

A Cultural Theory meets cultures of theory

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Breakthrough works in International Relations (IR) are relatively rare.¹ They count as breakthrough works because of the profound effect that they have on subsequent theory and research. Since we can never know in advance which works will have such an effect, we can never identify them precisely when they appear. But it is no coincidence that the relatively few books that qualify have been works of breathtaking ambition; take, for example, Hans Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations* (1948), Hedley Bull's *The Anarchical Society* (1977), and Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* (1979). The authors of these works consciously sought to reshape the conceptual landscape of the field, and to a large extent succeeded. One might well disagree with any or all of them, but one could not simply ignore them.

Richard Ned Lebow's *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* (2008)² is a conscious attempt to reshape the conceptual landscape of the field, and it is certainly a work of breathtaking ambition. Indeed, it is the second in a series of three books of breathtaking ambition whose purpose is no less than to present a grand theory of politics. As Lebow himself puts it, 'In *The Tragic Vision of Politics* (Lebow, 2003) I attempt to develop a new ontology for social science In this volume I build on this ontology to develop a theory of IR embedded in a proto-theory [of] political order. In a follow-on volume I hope to develop a full-blown theory of political order drawing on the findings of this study and additional research' (Lebow, 2008: ix).

Not all works of breakthrough ambition succeed, and some of those that do no doubt deserve to fail – but in an ideal world, a work worthy of success would ultimately achieve it. It is the goal of this symposium to

¹ I will follow Hollis and Smith's useful practice of capitalizing the term when speaking of the field of study, and using lower case when speaking of its subject matter (Hollis and Smith, 1991: 10).

² All otherwise unspecified in-text citations in this symposium are to this work.

help readers decide whether *A Cultural Theory* is worthy.³ Here we ask: What does Lebow seek to accomplish? How does he go about accomplishing it? Does he choose wisely from among the many texts, theories, and bodies of research upon which he might have drawn for inspiration and evidence? Does he present an argument that coheres? Does the evidence support his claims? In this essay, I provide an overview of *A Cultural Theory*, introduce the contributors, tender a few mea culpas, and offer some reflections of my own intended to help contextualize the book. The contributors follow with analyses and criticisms that reflect their particular epistemic and methodological concerns. The symposium closes with Lebow's response.

Only time will tell whether *A Cultural Theory* will secure a place among the great works of IR theory. But it is our aim here to help readers decide whether it deserves to do so.

The book

A Cultural Theory is complex, eclectic, and syncretic. It is difficult to characterize or summarize tersely. Its primary objective, however, is to craft a 'constructivist' theory of IR grounded in an understanding of human nature (understood essentially as a set of psychological drives) that is different from the one that has come to dominate IR scholarship, at least in North America: namely, *Homo Economicus*. The theory is constructivist in the sense that it understands the behavior of political agents and the structure of political systems as co-evolving but not deterministic; Lebow leaves room both for structure and for agency. The agency is that of individual human beings, but most significantly that of political and military elites. The structure is the web of norms we typically call 'cultural' that governs social interaction.

Lebow reaches back to the ancient Greeks for the set of fundamental drives (he sometimes calls these 'motives') on which he hopes to build his alternative account of human nature. He identifies three as particularly fruitful and appropriate for a theory of politics: spirit, appetite, and reason (p. 26). He offers ideal-type descriptions of worlds in which each would dominate, describing the behaviors to which they would give rise, the social hierarchies they would lead us to expect to observe, and the principles of justice they are likely to inspire. Noting that the real world

³ Initial reception is not a predictor of uptake – I speak from experience – but it is noteworthy that in 2009, *A Cultural Theory* won both the American Political Science Association's Jervis-Schroeder Award and the British International Studies Association's Susan Strange Book Prize.

