

## Eight questions for *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*

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I begin by pointing out some differences between Professor Lebow and myself that color my comments on his *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*. My central interest lies in scientific theory, while Lebow aims for a broader, almost philosophic understanding of international relations. I am inclined to a more rigorous examination of empirical tests of a given theory, while he aims for a deeper historical interpretation of key cases. Despite these differences, we have some important points of agreement that I would like to point out in addition to the eight criticisms I have of his argument.

Let me begin with a summary of Lebow's argument, as I understand it. Lebow never provides definitions of his key terms: spirit, appetite, reason, standing, honor, fear, and interest, although he discusses each at length. This section summarizes my understanding of his argument; other readings are possible because he never presents a single, clear logical argument. Human beings have at least two main types of motivation, one directed at gratification of our material and sensual desires – *appetite* – and another for self-esteem – *spirit*. Societies are organized by systems of norms that focus rewards and social order around a mixture of these two motivations. At the extremes, there are worlds of *honor* where the spirit alone rules<sup>1</sup> and those of *interest* where appetite dominates. Further, the norms of some societies are supported by deeper understandings of common interests and values advanced by those norms, so that actors have more sophisticated views of why these norms advance their interests and why they should operate within the limits of those norms. This deepening of norms is *reason* as it is based on a reasoned understanding of why these norms are appropriate and good. *Fear* can arise in societies where reason is absent because members of the society come to fear that others will deprive them of the rewards of society.

<sup>1</sup> O'Neill (1999) is the classic statement of how a world of honor can be explained as rational, equilibrium behavior.

I say societies in all these cases because both international and internal political systems create such societies. All societies contain the seeds of their own demise because the pursuit of the goods they award can lead to the violation and breakdown of their norms. Societies with high degrees of reason are less susceptible to such breakdown because the actors have a deeper understanding of why they follow the norms. Finally, the lack of congruence between the norms of domestic and international society complicates the sustenance of norms in both societies. The theory is cultural in the sense that it focuses on the culture of norms in both domestic and international societies.

We agree on some important points. I agree with Lebow that norms structure international politics, although I believe they are tenuous and the question of how exactly they shape action is primary. I also believe that the character of international politics changes with the character of the domestic systems of the polities that compose the international system.<sup>2</sup> But I also have eight points of concern with the argument Lebow develops.

### **Are worlds of interest more peaceful than those of spirit?**

Lebow seeks to resuscitate spirit as a motivation and driving norm in political life, particularly when that drive for self-esteem is regulated by norms of limited conflict. Reading his cases, though, I am struck that he traces the roots of many conflicts to spirit, albeit corrupted spirit. The 17th and 18th centuries were warlike because kings fought for honor and glory. Both World Wars in the 20th century were driven, according to Lebow, by countries whose aggressive foreign policies satisfied popular demands for national honor. This suggests that appetite-driven worlds are less prone to conflict, and in that sense, superior to spirit-dominated worlds. This view matches arguments that world politics was fundamentally changed toward less conflict and greater predictability when interests supplanted personal ambition and grand moral designs as the guiding light of state policy (cf. Kissinger, 1994: 56–67; Bobbitt, 2002: 522–537). Interests allow for calculation and pragmatism that moderate international conflict. International agreements to limit competition within a system of interests are also helpful, in accord with Lebow's argument concerning reason and norms.

### **Are worlds of honor less prone to fear than those of interest?**

Spirit and competition over standing, in addition, raise the prospect of fear. The rewards to the parties in an interest-based world are not

<sup>2</sup> Although the empirical tests to establish this point have not been done at this time.

necessarily in competition with one another, while standing is inherently competitive. If actors derive their self-esteem from their standing, it cannot be the case that all have an above-average standing, except perhaps in Lake Woebegon. Those with high standing may be concerned that those with lesser standing pose a threat because conflict is a way for the latter to gain the standing they currently lack. Further, it is more difficult to craft deals that would satisfy both sides in the face of imminent conflict. One side's gain is the other's loss.<sup>3</sup> Both those with high standing and those with low standing might harden their views of one another as threatening, the characteristic of fear in Lebow's argument. And those fearful reactions would be both appropriate and correct. Fear in some cases is the reasoned response to one's situation.

### **Why do people gain self-esteem from the standing of their state?**

The other question Lebow's idea of spirit raises to me concerns why people gain self-esteem from the standing and achievements of their state. Key to his account of the source of the First World War is how non-aristocratic classes in Germany sought to overcome their own lack of domestic standing through identification with Kaiser Wilhelm's 'quest for a place in the sun'. I do not doubt that many feel strong attachments to their states and gain a sense of pride in national accomplishments and power, but such attachments are something to explain, not simply assert. They did not always exist for all members of all states; it is hard to imagine that the slaves in Rome felt better as it conquered the Mediterranean. Warrior elites run societies such as some of the Greek city-states that are central to Lebow's argument; an identification by that elite of the status of the state and their own standing is obvious. For modern states, that identification between subjects and their state is not.

