

A matter of honor

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A Cultural Theory of International Relations is a challenging book to read and it will be a challenging book for the field of International Relations (IR) to absorb. It is long, rich, learned, complex, powerful, and, in the end, richly rewarding. It is utterly *sui generis*: a unique marriage of classical Greek thought and modern sensibility, and of grand theory and detailed historical research, that only Ned Lebow could produce. It questions so many conventional wisdoms and flies in the face of so many disciplinary conventions that it is bound to infuriate some readers. But even the most critical reader would have to acknowledge the cumulative power of the argument and evidence Lebow amasses in support of his basic proposition that the human quest for self-esteem deserves a place alongside material well-being and security as a fundamental driver of international behavior. And though the book does not seal the deal in nailing down the precise causal effect of the human spirit as a basic motive in international politics, it helps establish a rich research agenda for scholars. For these reasons, the book is destined to be considered a signal contribution to scholarship.

Drawing on Plato and Aristotle, Lebow proposes that the human psyche is composed of spirit, appetite, and reason. He provides extensive discussions but not compact definitions of these terms, so we end up knowing not what they are but what they entail. Spirit 'is best conceived of as an innate human drive, with self-esteem as a goal, and honor and standing as the means by which it is achieved' (p. 64). Appetite is the desire or need for worldly things such as wealth. Reason is an innate drive that can constrain spirit and appetite through education and reflection. It is manifested in social norms or rules that govern individuals' or states' quest for status and wealth.

Lebow argues that highly competitive and dangerous spirit- or appetite-driven worlds are always waiting to break out if not restrained by these reason-based norms. Under certain circumstances, key actors violate these norms in their quest for status or wealth, creating a cascade of norm

violations by others. The result is a fear-driven world, familiar to IR scholars, in which security becomes the chief goal. Fear is thus a second-order driver of human behavior; it is not a basic drive itself, nor is it the inescapable outgrowth of anarchy, but rather it comes to the fore as the result of the contingent events and processes that cause spirit and/or appetite to trump reason.

Current grand theories foreground fear (realism) and appetite (liberalism), according to Lebow, and therefore we need a new grand theory that accounts for variation in human motivation and, most importantly, that allows us to explain the spirit's profound influence on international politics. Much of the book is an effort to make the case that 'affronts to honor, and thus to self-esteem, have been at least as great a source of war as threats to material well-being or security (p. 131)'. This is crucial for Lebow because he acknowledges that much of international history has been marked by familiar fear-driven settings and hence seems to accord with standard realist explanations. Lebow needs to show that the fear we observe in the historical record resulted not from anarchy itself but from spirit, and thus that variation in the conflict propensity of international systems can be explained by his theoretical architecture.¹

Lebow seeks to establish the plausibility of his argument in a series of major case studies ranging from ancient Greece to the Iraq War. Their cumulative effect is unquestionably to make a *prima facie* case for the spirit's salience as a driver of human behavior. As important as the contribution is, the positive case for the spirit remains suggestive and not definitive, despite Lebow's formidable learning and the Heraklean scale of the book. Partly this is a result of the intrinsic difficulty of the task. Motives are generally unobservable and interdependent. What one does to enhance self-esteem may also bring wealth or security. How do we know behavior is motivated by spirit and the quest for esteem as opposed to appetite or security? At times, Lebow seeks to 'construct estimates of esteem through the eyes of actors themselves', arguing that '[d]iscourses are largely inseparable from practices' (p. 374). And, to be sure, in many historical epochs, leaders spoke frankly about their honor and standing, lending credence to Lebow's claims. Later, though, when discussing US policy in the Cold War, he argues that '[t]he security discourse became so dominant that it was successfully used as a cover for a host of policies and programs in the United States that had little or nothing to do with security' (p. 443). So discourse is evidence of motive, except when it isn't.

¹ The argument's very general form and constructivist premises resemble Wendt (1999), but the differences are definitive. See Lebow (Ch. 2).

Has the mix of motives changed, or just the language used to describe them? It is hard to tell.

