

Remember the *Aeneid*? Why international theory should beware Greek gifts*

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In 2003, Ned Lebow produced one of the most arresting books that had appeared in politics or International Relations (IR) scholarship for a good long while. *The Tragic Vision of Politics*¹ deployed an understanding of classical tragedy as a backdrop against which to read Thucydides, Clausewitz, and Morgenthau's contribution to political realism in particular, and to politics and IR more generally. The result was a *tour de force* of interpretive and analytical scholarship that was rightly lauded and has played a significant role in the revival of certain forms of what is now routinely (though I think rather problematically) called 'classical' realism.

Never one to rest on his very considerable laurels, however, Lebow has now, 5 years on, produced a sequel. *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* is, he tells us, an attempt 'to build on [the ontology developed in *The Tragic Vision*] to develop a theory of IR embedded in a proto theory [of] political order' (p. ix). And, he further announces, that the two will be followed by a 'follow on volume [in which] I hope to develop a full blown theory of political order drawing on the findings of this study and additional research' (p. ix).

Beginning with a detailed account of how Greek thought understood fundamental motivational assumptions, most especially appetite, spirit, and reason, and arguing that we should take these as a starting point over more familiar enlightenment-derived ones (Ch. 1), Lebow develops an account of politics based fundamentally 'on spirit and the need for self esteem to which it gives rise' (p. 122). In addition to rooting this in his extremely acute reading of Greek thought, Lebow calls in aid much

* The phrase *Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes* appears in Virgil's *Aeneid* (II, 49). Its proper meaning is 'I fear the Danaans (Greeks) even if they bring gifts'. Its more usual English translation, of course, is 'beware of Greeks bearing Gifts'.

¹ Lebow (2003).

modern work in psychology, sociology, history, and political science to develop a taxonomy of 'honor based worlds', 'fear based worlds', 'interest based worlds', and 'appetite based worlds' (Ch. 2). These distinctions, he argues, can help us to theorize IR much more effectively than the very static, enlightenment-based theories with which we have mainly worked to date. As Lebow puts it, '[T]he core of my theory concerns the different logics governing cooperation, conflict and risk taking I associate with reason-spirit-appetite and fear based worlds' (p. 515).

These theoretical arguments are then illustrated with an extremely impressive set of historical cases: the Ancient world (Ch. 4), medieval Europe (Ch. 5), 'from Sun King to Revolution' (Ch. 6), Imperialism and World War One (Ch. 7), World War Two (Ch. 8), Hitler to Bush and Beyond (Ch. 9). The whole is finished with a concluding chapter that reviews his theoretical claims and advances some tentative hypotheses and conclusions. In particular, he suggests that the beginnings of a transformation of the international system might be visible. '[T]he international system', he suggests at the end of the book, 'is something of an atavism that still reflects many of the values of warrior societies ... [T]here is still a single hierarchy of standing, and it is based on military power'. But a challenge 'is now underway ... spearheaded by a diverse group of countries ... [whose] claims for status are based on honor, and rest on the hope that international society has become more like domestic societies in that multiple hierarchies are possible and thick enough to allow honor to replace standing as the basis of influence' (p. 570). In his last sentence, he urges us 'not to lose sight of this possibility' and says that it is the task of theory 'to show us how such a world could come about and renew our commitment to work towards its attainment' (p. 570).

So no one can say, I think, that Lebow is shy of ambition. The question before us, therefore, is to ask how well he succeeds, in this volume, in matching ambition to achievement. In many respects, the answer has to be: very well indeed. As with *Tragic Vision*, Lebow pulls off an enormously impressive intellectual high-wire act with great bravura, and as the foregoing summary surely shows, the reach and the range of the book is spectacular, combining sophisticated literary and textual scholarship with insights culled from the modern social sciences and detailed historical narrative. It would be hard to think of anyone interested in the history of international relations, or IR theory, who could fail to enjoy and learn from this book.

But, as ever when one paints on so broad a canvas, there are some parts of the picture that are rather out of focus or that appear to have less detail in them than one might ideally like, and other parts where the detail appears almost too much. In what follows, I want to focus on two such areas.

