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Symposium on A Cultural Theory of International Relations

Reading Lebow: a funny thing happened on the way to the oracles

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In *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*, Ned Lebow sets out to put the *Geist* back into *Zeit* and to make International Relations (IR) theory grand again. On the way, he elucidates the fundamental human forces, powerful emotions, and routine practices that make and unmake international order. Covering well over two millennia of world history, Lebow instructs fellow pilgrims on the interplay of appetite, standing, and wealth in the production of politics, from the personal to the international, from antiquity to modernity. He recounts transformative moments when these primordial and universal desires go unchecked by the self-reflection of reason (his chapter heading 'Hitler to Bush and beyond' is one for the annals). He portends worse to come as the desire for material interests grows and dominates that for winning and preserving honor. After 500-odd pages of explicating international order through a psychology of identity, Lebow never quite reaches a cultural theory of international relations. But no matter: not unlike Greek *theoria,* the proto-diplomats who traveled to Delphi in search of truth from the oracles, the journey proves to be much more interesting, if not more important, than the destination.

At once hermeneutical (think Hermes) and Heraklean (think Stygian stables), Lebow's critical interpretation of order and disorder acts like a colonic cleanse of prior, stodgier accounts of the rise of the West. This book contains multitudes: 'from Plato to NATO' seems like a small intellectual hop compared to the great imaginative leaps Lebow takes in this book. By the end of the journey Lebow has, almost in spite of his stated intent, achieved something quite oracular if not miraculous: by conjuring up the spirits of dead Greeks, he has brought back to life a body of thought that was practically moribund. Lebow has revived the lost art of psychomancy.

IR theory cannot help but be enlivened by Lebow's epic account of how the 'Big Bang' of Greek antiquity not only created the foundations of

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international order but also continues to vibrate through it, acting like a kind of string theory for the expansion of international society. An incredible amount of erudition is marshaled to make his case. At times, especially when the Greek concepts are flowing fast and furious, the book becomes more didactic than analytic, and the elaborate folds of history's multiple tragedies give way to the *sub fusc* of a final paper (exam): '"There can be no international society without (a) justice; (b) order; or (c) honor". Choose one and discuss'. The right answer – which makes Lebow a wild-card constructivist, if not a card-carrying member of the reconstituted English School – is 'all of the above'. Where other constructivists fear to tread, Lebow rushes in, psychologizing and projecting honor as a key variable in the formation and deformation of identity as well as the constitution and de-constitution of order.

Lebow digs deep, less so into the archives (the history is syncretic and drawn mainly from secondary accounts) than into the human psyche. To be sure, this is, given the Greek origins, largely a psychology of dead white males – and the picture is not always pretty: his excavation of the motives and desires, values and norms that drive much of world history produces, to cite Lebow's earlier work, a mostly tragic vision of international politics. Scratch Lebow's constructivist application of identity and one finds a pessimistic realism underneath; not much of a surprise given Lebow's self-confessed debt to Thucydides, Clausewitz, and Morgenthau for his derivation of universal principles from particular historical contexts. Although the mixing of epistemes raises the question of philosophical incommensurability, this constructivist-realist hybrid gets good mileage when Lebow divagates onto the road of policy prescriptions (see warning sign below). Reading Lebow, one better understands how world leaders, not in spite but because of the desire to do good, get drawn into the web of tragedy. We can see connections from Oedipus to Bush to even Obama, whose own father-dreams of universal humanity might well be undone in the very place where Alexander and the Hellenistic vision of the unity of mankind met their match (Afghanistan).

Lebow shows in historical detail how identity works in IR, especially how individual destinies not only become interdependent but also dependent upon other more powerful supra-identities (fate, providence, and god). Perhaps others have done a better job of theoretically demonstrating how there can be no identity without difference, difference without identity (see Judith Butler, William Connolly, and David Campbell). But Lebow adds historico-psychological (not to be confused with psycho-historical) depth to previous constructivist and poststructuralist investigations into the interplay of identity and order, providing exemplary models of how a spiritual agonism of honor and reason sustains order

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in the face of material antagonisms of appetite and fear. Here I think Lebow could go further into the darker recesses of the collective unconscious, to explore why the 'healthy' psyche degenerates into and is so often overpowered by systemic pathologies; or as Nietzsche put it, 'madness is rare among individuals – but in groups, parties, nations, and ages it is the rule' (Nietzsche, 1989: 90). Religion – church, civil or state – gets short-shrift (and no index entry) when compared to spirit, but it might provide a better clue for how the will to power and other universal drives are channeled into the mastery of others rather than self-mastery. Virtue, in spite of Greek claims to the contrary, is not always up to the task. Nietzsche demonstrates through his own genealogies of morals how virtue often cloaks the smell of the swamp as well as its own complicity in acts of revenge and violence:

> And others are proud of their handful of righteousness and for its sake commit wanton outrage upon all things: so that the world is drowned in their unrighteousness.
>
> Alas, how ill the word 'virtue' sounds in their mouths! And when they say: 'I am just', it always sounds like: 'I am revenged!' (Nietzsche, 2003: 118–119).