Aside from the intrinsic challenge of the task, another challenge Lebow confronts is the vast range of purposes he pursues in this book, which could not help but detract from a laser-like focus on the challenge of evaluating hypotheses about the spirit's effect on the war-proneness of international systems. For example, other disciplines ranging from psychology, sociology and economics to biology and neuroscience have generated substantial scientific evidence of the importance of self-esteem in human behavior. Lebow reviews some of this work merely 'to show that some of the most important insights of Greek philosophy and literature find resonance, even empirical support, in contemporary research' (p. 138). But, he stresses, 'I neither assess the relative merits of these research programs nor use them to build my theory' (p. 138). This may have been a missed opportunity to exploit modern research in a more precise way to structure his inquiry and extract more probative evidence from his historical investigations.

Lebow's case selection is plainly meant merely to establish plausibility rather than to make bolder inferences about causation. His method is to select cases of conflict and sift historical accounts for evidence of status seeking. The cases move from epochs (ancient Greece, medieval Europe) to phenomena (imperialism) and events (World Wars I and II, the Cold War, and the Iraq War). In each, Lebow seeks to make the case for spirit as an important – if not the most important – cause. This has three effects that work against the goal of evaluating the theory empirically.

First, selection of cases of conflict means the book joins an overcrowded explanatory competition. The book is not addressing some unexplained puzzle, nor even reframing an old puzzle in a new way. Rather, it is bringing a relatively understudied 'independent variable' to bear on the oldest puzzle of all, the one the field of IR grew up around: why states go to war. Lebow tries to show that much of the conflict he covers remains challenging for existing theories. But with so many well-established explanations already on the shelf, this is tough going, and Lebow is not likely to persuade readers armed with those theories who know the cases well.

For example, in making the case for the role of spirit in the Bush administration's drive to war in Iraq, Lebow states confidently that the suspicion that Saddam Hussein harbored weapons of mass destruction 'had no basis in fact' (p. 471). Actually, there was a great deal of evidence for the belief that Hussein maintained chemical and biological weapons programs, which is why it was shared by most of the world's key intelligence services and most of the war's opponents.

Similarly, here is how Lebow establishes that the end of the Cold War is a puzzle for realist theory. He notes that ‘realists reason that Gorbachev sought to make the best arrangements he could before the Soviet Union’s relative power declined more precipitously. There is no evidence for such an inference; there is no Politburo document or oral testimony by former Soviet officials that they or Gorbachev acted on this basis’ (p. 457). Not so fast. On 4 October 1986, Gorbachev reminded the Politburo that ‘Our goal is to prevent the next round of the arms race. If we do not accomplish it, the threat to us will only grow. We will be pulled into another round of the arms race, and we will lose it, because we are already at the limit of our capabilities’. As far as ‘recollections’ are concerned, former Soviet Marshal Sergei Akhromeev wrote in 1992 that ‘all who knew the real situation in our state and economy in the mid-1980s understood that Soviet foreign policy had to be changed. The Soviet Union could no longer continue a policy of military confrontation with the United States and NATO after 1985. The economic possibilities for such a policy had been exhausted’. Such evidence – and there is a lot of it – may not ultimately undermine Lebow’s case.² The point is that it’s much harder to make that case than he allows.

Second, the focus on conflict cases means we do not get variation and so cannot carefully examine how the theory operates for periods of peace – which, after all, is most of the time. There are dozens of fascinating questions that cannot be answered with a focus on great-power conflict. It would be interesting to see how the theory deals with societies in which honor seems to be central but there is almost no interstate war, such as in Latin America. Do we see reason-based norms the theory predicts must be restraining the Latin American spirit? More generally, the theory cries out for examining periods of peace, such as the relatively peaceful nineteenth century, or, even more significant, the dramatic decline in war at all levels within and between states since the end of the Cold War.³ This important trend clearly calls for an explanation in terms of Lebow’s theory.

Third, the case selection has the strange effect of accentuating continuity, not change; predictability, not contingency; and structure, not agency. Again and again, in case after case, norms break down and unrestrained competition comes to the fore. Could it be that the precedence of competitive

² These quotes, and much other evidence, are reported in Brooks and Wohlforth (2000/2001).

