

Richard Ned Lebow. *A Cultural Theory of International Relations.* Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008, reprinted with corrections 2010. ISBN 978-0-521-69188-8, 762 pp.

Contrasting views between rationalists and reflectivists, which concern the epistemology of international relations, have given rise to another great debate in International Relations (IR) theory. Richard Ned Lebow, a James O. Freedman Presidential Professor of Government at Dartmouth College and Centennial Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science, one of most prominent constructivist thinkers in the United States, contributes to IR theory with his cultural approach by which he examines the influence of culture and identity on the development of international political order. His theory generally follows the path of a constructivist theoretical school of thought, though in some cases Lebow can be critical of mainstream constructivism. He admits that constructivism has not met with success in producing a comprehensive theory of international relations (3). Only time will tell if Lebow is presenting another aspect of constructivism and if this book will initiate a new *grand theory* in international relations.

In his book Lebow takes a closer look at changes in norms, beliefs and values and how these changes are often motivated by irrational factors he called the motives *appetite*, *spirit*, *fear* and *reason* which may dominate political decision-making in societies (worlds). Appetite values *satiation* and uses *wealth* as an instrument in order to achieve this goal. Spirit aspires to *esteem* through *honor* and *standing*. Fear urges us to seek *security* using *power* as a tool (90). At the same time, Lebow notes that culture and ideology can do more than rationalist behavior is able to offer, providing people with meaning, order and predictability in their lives (16). Many social scientists do not want to provide the public with perfectly calculated explicit theories. They “are more interested in understanding the background conditions and cultures that constitute the social reality and make actors and action meaningful” (34).

A *culture* is a unique phenomenon in the history of mankind which manifests relationships among individuals and groups, ideas and identities. Cultural relativists, including constructivists, recognize the constant need in international relations to draw distinctions between *Us* and *Others* in forming cultural identities. Constructivists move away from rationalist theoretical arguments by arguing that identity is rather a social construction which emphasizes the self-esteem of actors. The construction of identity is essential in determining interactions between an international system and actors operating within it. While realists mainly focus on the anarchical order of an international system, which requires that actors within it help themselves, constructivists emphasize that “identity is closely connected to autonomy regardless of the motive that is dominant” (555).

The roots of debate between rationalists and reflectivists/cultural relativists reach back to the time of the ancient Greeks, the foundation of modern Western thought. Even then the ancient philosophers were already discussing whether nature should be understood in terms of its units or in terms of a process (56). Ontologically, cultural theory has its origins in the works of Plato and Aristotle which described the psyche as consisting of three drives: appetite, spirit, and reason (14). Similarly, Lebow recognizes the influence of “universal drivers (*appetite and spirit*), a powerful emotion (*fear*) and routine practices (*habit*)” which interfere with international decision-making at every level of social aggregation (5). Each of these four motives creates its own logic of cooperation, conflict, and risk-taking. They express different forms of hierarchies and practice different forms of justice. Spirit-based worlds and appetite-based worlds are inherently unstable and intensely competitive “which encourages actors to violate the rules by which honor or wealth is attained” (82). These motives would become dominant in international relations and generate appetite-based societies aspiring to wealth, spirit-based societies valuing honor, reason-based worlds being prepared to cooperate with others, and fear-based worlds seeking security.

Lebow highlights human *self-esteem* as an important factor in the formation of identity. Nationalities, nations and other cultural entities seek, at least to some degree, enhanced self-esteem through their victories and suffer a loss of esteem, even humiliation, when experiencing setbacks (17). This makes the *spirit* an important, perhaps a dominant, motive in international relations. *Spirit* as a motive is closely related to its instruments *honor* and *standing* by which higher self-esteem can be attained. For the ancient Greeks, honor was a status which described the outward recognition given to us from others in response to our excellence (64).

Appetite is probably one of the most visible motives, manifested by *wealth*. Plato estimated that wealth had become the dominant goal in the democracy of Athens (72). Appetite-based societies, in which cooperation is built around common interests and those interests dictate preferences of policy, differ from spirit-based societies where cooperative relationships with others are much more difficult to achieve (75–76). Reason-based worlds are even more cooperative than appetite-based worlds, being willing to cooperate even if it may run contrary to their immediate self-interest (77).