Theory

Let me start by developing one central area of disagreement I have with Lebow's account. Lebow's argument is that, starting with assumptions drawn from Plato and Aristotle's discussion of motivation, we can devise an account of what he calls 'honor-based worlds' – which he suggests far more appropriately describes the worlds of international relations from Homer's day to our own than more familiar so-called 'materialist' assumptions – as well as other ideal types – for example, 'interest-based worlds' dependent upon appetite- and reason-based worlds as sketched (he argues) by Plato in the *Republic*.

'Real worlds', he claims, 'are mixes of all three motives, and in those I refer to as honor-based societies, honor is more important for the elite than appetite. The reverse is true in interest-based worlds. For either kind of society to exist in practice, reason must to some degree restrain and educate spirit and appetite alike. When reason loses its hold over either ... a rapid phase transition to a fear-based world [can result]' (p. 162). Honor-based societies, he concludes, incorporate four key tensions (p. 164):

1. There is a tension between competition for honor and the *nomos* that makes that competition possible and meaningful Actors are sorely tempted to take short cuts to attain honor. If the rules are consistently violated, honor becomes meaningless.
2. The quest for honor requires a proliferation of ranks or statuses. These gradations intensify conflict when they are ambiguous.
3. In practice, ascribed and achieved status hierarchies are often distinct and diverge. The relative standing of these hierarchies and those within them can constitute a powerful source of conflict.
4. Warfare conducted by the rules of honor societies privileges the honor of individual warriors over the honor and security of a society as a whole. Adherence to these rules can make defeat more likely against adversaries who are not similarly constrained.

These tensions define the crises that can beset honor-based worlds. As Lebow puts it, 'the survival and stability of real-world honor societies depend on their ability to moderate and control these four tensions. As they interact synergistically, failure to do so can lead to a rapid transformation of an honor-based world into a fear-based one. However, success and the orders it brings make the accumulation of wealth more likely and threaten to transform honor societies into worlds dominated by appetite' (p. 164).

This is a rich and provocative thesis and it should be said immediately that it is a powerful corrective not only to the rather flat 'materialist'

theories that have been all too common in IR theory,² but also to many of the ‘constructivist alternatives’ that have proliferated recently as well. Lebow’s illustration of his thesis in his historical cases is exemplary and demonstrates very well the fecundity of his approach (as well as the breadth of his historical reading).

But I am, I confess, unpersuaded that we should see human motivation wholly or even principally through the tripartite lens Lebow suggests. It is not that human beings are not motivated by appetite, honor, or reason. They certainly are. But surely there are many other things that motivate them as well? What about delight or faith or imagination or love or even hate? These are surely motivations every bit as powerful as the three Lebow emphasizes, and are not reducible to them (sex may be an ‘appetite’ but love is not – it can, after all, be – or become – *philia*, *agape*, or even *philosophia* as much as *eros* – the latter being, surely, the central theme of the *Symposium*). And if we cannot structure human motivation as Lebow wants to, then the elaborate structure on which *A Cultural Theory* is based looks decidedly rickety.

Lebow might counter that his theory is not meant to be a theory of everything but rather a theory of political order and international relations and that for *this* purpose one can see human motivation as divided up in the way he suggests. This is effectively the argument he makes in chapter one where he suggests that, in contrast to most other contemporary theories of IR, ‘I privilege process over structure and change over stability and attempt to describe the dynamics that bring about change. I build my theory around ideal types which can be described as non-existent structures’ (p. 58). But in order to claim this in general, Lebow does assume – and I think *must* assume – that ‘Plato and Aristotle posit three *fundamental* drives’ (p. 60, emphasis added) for the theory to work. In other words, while he can accept that there are other motivations, these three have to be seen as somehow basic, elemental drives that can subsume all others. However, in *A Cultural Theory*, this remains an assumption. It is never argued for, as opposed to being asserted, through derivation from ‘the Greeks’. As such, it remains, I think, simply a hypothesis; and one that, as I say, I find unpersuasive.