always involves some combination of all three drives, Lebow nevertheless argues that in distinct historical epochs, in distinct societies, and in particular events, we ordinarily find one of the three dominating. There is no particular equilibrium, Lebow argues. Nor is any social order static. Spirit-based worlds, appetite-based worlds, and reason-based worlds are each susceptible to perturbations of various kinds, and under certain circumstances any of them will sow the seeds of its own transformation.⁴

While spirit, appetite, and reason are present in all times and places, Lebow contends that modern social science – and IR theory in particular – has grossly underestimated the importance of spirit throughout human history. Realism overemphasizes the role of reason (narrowly conceived) and wrongly sees the world as a timeless competition driven fundamentally by fear. Liberalism overemphasizes the role of appetite and wrongly sees the world primarily through the lens of interest. Modernity has forgotten the importance of spirit, and no longer sees politics as driven by honor, understood as the quest for self-esteem through recognition. Without denying the importance of reason and appetite, or of fear and interest, Lebow wishes to demonstrate both that spirit and honor have played vital roles over the grand sweep of international history from ancient Greece to the war in Iraq, and that these roles increasingly have come to be overlooked.⁵

Lebow's argument unfolds over the course of 10 chapters. The first – an introduction – articulates the book's objectives, locates it in the relevant literature, sketches its main claims, and explains its approach. Chapter 2 looks specifically at fear, interest, and honor as three distinctive human drives, and makes the case for exploring spirit-based, appetite-based, and reason-based worlds. Chapter 3 delves more deeply into spirit-based worlds, leveraging insights from Homer's *Iliad* – 'the prototype for later European conceptions of honor', according to Lebow, 'and for this reason... the most useful text for my analysis' (p. 29) – to flesh out this vital neglected drive. Chapters 4 through 9 explore the interplay of appetite, spirit, and reason in six historical periods: classical Greece (Ch. 4); Medieval Europe (Ch. 5); Westphalian Europe to the French Revolution (Ch. 6); the modern imperial period to the outbreak of World War I (Ch. 7); the origins of World War II (Ch. 8); and the Cold War (Ch. 9). Chapter 10 steps back from the historical cases to tease out patterns and tendencies, and

⁴ Within each category there is variation as well.

⁵ 'Following Thucydides, Plato, and Aristotle, I maintain that the spirit animates all human beings and that the need for self-esteem is universal, although manifested differently across societies ... I develop a paradigm of politics based on the spirit, and incorporated in the general theory of international relations based on a more comprehensive understanding of human motives and their implications for political behavior' (p. 16).

articulates the implications of Lebow's analysis for various bodies of theory, such as state formation (pp. 535–537), prospect theory (pp. 537–539), great power behavior (pp. 539–551), power, influence, and justice (pp. 551–558), and identity formation and change (pp. 558–570). Throughout, Lebow sounds a subtle and appropriately cautious note of optimism: we may be saddled, as it were, by a hard-wired need to slake the thirst for recognition and standing, which are inherently competitive in their social manifestations, but over the grand sweep of human history we see at least the possibility of – and perhaps even a trend toward – progressively more peaceful modes of competition. In this respect, as Lebow puts it, 'the international system is something of an atavism', since, '[i]n contrast to societies in the developed world, there is still a single hierarchy of standing, and it is based on military power'.

But there is 'a distinct possibility' of change:

Key to this transformation is the way in which discourses define what actors consider to be legitimate and illegitimate. Changes in the criteria for standing encourage shifts in foreign policy behavior, which in turn affect how states define their interests and ultimately their identities. As conflictual and violent as the world currently is, and as remote an ideal of 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 ... It is important not to lose sight of this possibility, and for theory to show us how such a world could come about and renew our commitment to work toward its attainment (p. 570).

Arguably, there is reason for even more optimism than Lebow is willing to admit. Recent work on 'security communities' suggests that this transformation is already well underway, at least in certain parts of the world, and that it is a latent possibility in others (Adler and Greve, 2009; Kitchen, 2009; Pouliot, 2010).