Although Lebow puts it more prosaically than does Zarathustra, he is not wholly unaware of the ease by which individual virtue tied to collective purpose can transform honor into a dangerous hubris (the run-up to Iraq is a good example). Hence, he seeks to 'purge' his grand theory from any normative or teleological notions in favor of a more neutral concept of 'development', by which he means 'nothing more than increasing complexity' (p. 38). That makes sense as acceleration, interconnectivity, and heteropolarity make short work of any explanatory metanarrative, no matter how progressivist or emancipatory. The problem is that Lebow keeps smuggling in normative assumptions, despite all the declaratory statements to the contrary. In one passage Lebow declares, 'My [grand] theory celebrates diversity'; in the next, that his 'foundational concepts are based on the Greek understanding of the psyche' (p. 38). Lebow is sensitive to the charge of '*polis* envy' (p. 43); but not so much so to the legacy left by the Greeks of phallocentrisim, androcentrism, and orientalism. And then there is the matter of scale: considering that the Athenian polis was composed of about 30,000 citizens, once you exclude (as the Athenians did) all women, slaves, and foreigners, that is a pretty small base from which to extrapolate and to project a grand theory, let alone a universal order.

Regardless, after reading Lebow, it is more difficult to contest the legacy – out of affinity, superiority, or just pure conquest – of Greek

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thought and history in IR. But myth instructs as well as history, and no matter how virtuous the intent, some wariness is warranted when Lebow regifts the Greeks for IR. Having spent the past 3 years working on a documentary film about the US military appropriation of social-scientific and anthropological concepts of culture to fight counterinsurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan,[1] I am perhaps a bit too ready to reach for my Glock when the 'c'-word appears to be used for instrumental purposes. Indeed, I predict that Lebow's book, chock-a-block with *phronesis* (practical intelligence), an essentialist interpretation of culture, and an appreciation if not glorification of honor and sacrifice, will end up on more than one War College reading list, as a kind of high-end supplement to the new cultural-centric form of warfare promoted by the 2006 Counterinsurgency Field Manual 3–24 (in which 'culture' is mentioned over 90 times). This is not necessarily a bad thing, but with a tendency already in the military to use 'cultural awareness' as proof that there is a discrete 'Arab' as opposed to 'Western' culture, I can see how this book might be used as 'Mars turns to Minerva' in the effort to weaponize culture for military campaigns in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere on the peripheries of the Long War.

However, Lebow and the Greeks left a mark. Inspired by Lebow, and killing time before witnessing the oracular spirit of Leonard Cohen at Madison Square Garden, I decided to make a quick visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art's recently renovated and much-hyped Greek and Roman Art Collection. The story behind the renovation is right out of Lebow's telling of the 'development' of Greek culture in Western civilization. Perhaps uncomfortable with America's new standing as an empire, or just wanting to serve the appetites of a growing middle class with more disposable income than artistic appreciation, the new director of the Met decided in 1949 to convert the Roman court – hitherto a beautiful two-story atrium full of sculptures surrounded by columned light – into a restaurant, which years later became an even more mediocre temple of human appetite, a cafeteria. Sixty years later, the space – and honor – was restored, producing a spectacular exhibition of more than 5000 objects, many never on display before, in an area of more than 30,000 square feet.

During my brief visit, one piece stood out from all the rest. It was a sculpture of a warrior who looked as if he once held a spear in his right hand and a shield on his left, but age had shorn him of hands, weapon, and shield. However, the insult of time revealed an injury from the past: a puncture wound under the warrior's armpit, probably lethal since he

[1] See http://www.humanterrainmovie.com.

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appeared to be leaning or falling backward from the blow. The description supported but did not prove this visual conjecture. The sculpture most likely was a Roman copy, possibly of a famous statue by the sculptor Kresilas of the Greek hero Protesilaos, who ignored an oracle's warning that the first Greek to step on Trojan soil would be the first to die in battle.

I stood a long time in front of the warrior, thinking of facsimiles that have followed, of Capra's famous photo (faked?) of the mortally wounded Republican soldier; of Sgt. Elias (Willem Defoe), arms outstretched to the helicopters abandoning him to a warrior's death in *Platoon*; to my grandfather, a World War One veteran, dying too credibly for his grandson to bear in reenactments of Civil War battles. My viewing of the warrior further colored my impression of Lebow's book. I newly appreciated his willingness to seek out the most tragic elements of IR, trying to make some sense of it through historical experience and psychological insights rather than by past accounts or new abstract models. Bathed in the atrium light reflecting off so much sublime beauty and ruin, I newly appreciated Lebow's attempt to end on a hopeful note. Invoking the Roman poet Catullus ('Troy – the horror! – common grave of Asian Europe/cruel tomb of all heroes and heroism…'), Lebow writes:

> As conflictual and violent as the current world is, and as remote an ideal a peaceful world appears, there is nevertheless a more realistic possibility than ever before of transforming the character of international relations to make it more closely resemble the more ordered and complex world of domestic societies. Troy – or Iraq – may ultimately become the tomb of heroes and heroism in the sense understood by Catullus… (p. 570).

Looking back on the mortally wounded hero, I better understood why the atavism of warrior societies continues to haunt our waking hours, days … and millennia. Reading Lebow helped me finally comprehend what Walter Benjamin meant when he, also seeking to find some hope in the face of endless wars, wrote:

> The imminent awakening is poised, like the wooden horse of the Greeks, in the Troy of dreams (Benjamin, 1999: 392).

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