Greeks

It is obvious from what I have already said that the whole edifice of *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* rests on Lebow’s interpretation

² I refer here not only to obvious ‘materialist’ theories such as neorealism and Marxism, but also to all of the neo-utilitarian accounts of institutions, organizations, and political economy.

of Ancient Greek approaches to ‘human motives and their implications for order and justice’ (p. 44), contrasted with their modern counterparts, and on his insistence that the former is more useful than the latter. In particular, Lebow assumes that enlightenment and post-enlightenment abandonment of teleology, and emphasis on instrumental conceptions of rationality, has been profoundly damaging. ‘Strategic action models take preferences as given’, he tells us. ‘They acknowledge the critical importance of preferences, but cannot tell us how they form or when and why they change’ (p. 45). The Greeks, however, ‘framed the problem of choice differently. Their principal concern was human goals, and from an early date, they distinguished between two kinds of human motives: appetite and spirit. The former pertained to bodily needs, like, food, shelter and sex, and the latter to the competitive quest for recognition as a means of building self esteem. Plato and Aristotle maintained that reason also generates desires of its own, and was a third independent, motive ... This three-fold characterization of motives provides the foundation for an analytical framework for a theory of preferences. It also generates a typology of political orders applicable to individuals, societies and regional and international systems’ (p. 47).

While in general terms this is a fair enough interpretation of some crucial differences between aspects of ancient Greek thought and aspects of post-eighteenth-century thought, the more one ponders it the more problematic aspects of it become. To begin with, claims about what ‘the Greeks’ thought must, I think, be taken with a pinch of salt. ‘The Greeks’ didn’t think anything in particular; rather they differed amongst themselves hugely about the relative importance of various different kinds of human motivation, certainly including (but also not limited to) appetite, spirit and reason and a whole host of other things. Lebow suggests that he is taking his reading from ‘epistemological and substantive conceptions that shape the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, the histories of Herodotus and Thucydides and the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle’ (p. 44). He accepts, of course, that there are many differences between them. However, he says, ‘as my purpose is to build *Grundbegriffe* for my own theory, I do not go into detail about the many differences [between them]’ (p. 44).

We can accept, I think, that inasmuch as Lebow’s aim is to ground his own theory, many of the differences between such thinkers would not be directly relevant – but that does not mean that they are completely unimportant. I would have thought that the differing views of Herodotus and Thucydides on the character of their narratives, for example, would be very pertinent (and they cannot both be right, though of course they might both be wrong). It would also be interesting to know more of how

Lebow reads for example, Plato's *Republic* on *Thymos*, for, of course, there are multiple and contested readings of this, some of which are compatible with Lebow's reading but many of which are not.³ But more problematic still is the relatively bald assertion that it is *these* thinkers that constitute 'The Greeks' for Lebow. Why them and why not (for example) the Old Oligarch or Hesiod? Or sophists, such as Protagoras of Abdera or the (very different) Gorgias of Leontini? And what about the Poets – say Pindar – or later Greek writers such as Lucretius? The way of understanding human motivation offered by a Diogenes of Sinope, and even more by someone like Plotinus, is starkly at variance with Lebow's reading, and to answer that they fall outside the 'period' that Lebow is concerned with does not answer the question, because he has not given us a defense of his periodization in any case. Why *these* Greeks, writing *then* and not these *other* Greeks writing *later* (or earlier)? We are not told, and that, surely, is a problem.

One might put this in a slightly different way and say that the real problem is that it is not always clear why Lebow is so exercised by 'the Greeks' when – it is quite clear – there are many 'Greeks' that cannot be interpreted in the way he chooses. His claim about the importance of spirit, recognition, and so on can surely be made and assessed without detailed reference to 'the Greeks', or he might have chosen one particular Greek thinker – as he did so well in *The Tragic Vision* with Thucydides – and hung his theoretical reflections around a particular interpretation of this thinker, in which case the problems alluded to above would indeed, at least in the main, not be relevant. But instead, he chooses to base his theory on a view of 'the Greeks' that must, I think, be seen as, at best, a highly abstracted and 'one dimensional' one, however expertly mounted and deployed.

Conclusion

None of the above should be taken as a denial of the very real power and originality of Lebow's book. As *The Tragic Vision* did, it sets the bar of international theory very high indeed. Even for those who find it ultimately unconvincing, it is a wonderful and exhilarating journey that anyone who is interested in IR, political theory, or political science could not fail to learn from. It also whets the appetite for the next volume of this always fascinating journey. But perhaps it also reminds us why we should still have Virgil's warning close to hand. Even when the gifts they bring

³ See, for example, the account of *Thymos* in Gadamer (1980), and contrast it with Rochnik (2003) and Rosen (2005).

are this bountiful – and notwithstanding the fact that I love them too – we should still, I think, beware ‘Lebow’s Greeks’.

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