The critics

There is, of course, much more to the argument than my brief capsule summary suggests. Over the course of almost 600 pages, Lebow weaves together insights from an astonishing variety of literatures in the humanities and social sciences. It was the assignment of our commentators to engage Lebow from various perspectives. Engagement, of course, involves criticism, and all of our commentators are critical of certain aspects of the work. The criticisms are meta-theoretical, methodological, technical, and historical. While some are hard-hitting, perhaps even downright edgy,

none is dismissive: all of the contributors appreciate the richness and creativity of the work.

Given the richness, however, it was evident at the outset that it would be impossible in a relatively short space to establish a dialogue with critics from all possible perspectives. Accordingly, I set out to enlist thoughtful and engaging commentators whose own work might be thought of as representing one important rubric for the study of IR with which Lebow himself actively engages.⁶ Nicholas Rengger begins with reflections rooted in the political theory of IR and the history of ideas, challenging Lebow on his choice of muses and themes. Jacques Hymans follows with a political psychologist's perspective, pushing Lebow particularly hard on his treatments of group identity and fear. William Wohlforth offers a realist take, suggesting that realism's concerns with interest and power may well offer better explanations than Lebow is willing to concede (and that Lebow's own theory can offer) for the dogs that do not bark, that is, the many peaceful periods and relationships in world politics, some of which are spirit-based. James Morrow comments from the perspective of a rationalist interested in scientific progress, asking hard questions about the operationalizability of Lebow's concepts and the testability of his propositions. Finally, James Der Derian offers some reactions in a critical/poststructuralist vein, evincing unease with what he suggests is Lebow's essentialized understanding of culture, subjectivity masquerading as objectivity, and wishful thinking that life imitates art. In his concluding comment, Lebow engages each commentator on his home turf, as it were – demonstrating the versatility and erudition so evident in his work.

Readers will notice that certain perspectives are not well represented here, and by their absence I do not mean to signal their unimportance. For example, it is possible to interpret Lebow's account of the role of honor in (variously, depending upon context) motivating, shaping, constraining, resolving, and preventing conflict as consistent with a hypermasculine view of the world that reflects the dominance of patriarchy. The absence of a feminist critique is unfortunate and not deliberate. As I write this introduction – at the end of the process and with full knowledge of what is to follow – I particularly regret the absence of a feminist critique. I believe that it may well be an especially powerful response to Lebow that what he actually offers us is an installment on a general theory of *patriarchal* politics. That all or virtually all politics is patriarchal may be a cogent rejoinder to the critique, but it would merely serve to underscore

⁶ In characterizing the contributors' approaches as I do in what follows, I run the risk of unjust labeling. As the reader will see, their comments evince a richness and sophistication that puts the lie to simplistic typologizing.

its importance.⁷ Similarly, Der Derian's comment is the closest we have to a subaltern perspective, one that I suspect many postcolonial scholars may not see as adequately representative of the genre. Third (I dare not say finally), it would have been instructive to offer commentaries from self-consciously liberal, English School, postmodern, or various other constructivist vantage points. My hope at least is that the richness of the commentaries, and Lebow's responses, will provoke even broader deliberation and debate.

Some closing opening thoughts

It was not my intention as organizer of this symposium to provide a substantive comment of my own, but the editorial process that ultimately resulted in the conversation that follows persuaded me to offer three brief extracurricular observations that I believe might helpfully situate Lebow's remarkable book.

