

A CULTURAL THEORY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Richard Ned Lebow

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 762pp, US\$120 hardback, US\$39.99 paper

ISBN 978-0-521-87136 hardback, 978-0-521-69188-8 paper

DIPLOMATIC THEORY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Paul Sharp

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. 339pp, US\$94.99 hardback, US\$32.99 paper

ISBN 978-0-521-76026 hardback, 978-0-521-75755 paper

These stimulating volumes reflect disillusionment with current approaches to the study of international relations. Theorists of the field—those who try to enhance understanding of the essential characteristics of diplomatic life as opposed to analysts of the most recent crisis or foreign policy moves—have increasingly come under criticism for their focus on a European or American perspective on that life, for not adequately getting the essentials right, and for ignoring the problem of change. As an example, the hoary lodestone of realism, the balance of power, does not fit the facts any longer—if it ever did. And most theories of international relations offer little more than a snapshot of critical tendencies or patterns at a single point. Those that offer explanations of dynamics do so only within very narrow parameters. In realism, for example, the only movement is between balances and imbalances of power.

Lebow's massive volume, a major effort at "grand theory," offers a transhistorical sketch of patterns of behaviour among independent political units, whether they are city-states, empires, or nation-states. His purpose is to uncover the essential motives for behaviour, the dynamics of change, and the critical elements of international order. The methodology is essentially positivist, embodying causal explanations for observed patterns.

His initial move is to locate causes at the level of the individual. He goes back to Plato, Aristotle, and Thucydides to identify the universals of the psyche: the *spirit*, concerned primarily with honour and standing; *appetite*, concerned with wealth and comfort; and *reason*, which, according to Plato, should govern the first two if one wants balance and order. These "fundamental drives" of the human psyche become reflected within and between societies (29). Fear, which Lebow claims to be an emotion rather than a "drive," is a response to excesses of spirit and appetite. Lebow's

explanatory scheme is reductionist and challenges Waltz's famous argument that you cannot construct a theory of the whole (international politics) from examining the character of its parts. This is not the place to engage in a debate about Waltz's position, but it is important to recognize that Lebow translates the Greeks' concepts of the psyche into an overall explanatory framework for the dynamics of international relations. Individual behaviour has systemic consequences.

What advantages accrue to the field from this maneuver? Lebow offers a succinct argument, displaying his discomfort with presently available theoretical alternatives:

The...most important [advantage] concerns the limited representation of human motives by existing paradigms and the theories nested in them.... [L]iberalism and Marxism are rooted in appetite, and so is realism at one remove. It is a paradigm based on fear, and the theories within it contend that in anarchical environments actors must make security their first concern, and only then can they indulge their desires for material well-being. There is no paradigm or theory that builds on the motive of the spirit and the human need for self-esteem and describes the ways in which strivings for honor and standing influence, if not often shape, political behavior. My theory of international relations is necessary to explain behavior other theories cannot, identify new problems, reframe existing ones in helpful ways and, in general, to establish a new and fruitful research program (35).

Lebow proceeds by constructing ideal types, worlds where the three psychic elements and fear are in balance or imbalance, and how they change through social dynamics. For example, spirit- and appetite-dominated worlds are inherently unstable because standing, honour, and wealth are usually perceived in zero-sum terms (83). Imbalance toward either the spirit or appetite breeds fear in others, and worlds dominated by fear are the most dangerous, warlike, and unstable. Order (defined as a stable and balanced relationship between the elements, not the absence of strife or war) cannot emerge where reason has been subordinated to spirit and appetite. As a theory of history, Lebow then offers explanations of transitions from one type of "world" to another and the dynamics and causes involved.

This brief outline hardly does justice to the nuances and complexity of Lebow's analysis, but it at least underlines the essential elements causing

change and the consequences of those changes in terms of order, risk-taking, and disorder.

The remainder of the story is a detailed examination in six chapters of western history, from pre-classical Greece through the Bush administration's main foreign policy actions. It is a *tour de force* resulting, not surprisingly, in a reasonable fit between outcomes and the theoretical explanations of them. Lebow, however, is quick to acknowledge that not all his theoretical expectations are confirmed by the historical evidence.

This is a lengthy read, based on voluminous research (the bibliography runs 169 pages) offering a huge amount of detail that normally escapes political scientists. Experimental and theoretical studies by psychologists and sociologists also come into the discussion, so Lebow's work admirably passes the test of interdisciplinarity. The focus on the dynamics of change sets it apart from most theorizing in international relations. Linking individual characteristics to politics and then to international systems is a bold but theoretically perilous move.