Fear is one of the general motives that shapes international relations, setting *security* as a goal and using *power* as an instrument. Lebow defines fear as “an emotion, not a fundamental human drive”, which differs from appetite, spirit, and reason (89). He doubts the utility of power as a concept (557). Power is the main argument of the realist school, though realists are not able to give a usable definition for it. All the components used in describing “power” – territory, population, wealth, military capability – can be counterproductive if they are used in inappropriate ways.

Lebow assumes that spirit would be probably the most dominant motive in shaping international relations. In his book he takes us on a journey through human history, visiting ancient Greek and Roman society, medieval Europe, the courts of Sun King Louis XIV and his contemporaries, Europe's multi-polar society from 1815 to 1914 dominated by competitive great powers, Nazi-Germany and imperialist Japan, the Cold War environment and finally he reaches the era of the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq. All these societies had powerful spiritual motives which, from time to time, produced changes in international order.

In the ancient world, classical Greek society identified honor as a primary motive for the aristocratic elite and other citizens (518–519). Later, “limits established by governing norms facilitated a shift in goals from *honor* to *standing*,” (521). According to Lebow, fifth-century Greece and the late Roman Republic were *fear*-based societies, while the Roman Empire was dominated by *appetite*. In medieval Europe, the Merovingian and Carolingian dynasties of the Frankish Empire ruled over warrior societies where honor was absent and in which appetite was the dominant drive (521). Describing Europe between 1648 and 1789, Lebow notes that the distinction between private and state interests had mostly not yet developed and Europe was a set of honor societies where appetite was looked on positively (525).

In the 19th century, the decline of the aristocracy and “feudalization” of the European middle-classes led societies from a spirit-based world to an appetite-based world (527). Standing and honor diverged at the state level but honor survived at the personal level (528–529). The spread of nationalism in 19th century Europe helped to keep spirit alive, and *appetite* and *spirit* both became dominant motives of that era. The first half of the 20th century, which produced two world wars, was probably the apogee of Western influence on the international system, and western powers attempted to divide the world. Non-Western powers like Iran, Turkey, China, Japan, India, and others were weak, isolated, or destroyed by their colonial expansion.

At the beginning of World War II, spirit became an important motive for the Axis powers – Germany, Italy, and Japan. As Lebow explains: “When society is robust, honor and standing are closely linked, and actors are correspondingly more restrained in their goals and the means they use to achieve them. When society is thinner, honor and standing more readily diverge, actors are less restrained and escalations in goals and means are likely to occur” (532).

The book's most intriguing case-study is called “Hitler to Bush and beyond”, in which the author explores some tremendous parallels between the actions of Adolf Hitler, giving rise to World War II, and George W. Bush invading Iraq in 2003. Lebow admits that Hitler and Bush were different personalities. Hitler was a pathological murderer using power on behalf of “his most perverse fantasies and compulsions” (442). Both leaders, however, got involved in military operations that were condemned by majority of the

rest of the world. By invading Iraq, Bush and his neo-conservative advisers attempted to bring back the age of heroes and heroism, but ultimately failed. “The Anglo-American invasion of Iraq offers dramatic evidence that power does not necessarily produce influence” (557).

The study tells us that spirit-based societies are generally more risk-accepting than appetite-based and fear-based worlds (537). Consequently, appetite-based and reason-informed worlds are more cooperation-oriented, while spirit-based and fear-based societies are more receptive to conflict-building. Lebow argues that power of spirit as a dominant motive in international relations still resists. In the recent world, he makes a distinction between revolutionary powers (i.e., the United States, France, the Soviet Union, China and Iran), which claimed standing on ideological grounds, while others (i.e., Canada, Japan, the European Union) claimed standing on the multilateral nature of their foreign policies (570).

The international order is a complicated and multifaceted phenomenon in which the cultural identity of its actors certainly plays an important role. Ever since ancient times, international actors have relied on fundamental drives for justifying their behavior in facing multiple intercultural challenges. With his cultural theory, Richard Ned Lebow provides a promising approach to the discipline of international relations, which might encourage timely debate between cultural relativists and rationalists. Besides a “*Social Theory in International Politics*” of Alexander Wendt, this book has the great potential to become another fundamental study for reflectivist theoretical standing.

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