First, no matter how difficult it might be to operationalize and deploy the concept of honor, Lebow is clearly on to something when he insists that modern social science, and IR theory in particular (at least in its dominant North American manifestation), overlooks its importance. It is difficult to resist the suspicion that the dominance of both realism and rational choice in the study of international politics reflects to some extent the relative tractability of each – a suspicion that brings to mind both Maslow's Maxim ('When the only tool you have is a hammer, every problem begins to resemble a nail') and the image of fool who looks for his wallet under the lamppost, not because this is where he lost it, but because this is where the light is brightest. No doubt William Riker was entirely sincere when he insisted that he could not imagine any basis on which to build a theory of human behavior other than rational choice; but his own attempt to construe as 'rational' the behavior of a US marine who sought to protect his fellow platoon members by throwing himself on a Japanese hand grenade during the battle of Iwo Jima (Riker, 1995) can only succeed if we stretch the term to the point of tautology. Similarly, allowing any and all state motives to count as 'the pursuit of power' renders realism banal (Blainey, 1973: 149–150).

People clearly often do things because they are the honorable things to do. Moreover, they sometimes do so at great personal cost. There is no

⁷ Lebow is evidently aware of this, as readers will see in his response to Der Derian (below). In *A Cultural Theory*, he is cautiously optimistic that social dynamics – in particular, the ritual-altering effects of Goffmanian interactive order – will ultimately promote gender equality (pp. 565–566).

obstacle to representing this behavior as utility-maximizing so long as we are willing to allow the set of non-utility-maximizing acts to sit empty and padlocked.⁸ But even under these circumstances, honor would still be doing relevant work and we should pay attention to it.⁹

Second, recent developments in cognitive science and neurobiology point toward an understanding of the mainsprings of human behavior better captured by the ancient Greeks than by modern behaviorism. Reason understood as calculation or logical deliberation is clearly a higher function that implicates only specific regions of the cerebral cortex. What the Greeks understood as spirit and appetite implicate other cortical and various subcortical regions.¹⁰ Even as social scientists increasingly appreciate the role of emotion in human behavior in general (and in international politics in particular – Crawford, 2000; Welch, 2003; Hymans, 2006), life scientists are shedding light on the precise mechanisms by which this happens.

Third, Lebow self-consciously considers his theory a theory of change: ‘My theory is dynamic because it accepts change as the norm ...’ (p. 505). This is, of course, precisely what one would expect from an avowedly constructivist theory. But it requires delicate seamanship to sail the theory safely between two paradoxes. On the one side – Scylla, as it were – is the danger of attempting to explain something fluid in terms of something else fluid. If agents and structures co-evolve, it is easy to imagine Lebow’s theory of political order breaking down as a result of changes in either, perhaps even (ironically) as a result of ‘learning’ from earlier cycles of interaction. On the other side – Charybdis – is the danger of reifying the explanans. The account of human psychology upon which Lebow draws is truly ancient. He also describes it as universally applicable, though noting that it manifests itself somewhat differently in different times and places. He employs it to explain virtually the entire recorded history of international politics. Structure and agency cannot co-evolve if agency is timeless.

Does Lebow sail safely through? Readers will decide for themselves, but for my part I would argue that these potential difficulties offer an opportunity to put things in perspective. On a geological timescale, ancient Greece was not even yesterday – it was the briefest possible

⁸ But see also Lebow’s reformulation of prospect theory for honor-based worlds (pp. 537–539).

⁹ Having said this, I should also note that there is no necessary obstacle to attempting to analyze honor-based behavior using tools more commonly associated with rational-choice scholarship. Lebow and Barry O’Neill (1999) may have somewhat different agendas, but they are in some respects fellow-traveling pioneers – if we allow the rediscovery and reformulation of received ancient wisdom to count as pioneering.

¹⁰ Such as the basal ganglia and amygdala; see generally Thagard (2010).

moment ago. Human psychology may not look much different today than it did in the fifth century BCE, but it is probably very different from the pre-human psychology of our hominid ancestors, and will probably be very different again from the posthuman psychology of our follow-on species, should we be so fortunate as to have one. While Lebow, unlike Thucydides, judiciously declines to offer us a ‘possession for all time’ (pp. 3–4), he does offer us a possession for some time at least. Whether it is for a very long time, or for the briefest fleeting moment, depends entirely upon one’s point of view.

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