to international organizations.¹⁶⁷

This isn't "federation as a last resort." This isn't a disavowal or a purposeful ignoring of international federalism as the logical consummation of liberal political economy. This is an invitation – a *plea*, really - for other liberals to pick up where he leaves us: at the end of a 15-year book project on liberal political order and the dangers it faces from around the world.

¹⁶⁷ Hayek 2021 (1979), pg 505

This long paragraph on liberalism and world order is not the only place where Hayek broaches interstate federalism, either. I would argue that interstate federalism's ideals are deeply embedded throughout 1979's Volume 3, just as it is in his previous works on political economy, though of course I welcome challenges to this interpretation.

Good faith & bad actors

Scholars can comb through postwar Mises and find the same skepticism to international institutions *as they emerged* and also the same idealism for a more republican world order that was found in his earlier writings, too. I don't want to get into a quote-fest with Edwin here because **a)** I think my point has been made clearly and plainly and **b)** quote-fests are useless without context. On point B: opposing international institutions as they emerged and yearning for a more politically interconnected world via co-binding measures are not mutually exclusive. On point A: consider how Edwin reads my work relative to Streit's: "Christensen does not mention it, let alone that he uses it as a spring board for his own ideas."¹⁶⁸ Now, briefly, Streit called for a brand new federation between Western democracies, whereas

¹⁶⁸ Van de Haar (2026), pg. 403

the American Proposal argues that the U.S. needs entrance and exit policies for polities yearning to breathe free. While both proposals are interstate federalist ones, the differences are cavernous: one is a top-down approach (rationalist constructivism) and the other is a bottom-up approach (spontaneous order). Edwin is not being uncharitable here. This is how he reads Hayek, Mises, and Smith, too.

Then there are the harsh assertions about there not being a libertarian interstate federalist tradition to begin with. If this were true, where did the American federalists get their ideas from? The American Proposal suggests reviving and extending under-appreciated insights and arguments from the classical liberal canon (I labeled them “intellectual heritages” in the Proposal itself), and elsewhere, but it doesn’t claim that there is some unbroken, seamless, and rigidly-defined school of “classical liberalism and international relations.” Such a school would go against the very ideas that permeate Austrian and similar epistemic scholarly communities anyway. Are traditions rigidly defined, or are they continually discovered and rediscovered through the methods of science that we as humans have been able to institute?

At any rate, here is Edwin taking me to task for ignoring the failures of the E.U.:

Of specific importance in the context of Christensen's article is the experience of the European Union and its member states [...] the EU has developed into a monstrous bureaucracy, failing spectacularly in protecting the liberties cherished by classical liberals. It is a collectivist undertaking, ever increasing its regulatory power. So, it is certainly not suited to be included in a federation aiming to increase individual liberties.

All good points as far as they go, but I explicitly utilize the E.U. as an example of why the Americans' sovereignty-subsuming federal union is a prime antidote for solving Europe's serious security problems; my American Proposal explicitly uses the European Union as an example of what *not to do*.¹⁶⁹ This, in turn, means Edwin is agreeing with my assessment of the E.U. and yet, somehow, he manages to turn an agreed-upon assessment into an attempt to show how the American Proposal ignores the example of the European Union.

¹⁶⁹ Christensen 2021: 433-441

Lastly, Edwin’s interpretation of “centuries of legal tradition” [cite] in Europe leaves much to be desired. The only tradition — the only common thread - in Europe’s legal orders is chaos from violence and continued upheaval of said legal orders. Every time a Napoleon, or a Hitler, or a Habsburg, or a Putin, or a Carolus Rex runs roughshod over neighboring states, the legal orders in those states are uprooted and destroyed. When the Napoleons are defeated, and the sovereignties of new countries are declared once again to be free, completely new constitutional orders are implemented, and those previously conquered states aren’t able to just put their old constitutional orders back in place. This is why the legal orders of contemporary European states are much *younger* than the legal orders of the American states-system. This Westphalian anarchy was the only constant in Europe until the arrival of the United States in the mid-1940s, and this is just a summary of Westphalian anarchy for international relations when bigger states try to balance each other out: anarchical balancing famously causes autocratic hierarchy and violent chaos domestically, too. Those Napoleons and Hitlers and Putins didn’t emerge out of the Bronx or Compton or Houston’s

Fifth Ward. They emerged from intensely violent and hierarchical domestic orders where constitutional authority was, and still is in many parts of the world today, contested sharply due largely to a lack of “longevity legitimacy.” France, for example, is, as of 2026, on its fifth republic since 1792 (just a few years after the founding date, 1789, of the federal American states-system). Readers will have to forgive me as, for brevity’s sake, I’m just going to assume you have a passing knowledge of French history between the first republic of 1792 and the fifth of 1958.

Closer to home, The Netherlands pretended to run a democratic government from exile in London when Hitler invaded and occupied the country in 1940, but for five years the people inside the occupied sovereignty were told what to do by an autocratic and neighboring sovereignty. When the United States repelled the Germans from The Netherlands, that exiled government was, for the first time in Dutch and European history, able to return and reimplement its legitimacy thanks to the co-binding arrangements that the U.S. had implemented with European sovereignties. The postwar federative American order has stabilized constitutional governments in Europe for far longer than anything

that anarchy could produce;¹⁷⁰ prior to the American experience in Europe, violence and oppressive hierarchy due to constitutional and legal precarities on domestic and international levels characterized Europe.