### **Do the political institutions of a state change the dynamics of spirit and appetite within and across states?**

Domestic politics does not play a substantial role in Lebow's argument. The politically relevant class has varied across time, from the aristocracies of Ancient Greece and Rome to modern mass democracies with universal adult suffrage. The aims of the state and how they are pursued depend

<sup>3</sup> To be careful, though, this competition need not be zero-sum, merely that of opposed interests. Both sides might continue to have an interest in deals to avoid the costs of a conflict.

upon who has the power to act in its politics.<sup>4</sup> Increasing the politically relevant class can change not only the policies but also the purpose of a state. The system for reaching decisions from the views of that politically relevant class also matters. Was the problem facing Wilhelmine Germany the identification of the middle class with belligerent policies in the effort to achieve international standing or a political system that placed little restraint on the Kaiser and his appointed foreign and military leaders? Political institutions moderate, or in some cases exacerbate, how actors pursue their ends. The translation of individual desires for standing or goods into state policies then depend on how the state's institutions translate those desires into its policies.

### **Is reason a property of individuals or societies?**

Reason is the great moderator in Lebow's argument. When competition over standing is restrained by reason, an honor society with meritorious competition can emerge. Appetite restrained by reason leads to common interests realized through cooperation and the division of labor and attendant gains in efficiency. I have focused on norms of limited competition as the key element of reason, unlike Lebow's emphasis on reason as a process of self-reflection and wisdom. I do so because emphasizing the individual properties of reason leaves the explanation as little more than the observation that smart people make better choices than do foolish ones. I do not doubt this is true, but as Stephen Krasner observed, 'Stupidity is not a very interesting analytic category' (Krasner, 1976: 319). Self-reflection and reason may lead us to understand that our ends, whether they be for standing or for material satisfaction, are served better by limiting the competition over those ends, but it is the shared understanding that competition should be limited, not the process of reason behind it, that is critical.

### **Can reason undermine norms of restrained competition, instead of strengthening them?**

Lebow traces the breakdown of norms to the failure of reason to limit competition in honor societies or pursuit of material gain in others. However, systems of norms can also fail because of the rational judgment that one does not benefit from those restraints. Lebow describes the

<sup>4</sup> Bueno de Mesquita *et al.* (2003) present a general theory of how variation in the politically relevant class – called the selectorate – and the size of supporters needed to retain office affect the policies followed by leaders of a polity.

limited nature of hoplite warfare in Ancient Greece before the Peloponnesian War. The key step in the breakdown of these norms of limited warfare was Pericles' strategy for the war which avoided hoplite combat with the Spartans (cf. Ober, 1994: 18–24). Pericles, as Lebow (p. 185) describes him, is an exemplar of reason, the man who controls his appetites and seeks status through honor.<sup>5</sup> Yet he broke the rules of honorable combat to advance the cause of Athens. Interests and norms are mutually supporting; norms contrary to interests cannot persist.

### **What is the tradeoff between appetite and spirit?**

I am wary of Lebow's raising of esteem to equal standing as a motivation with appetite as a basic good over which individual preferences are defined. Multiple goods naturally raise questions of tradeoffs; how much esteem is one willing to sacrifice to gain material goods? Lebow offers no guidance on these tradeoffs, and without that guidance, the argument can be made to fit any behavior because the preferences underlying the tradeoff are unobservable and no conclusion is falsifiable.<sup>6</sup> I place the character of whether societies focus on honor or standing on the character of their norms, what rewards they value, and how they regulate the distribution of those rewards because such shared understandings might be observable.

### **Is it necessary to distinguish spirit and appetite as motives?**

If societal norms determine whether the rewards of society are status or material, individuals within that society must take the character of rewards they can seek as given. As Lebow notes, worlds of spirit reward the prestigious with material goods (p. 141), and those in worlds of interest often seek material goods for the status they convey (p. 75). In the end, both are scarce; individuals value both and must compete for both. The character of that competition does change with the dominant form of reward, but the breakdown of norms through the failure of reason and the rise of fear is the core of Lebow's argument about change. This distinction among motives is otiose for the argument about change in international systems.

<sup>5</sup> Lebow does ascribe the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War to the breakdown of reason in Athens and Sparta (pp. 185–186), but he does not explain why the norms of limited combat broke down during that war (pp. 187–192).

<sup>6</sup> To be fair, Lebow does not claim his theory is falsifiable, preferring to 'generate fresh perspectives, raise novel questions, and stimulate further research...' (p. 121). This leaves open the question of whether his theory has any empirical content; a theory that is consistent with any pattern of evidence explains nothing.

Although I have made some sharp criticisms of Lebow's argument, let me end by returning to our points of agreement. We agree that norms regulate domestic and international systems. These norms shape how actors pursue their interests. Congruence between international and domestic norms is conducive to an international system that is more robust and sustainable. Norms of limited competition also strengthen systems and reduce conflict. However, I see a larger role for political institutions as defining who can matter in politics and in resolving disagreements as important and hope that Lebow will develop his argument to include their independent effect. I am also not as optimistic as he is that the spirit can be directed toward regulated competition and not provoke fear.

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