³ The Human Security Research Project (2009) summarizes the research findings of all the main peace research institutes thus: ‘The world is becoming less war-prone. The number of civil wars dropped by three-quarters from 1992 to 2005. And the number of international conflicts has been falling since the mid-1970s – the most sustained decline in two centuries’.

motives is hardwired after all? One fascinating question that emerges is: Why do leaders so frequently think that they can satisfy their spirit-driven lust for standing and prestige by using force? After all, Lebow stresses that standing is socially constructed; it is conferred by others. Other actors have to play ball; one cannot obtain standing unilaterally. Why do so many leaders over thousands of years periodically believe that they can violate the rules of honorable behavior, unleash the dogs of war, and fight their way into high esteem? Lebow's narratives do not rule out one answer: it works. And that might explain the otherwise curious continuity in the attributes that convey standing in international politics.

Theoretically, many socially desirable attributes could convey status – good opera, good athletes, a healthy and happy society. Theoretically, there is the possibility of many hierarchies, thus dampening contestation over who is number one. But Lebow notes that now, as in the past, 'there is still a single hierarchy, and it is based on military power' (p. 570). Lebow suggests that there is a new campaign under way, spearheaded by the European Union (EU), Canada, and Japan, to redefine the attributes that convey standing. Lebow hopes they succeed. So do I, but hope is not a theory-based expectation. After all, if the United States, Russia, China, and other bellicose states value their standing, then what is to stop them from using force to maintain or attain it?⁴ To explain why countries such as China, India, and Russia do not take Europe seriously as a great power, for example, noted EU expert Charles Grant (2009: 11) quoted Shi Yinhong, an eminent professor at Renmin University: 'A power needs guns and guts'.

The bottom line is that, in part owing to the difficulty inherent in addressing human motivation and in part owing to the way Lebow constructed his treatise, the theory is more successful at raising questions than answering them. And that makes sense, given that Lebow's purpose was to get scholars to take spirit seriously. I think he has successfully placed the burden of proof on defenders of the status quo to justify the exclusion of this motivation. Indeed, a major contribution here is to place a question mark over much of what we think we know about the causes of war and peace. Extant theories that highlight fear and appetite as drives also confront all the daunting challenges of establishing human motivation with which Lebow had to grapple in his study of spirit. Unlike Lebow, however, they benefit from path dependency and the status quo. Scholars are used to these motives, and they may well hold them to a lower standard of empirical verification than they would insist on for claims regarding the spirit.

⁴ The critique in this paragraph draws on Wohlforth (2009).

So if the measure of a good theory is that it raises important questions and points the field to a promising new research agenda, Lebow's work is a success. While it may seem obvious that any theory worth its salt should hold out the promise of a productive empirical research program, not all are written in a manner that invites such a response. Lebow is truly the 'anti-Waltz', and not in the obvious sense that his theory is anti-realist and anti-materialist, and anti-many other things we associate with Kenneth N. Waltz's great work. Rather, it is the *openness* of Lebow's theoretical enterprise that most starkly differentiates it from structural realism.

Whether one admires Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* (1979) and believes it had a profoundly productive impact on our field (as I do) or regards it as a colossal intellectual dead end (as Lebow surely does), it was more or less a one shot deal. It represented a closed system of assumptions and arguments that purported to answer a few timeless questions about international politics. To address other questions, scholars had to go beyond the bounds of the theory, which meant that no 'neorealist research program' would ever develop – although many of Waltz's admirers and detractors managed to convince themselves otherwise. As Randall Schweller (2003: 313) put it:

...Waltz brilliantly said everything that can be usefully said about neorealism; there is no way to improve or amend Waltz's theory without violating its structural-systemic nature and, in so doing, confounding the theory's highly deductive and internally consistent logic. For this reason, neorealism has never been, as is commonly assumed, a fertile research program. There cannot be any theoretical reformulations of neorealism, only extended applications of its logic to various historical cases... Moreover, the theory cannot explain specific events or foreign policy. There is nothing left for neorealists to do that Waltz has not already done.

Such a paragraph will not be written about Lebow's theory. This is good for the theory's shelf life, but it might undercut its initial appeal. Rather than compact, compelling, simple, forceful answers to puzzling questions, one gets a complex system of arguments, facts and ideas that actually make matters more complicated. But my bet is that the book will help propel a fruitful research program to tackle the empirical challenges of spirit as a human motivation. After all, the book represents a challenge to the honor and standing of the field. Lebow has dropped his glove before us all: by failing to address the matter of honor, he says, we have failed in our duty as scholars and dishonored the profession. Human nature being what it is, I am sure we will rise to the challenge.

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