

The arrival of psychological constructivism

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Move over, Waltz, Keohane and Wendt. The publication of Richard Ned Lebow's *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* announces the definitive arrival of an alternative intellectual framework – call it ‘psychological constructivism’¹ – that draws on ancient and modern insights into the psychology of identity to produce a radical break from our conventional understandings of the dynamics of international politics.

Psychological constructivism represents a major challenge to all of the currently dominant approaches to the study of international behavior. For far too long, realists, neo-liberal institutionalists, and constructivists alike have gotten away with making overly reductionist assumptions about human psychology. Meanwhile, the numerous psychologically well-informed theories of foreign policy have never coalesced into a genuine alternative International Relations (IR) paradigm, and as a result they have effectively been relegated to the margins of the IR discipline. Lebow's *Cultural Theory* radically changes this picture. To the impertinent question, ‘But isn't that just *psychologism*?’ we now have a pertinent reference: ‘Read Lebow’.² More specifically, Lebow's work provides compelling retorts to the most common refrains of IR scholars who deny the need to place complex human psychology at the center of international theory:

- ‘Psychology can only contribute to a theory of foreign policy, not to a theory of international relations’. On the contrary, as Lebow puts it, ‘A theory of IR embedded in a theory of society is also a theory of foreign policy. There can be no meaningful theory of IR just at the system level’

¹ This is not Lebow's term. In the book, he tries instead to claim that his is the one true constructivism, while recategorizing Wendt as a ‘structural liberal’ (p. 3, n. 7). But he is going to lose that battle.

² *A Cultural Theory* also promises to break down the foreign policy literature's traditional wariness of ‘sociologism’. Prior efforts to explicitly incorporate constructivist insights into foreign policy analysis include Welch (2005) and Houghton (2007).

(p. 53). In other words: international politics is politics, politics is only possible in the context of society, and in society the micro and macro levels are inevitably mutually constituting. Of course, traditional constructivists also subscribe to this as a general principle; but they have typically failed to respect it in their actual theoretical models, which instead rely heavily on top-down, structural-functionalist assumptions. By bringing psychology back in, we can start to fulfill constructivism's original promise.

- '*Psychology can only explain deviations from the behavior prescribed by rationality*'. Not so; for one thing, human behavior is inexplicable without reference to the basic psychological motives such as security, appetite, and self-esteem that are exogenous to rational choice models. And attempts to reduce the explanatory relevance of these basic human motives by declaring one or another of them to be always dominant inevitably founder on the reefs of human complexity. Second, we now know that even instrumental rational cognition is itself impossible without the participation of the affect.³ And this point cannot be finessed with the 'as if' assumption so dear to rationalists, because the experimental evidence clearly shows that our rational calculating functions actually never master, but at most may strive to manage, the powerful emotional impulses of the human animal. In short, to quote Lebow, 'We are emotional beings, not computers' (p. 514).
- '*Individuals may be affected by psychological factors, but states are rational*'. No, states are not gigantic calculating machines; they are hierarchically organized groups of emotional people. And besides, attempts to calculate the national interest objectively are practically doomed in the face of the daunting complexities of politics at this highest level of social aggregation. Lebow further deconstructs the ideology of rational stateness by documenting the concept's origins in the culture of kings and noblemen who wanted a justification for maintaining monopoly power over foreign policy decision making (e.g. pp. 266–267).⁴

³ For elaborations of this point, see McDermott (2004), Mercer (2005).

⁴ In his contribution to this symposium, James Morrow notes that rational choice scholars are also increasingly abandoning the notion of state policy as a function of the rational pursuit of the national interest, in favor of an alternative notion of state policy as a function of the rational pursuit of the interest of leaders or ruling groups. This evolution certainly represents an important advance over the simplistic unitary state actor assumption that until recently was hegemonic in both realist and neo-liberal institutionalist scholarship. However, is it not rather odd that having abandoned the faulty traditional assumption of unitary actor states behaving as *monstres froids*, IR scholars would choose instead to adopt the even less defensible assumption that flesh-and-blood individual leaders behave as *monstres froids*?