This result is not because the U.S. is a foolish federal fairy tale or a benevolent hegemon, but because its co-binding efforts have directly tackled state sovereignty in Europe by implementing numerous overlapping and concurrent jurisdictions that don't answer solely to national states. Contrary to Edwin's assertions, the United States has *already* been strengthening not only Europe's domestic constitutional orders, but transatlantic federative bonds at the international level as well. You can see this best today not in NATO but in Europe's electoral politics, where domestic elections and culture wars in European states mirror those of their North American peers.¹⁷¹ This is an astounding

¹⁷⁰ You can, of course, make an argument that anarchy is better than imperialism; my argument is that federalism is a more peaceful and liberal "second-best" than either anarchy or imperialism.

¹⁷¹ There is a large scholarly literature on this, but Tyszka-Drozdowski 2022 is perhaps the best citation for this particular essay:
<https://unherd.com/2022/04/america-has-captured-france/>.

outcome of experimentation in liberal co-binding and self-government, as Europe would still be a violent anarchy, or perhaps a peaceful — if oppressive - empire, without the federative anchor of the American's compound republic.

Edwin is correct when he points out that federations don't typically federate successfully under peaceful conditions, but this doesn't actually deal with the subject at hand. There is nothing peaceful about Europe; the region is still populated by technologically advanced and economically interdependent states. The difference between 1938 and now (2026) is the vast array of federative co-binding restraints that chain governments onto concurrent, overlapping jurisdictional authorities. The status quo for Europe's security situation is unlikely to last, due to domestic American resentments regarding consistent and long-lasting European free-riding, and its mirror image: domestic European resentments regarding persistent and long-lasting dependence on the American security umbrella. The alternative to transatlantic federation isn't the U.S. leaving and Europe returning to its glorious Westphalian past and mythical centuries-old legal traditions; the alternative is European sovereignties being unable,

or unwilling, to maintain postwar co-binding restraints once the U.S. exits, thus contributing to the gradual but real erosion of the institutions that have kept Europe at peace for nearly 80 years.

What is Edwin's framework?

The other contributions in this special issue use a framework to confront my American Proposal, and beautifully so, but reading Edwin's contribution to this special issue forced me to ask: "what makes this polemic a classical liberal one?"

Edwin raises excellent objections to the viability of interstate federalism, but they're not from a classical liberal or libertarian point of view. They're standard, run-of-the-mill Westphalian objections. If they were classical liberal or libertarian objections, he'd be utilizing a framework developed by one or more of the classical liberal traditions instead of his pluck-and-smash methodological approach.

Speaking of frameworks, any arguments or research paradigms based on social orders must grapple with the problem of violence. Nation-states emerged in northwestern Europe as a way for the peoples there to avoid tyranny in domestic affairs and extinction in foreign ones, but, as Hayek continually noted

throughout his life, these very same nation-states were also progenitors of mass violence and extinction agendas for other peoples. A solid framework for thinking about classical liberalism and international relations needs to confront violence in internal and external affairs; internally, constitutional restraints are necessary for reducing the threat of despotism, while externally, war or peace are necessary to prevent extinction. The libertarian interstate federalist tradition explicitly chooses to forage for peace in the form of international federal arrangements.¹⁷²

Hayek's anti-nationalist liberalism is unique enough in other areas of political economy to merit special attention,¹⁷³ and the same is true for his lifelong calls, stronger at some times than at others, for a more federal world order. Edwin's attempts at plucking-and-smashing Hayek into a preconceived box does Hayek and other anti-nationalist liberals a great disservice.

¹⁷² Christensen. Under review. "Instinctual Survival and Rival Traditions."

https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=6809540. In this paper, I deal substantially with Edwin's contributions to the broader literature on classical liberalism and international relations.

¹⁷³ Kukathas 2006

Just consider his assertion that Europeans and Canadians would never federate with the Americans under the latter's constitutional order. This isn't Truth. This is a legitimate empirical and normative puzzle, and a lively research paradigm, or tradition, would actively seek to solve it (one way or another) and build upon it. For Edwin, though, the buck stops at Westphalian sovereignty; the buck stops with an anarchical world of nation-states modeled after late 19th and early 20th century northwestern Europe (the epicenter of two devastating world wars). The fact that balancing in an anarchy is what produces the violence that classical liberal federation seeks to prevent is just...ignored.

So Edwin won't be engaging with or utilizing the anti-imperialist tradition of Coyne¹⁷⁴ or Duryea¹⁷⁵; or the likes of Geneva Westphalians such as Nientiedt¹⁷⁶ or Reho.¹⁷⁷ The exciting works on earlier federalist theories by Schliesser¹⁷⁸ and Levy¹⁷⁹ will not be utilized, either. Freire's¹⁸⁰ work

¹⁷⁴ Coyne 2022.

¹⁷⁵ Duryea 2025.

¹⁷⁶ Nientiedt 2022.

¹⁷⁷ Reho 2025.

¹⁷⁸ Schliesser 2024, 2025.

¹⁷⁹ Levy 2007.

¹⁸⁰ Freire 2017.

on alternatives to Westphalian sovereignty will continue to be ignored as well. Edwin's chosen scholarly path is not federation, nor has it been collaborative, and so he will bid us all adieu, citing himself as he heads out the door. "Classical liberalism and international relations" deserves a fresh start, and the hard-hitting essays in this special issue are doing just that. The substantive issues raised by Edwin — issues that can easily be raised by any outside observer - have already been anticipated by those tackling the American Proposal and the interstate federalist tradition. *Bedankt en doei*, old friend, and just know: this admittedly humble tradition's door will always be open to you.

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