It is not surprising that an enterprise of this ambition and sweep should contain some difficulties. Aside from numerous questions about some of Lebow's historical interpretations, two problems stand out. First, Lebow does not subject the Greek trinity of the psyche to serious scrutiny. He makes the case that these characteristics are universal and he supports the view by citing a substantial modern social science literature. But how do we know that these categories are exhaustive? Many would argue that they are gendered, reflecting a male perspective on character. What about the charitable dimension of the human psyche, an important component of Muslim thought? Can the immense domain of generosity, nurturing, and love be subsumed under Plato's trinity? I doubt it. If it is excluded from the analysis, why? And if it were included, how would it alter the study of international dynamics?

The second problem is Lebow's conception of culture, which he defines as "human goals and their variations across societies and epochs" and "the means by which people and their societies pursue these goals" (119). These ideas are both too broad and too narrow. They are too broad because they can mean almost anything, and too narrow because they exclude major behaviour-producing currents such as ideology, religion, and technology. None figures in the historical analysis. To argue, for example, that Hitler's foreign policy was driven primarily by desire for standing, or fear (418), and that it reflected a continuation of the social dynamics of pre-World War I Germany (382-87) ignores the unique aspects of Hitler's worldview, aspects

that do not fit well with the trinity of the psyche's characteristics and that led him to monstrous excesses. Few of the Nazis' many atrocities of the 1930s and 1940s can be understood as deriving from the drives of honour, mass nationalism, or fear.

The analysis, furthermore, avoids discussion of revolutionary changes in the norms and institutions of international relations. The delegitimization of conquest, the rise of the territorial integrity norm, and the ways in which the invention of nuclear weapons affected risk-taking—all fundamental changes that distinguish contemporary international relations from historic predecessors—do not figure in the analysis. Having said this, Lebow's work still stands out as a largely successful and provocative attempt to overcome the deficiencies of other international theories.

Like Lebow, Paul Sharp is interested in characterizations of international life that transcend time, place, and personality. Also like Lebow, Sharp is concerned that mainstream theories do not do justice to some aspects of the field. In his case, it is the role and functions of diplomats. Unlike Lebow, who is at this stage of his work concerned with understanding and explanation, Sharp is not interested only in what is, but also in how things should be. His diplomatic theory of international relations is largely a normative exercise.

Over several decades Sharp has been an eminent observer of diplomatic life. He starts his analysis by reviewing Martin Wight's well-known classification of international theories: radicalism (think Kant), rationalism (think Bull), and realism (think Morgenthau and Waltz). From some of these thinkers' main works, he teases out a "diplomatic tradition of thought" (10). That thought is concerned primarily with showing how to "manage three sorts of diplomatic relations: *encounter relations* between peoples meeting for the first time; *discovery relations* between peoples seeking to find out more about, and enjoy closer relations with, each other; and *re-encounter relations* where peoples stay in touch, yet keep one another at arms length" (10-11). The fundamental condition of international life is *separateness*, the world of sovereign states. This is the "distinctive site or space from which diplomats see the world, and from which a diplomatic tradition of international thought emerges to make its own distinctive sense of the resulting relations" (81).

Diplomats operate within a society of states (borrowing from the English school), which is a social domain infused with rules, etiquette, protocols, and traditions. International society is always in flux, moving toward disintegration or integration, but within these dynamics diplomats function to "manage these changes successfully, which usually means peacefully, and certainly without the unwanted or un-intentioned conflicts

to which such movements can give rise" (147). That this management has been largely successful is attested to by the global reach of European diplomatic institutions throughout the world over the last half-millennium. Today the world no longer "encounters," and despite the efforts of some like North Korea and Burma to keep the world away, most governments are fully engaged in the diplomacy of managing relations peacefully.

Sharp offers four entertaining chapters on particular contemporary problems and how diplomats do, and should, deal with them: rogue states, "greedy company" diplomacy, "crazy religion" diplomacy, and "dumb public" diplomacy. In these domains, those who are gifted with an appreciation of the role and functions of diplomats in a world of separateness can help smooth the way and avoid lethal crises.

Sharp's analysis is not in the positivist tradition of political thought. It resembles more a philosophy of action in the world of separateness, showing how understanding, empathy, and sometimes appeasement are necessary to sustain international society. Like his model diplomat, Sharp is skeptical of grand truth claims (as in some versions of religion) and of the idea of human perfectibility. His text is designed to promote an ethics of tolerance of difference through patience and appreciation of diversity. His stance fits in nicely within the English school tradition that emphasizes the benefits rather than vices of political pluralism and of living in a world composed of almost 200 separate states representing unique societies and historical cultures. With patience, one can learn to appreciate the benefits of diplomats and diplomacy, whose work often appears frivolous, long-winded, and redundant. Sharp deftly shows why this is not the case. If we can characterize, with a few hesitations, Lebow's work as magisterial, then Sharp's would be subtle and humanely gratifying.

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