- ‘*Human psychology is too variable to serve as a useful foundation for social-scientific analysis*’. It is true that there is great human variety, but we must not deny this fact simply in order to make our models more tractable. We must instead accept the reality that ‘God gave physics the easy problems’ (Bernstein *et al.*, 2000). Yet at the same time, by laying bare the connection between individuals’ cognitive and emotional tendencies and their deeper collective identities, psychological constructivism actually does provide relatively solid expectations about likely patterns of international behavior at specified moments in political time. And Lebow demonstrates the empirical relevance of those expectations across a vast historical panorama.
- ‘*Human psychology is merely a superstructural phenomenon that is dependent on more fundamental social facts*’. This is another dangerous half-truth. For although psychological constructivists accept that institutionalized collective identity is a powerful shaper of individuals’ cognitive and emotional tendencies, they also add that no social force is powerful enough to create a community of clones. Cultures inevitably give rise to counter-cultures.⁵ Therefore, individuals always have choice. Second, and even more importantly, the whole notion of distinguishing between (important) structure and (superficial) superstructure is thoroughly misguided. Lebow offers the crucial insight (e.g. pp. 152–153) that although individuals’ reactions to external events may initially be powerfully shaped by their institutionalized collective identities, their reactions often take on a life of their own – particularly when violence enters the picture – and in the long run can undermine the very identities from which they sprang. This insight into the dynamics of international interactions grows naturally out of Lebow’s process-philosophical understanding of politics, which heeds Marc Bloch’s dictum that history is the science of change.

One could take the basic psychological constructivist framework in many fruitful theoretical directions. Where Lebow chooses to go in *A Cultural Theory* is to ‘spirit-based worlds’ – international systems where actors are driven not by fear and the security dilemma, but instead by the desire to bolster pride and self-esteem in their individual and collective identities. In such systems, honor and standing are the coin of the realm, and the all-important international pecking order is established through frequent resort to armed conflict. Yet because that conflict is driven by the motive of establishing hierarchy rather than of eliminating danger, it is

⁵ See Brewer (2003).

likely to remain limited – although as Lebow also makes clear (e.g. pp. 193–194), such limits are always at risk of breaking down in the face of the hot emotions that violence inevitably unleashes.⁶

Lebow's spirit-based ideal type represents a dramatic break from standard IR thinking. On one side of the stereotypical IR debate stand realists who see conflict everywhere, and who attribute this tragic situation fundamentally – and notwithstanding their protestations against 'psychologism' – to ubiquitous fear. Meanwhile, on the other side of the stereotypical debate stand liberal idealists who focus instead on instances of cooperation, and who attribute this fundamentally to the retreat of fear. Thus, in fact, *both* sides in the debate accept fear as the default basis for international conflict; and so, not surprisingly, when liberal idealists find themselves confronted with evidence of conflict, they tend either simply to deny its severity, or to start singing from the realist songbook.⁷ By contrast, although Lebow certainly acknowledges that realist – conflict-prone, fear-based – worlds are possible, he contends that spirit-based worlds – which are at once conflict-prone and fear-proof – are also possible. This analytical separation of conflict from fear is a dagger thrust into the heart of realism.

To evaluate the extent to which Lebow succeeds in establishing his ideal-typical spirit-based world as a genuine alternative to the realist fear-based world for explaining and understanding international conflict, we must face two key questions. First, aren't psychology and realism natural allies, since all collective identity construction is ultimately based on fear of the 'Other'? Second, isn't fear implicitly present in the spirit-based model elaborated by Lebow?

On the first question, certainly much of the constructivist IR literature assumes that the search for collective self-esteem demands the creation of an enemy 'other' against whom we define ourselves in a dichotomous, black-white contrast – fertile ground for fear and security dilemmas. This literature often cites work in social psychology, and notably social identity theory (SIT), as a basis for its claims. However, as Lebow points out (e.g. pp. 11–12), such claims are based on a misinterpretation of SIT findings. It is true that SIT experiments routinely find a preference for one's ingroup over the outgroup in terms of evaluation, liking, or allocation of resources. However, SIT experiments also find that such ingroup favoritism does not necessarily, or even typically, translate into negative bias toward the

⁶ The use of limited conflict as a means of establishing hierarchy is not unique to states or even to human societies. The best analysis of the phenomenon is de Waal's study of chimpanzee politics (2000).

⁷ For some examples, see the devastating critique of the literature on transatlantic relations by Gunther Hellmann (2008).

outgroup – and much less into aggression against it. Ingroup love, in short, is *not* equivalent to outgroup hatred.⁸ Of course, one can point to many examples of oppositional identities among nation or states; but the mere fact that something is common should not lead us to assume that it must be necessary. In fact, non-oppositional or ‘sportsmanlike’ national identities, as I have labeled them in my own work (Hymans, 2006), are also possible – and indeed are a frequently observable empirical reality. In short, Lebow rightly corrects the mistaken belief that realism and SIT are natural allies.

On the second question, I believe that Lebow does largely succeed in constructing an ideal type that can stand on its own, without leaning on fear. However, at two key junctures he does implicitly smuggle the fear emotion into his model. These missteps open his work up to the charge that its supposedly ‘spirit-based’ world actually starts from a realist baseline. In fact, Lebow’s reliance on fear at these two junctures is not foundational to his broader edifice. However, it is nonetheless necessary to shine a light on these points, for if those of us who support Lebow’s overall project do not hasten to correct these errors, realists will likely start to depict them as Lebow’s Achilles heel.

The first appearance of fear in the model comes as part of Lebow’s attempt to provide an explanation for individuals’ strong psychological attachments to their communities – an important building block for a theory that derives many of its predictions from the quest for collective self-esteem. Lebow proposes (pp. 134–139) marrying SIT to terror management theory (TMT), another major psychological research program that focuses on the effects of the awareness of human mortality. As Lebow rightly notes, various TMT experiments have indeed demonstrated that mortality salience can, among other things, heighten the sense of affiliation with presumably more durable collectivities such as the nation. However, deriving the need for community from the feeling of terror obviously puts the fear emotion into the heart of Lebow’s spirit-based ideal type. And it therefore opens the door to the realist charge that if mortality salience is necessary for the collective pursuit of self-esteem, then fear and the security dilemma are actually the ultimate basis on which Lebow’s so-called ‘spirit-based’ world rests.

Yet Lebow’s excursion into TMT is quite unnecessary to the rest of his project. Only the extreme assumption of egoistic individuals, which weighs down so much of political science today, makes the question of why humans band together in groups seem to be a pressing one. In fact, it makes more sense simply to point to the innate human capacity for sympathy, as

⁸ See Brewer (1999).

Lebow rightly does elsewhere in the book (e.g. pp. 514–515). It is also worth noting here that the attempt to marry SIT off to TMT comes from the fertile mind of Lebow, not from SIT or TMT theorists themselves. Social identity theorists argue that although self-identification with the group based on fear of death is indeed possible, it is not necessary. When group identification is driven by fear, the result is typically an oppositional identity; when it is not, the result is typically a sportsmanlike identity. And it is the latter that forms the basis for spirit-based worlds. (In reality, of course, motives may mix, but it is important to keep our ideal types pure.)

The second appearance of fear in the model comes alongside one of Lebow's major theoretical contributions – his identification of anger, an emotion that is very distinct from fear (Lerner *et al.*, 2003), as a crucial mechanism linking the self-esteem drive to conflict in the international system. Lebow then chooses to follow Aristotle in conditioning the possibility of anger on actors' perceptions of relative standing or power: 'anger', he writes, 'is a luxury that can only be felt by those in a position to seek revenge' (p. 69). This is a wrong turn that weakens his case for the autonomy of the spirit. For if not merely the expression but even the very *feeling* of anger is indeed so highly dependent on relative power considerations, then we are back in Melos, where the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must. And therefore, realists may argue that fear and the security dilemma are the ultimate basis on which Lebow's 'spirit-based' world actually rests.

Like the excursion into TMT, Lebow's assertion that anger is an emotion of the strong is basically unnecessary to the rest of his project. The main purpose it seems to be serving is to ground the empirical assertion – the questionable empirical assertion – that honor-seeking is most common among people or groups at the top of social hierarchies, as well as among those who wish to break into the top ranks. This assertion, however, raises the follow-on question of why some states that are not at the top decide that they actually belong there.

Lebow's answer is that 'powerful states' feel anger when excluded from the high table, while 'subordinate states' do not (p. 69). This is a yet further unproductive step down the realist road. If relative power is indeed so fundamental, then why, for instance, does puny, backward North Korea so easily take umbrage at perceived slights by the great powers? To find the answer to this question, we should forget about the relative power tables and instead follow the approach that Lebow routinely uses elsewhere in his book: look *inside* the North Korean state, at the stories its elites tell themselves about their nation's core attributes and natural position in the world, and at the ideational lineages that allow them to see their nation in that way. It is only by such methods that we

will discover the deep sources of North Korean anger; and more generally, it is only by such methods that we will finally liberate our understanding of international conflict from the cold hand of realism.⁹

My critiques of Lebow's spirit-based ideal type are meant to strengthen, not to undermine, the challenge it can pose to currently dominant models of international behavior. But in closing, I want to underscore that Lebow's elaboration of the dynamics of spirit-based worlds is merely one vista opened up by his powerful, wider intellectual framework of psychological constructivism. *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* is one of those rare books that comes around perhaps once in a decade and promises to fundamentally remake the IR field. It is now up to the rest of us to carry out that remaking.

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⁹ A model of this type of work is Johnston (1995).