
Grand theories of international relations have been few and far between during the past half-century. Kenneth Waltz’s *Theory of International Politics* appeared in 1979; twenty years later, Alexander Wendt’s *Social Theory of International Politics* emerged.\(^1\) Now Richard Ned Lebow (hereafter L.) has delivered *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*, his follow-up to 2003’s insightful and erudite *Tragic Vision of Politics*,\(^2\) and the first of two volumes setting out a new model for the study of international relations and political order. Avowedly constructivist in its approach,

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1\(^1\) K.N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York, 1979); A. Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge, 1999).

L.’s work challenges some of the more problematic aspects of realist theories of international relations. More significantly, the study encompasses 2500 years of political history and thought from the ancient Greeks onward. *Tragic Vision*’s frame of reference has been considerably expanded as well; in addition to Thucydides, Clausewitz, and Morgenthau, the guiding spirits of that earlier book, L.’s new study is informed by a broad array of authors from Homer, Plato, and Aristotle through to Adam Smith, Alexis de Tocqueville, Max Weber, Johan Huizinga, and beyond. It is a truly humbling work, the product of a mere half-decade of deep research into a diverse range of academic fields and disciplines that would satisfy less diligent and energetic scholars as the sum and capstone of an entire career of dedicated research—the bibliography alone runs to 169 pages and contains over 3000 items. Despite its length, *A Cultural Theory* leaves one hungry for the promised synthesis of a “full-blown theory of political order” (p. ix) in a follow-on volume.

L.’s study begins with the premise that international politics is motivated by three drivers of human action identified in antiquity by Thucydides, Aristotle, and Plato, among others: appetite, reason, and “the spirit”; fear, which previous grand theories of international relations (especially realism) have emphasized, is less a motive than an emotion, a special condition that obtains when reason fails sufficiently to restrain appetite and/or the spirit. L.’s “spirit” refers to the ancient Greek concept of *thumos*, that ancient aristocratic feeling of pride in oneself and one’s status in society which, in the modern world, best equates to “the human need for self-esteem” and the “strivings for honor and standing [that] influence, if not often
shape, political behavior” (p. 35). L. argues that the spirit and its nexus of related concepts (honour, standing, identity, and prestige) have been undertheorized in previous parsimonious grand theories of international politics (p. 60), including those that self-identify as realist and constructivist. His thesis, broadly speaking, is that “the conduct of what we call interstate relations is fundamentally different in honor-, appetite- and fear-driven worlds” (p. 224), and that previous grand theories based on fear and appetite have failed to explain anomalies and inconsistencies in international behaviour because they have not taken the spirit into account.

L.’s first three and final chapters are largely theoretical in orientation, and explicate his tripartite motivational framework. He begins with a general critique of previous grand theories of international relations, citing realism’s well-known failure to account for state- (unit-) level phenomena, and the narrow focus of liberal-idealistic theories (such as Alexander Wendt’s “constructivism,” which, L. argues, is actually a species of structural-liberalism: p. 3 n. 7) on the modern world, and their liberal-democratic teleology; L.’s theory, although avowedly constructivist in orientation, is more open-ended. L.’s most significant contribution is his treatment of the spirit as an end in itself rather than a means to an end, to which other grand theories relegate it; in his analysis, the motivating spirit percolates upward from the individual level to the state, regional, and international levels to have a real-world impact on international politics.

In keeping with his constructivist orientation, L. regards the discourse of international relations as being constitutive of the international system rather than
simply being “the smokescreen of culture and ideology” that must be penetrated “to get at the political, economic and military realities they are understood to obfuscate” (p. 16), as most realists propose. L.’s particular contribution to the constructivist project is to psychologize the primarily social understanding of identity in constructivist thought, and in so doing draw out the implications of psychological identity for behaviour on the social and individual levels. L. recognizes—and indeed demonstrates—that the prime directive of survival that features so heavily (alongside the pursuit of rational self-interest) in realist theory is often subordinated, in practice, to the spirit-driven actors’ “willing[ness] to risk, even sacrifice themselves or their political units in pursuit of [the] goals of self-esteem through honor, standing or autonomy” (p. 19). Thucydides’ Melians, who in 416 BC famously chose collective suicide over acquiescing to Athenian power, is but one example; another is the sequence of seemingly irrational decisions made by the German and Austrian officials in the run-up to the First World War, as described by L. in Chapter 7.

Most of the theoretical heavy lifting appears in L.’s second chapter, which describes his three ideal-type worlds, each driven by one of the three motives of the spirit, appetite, and reason. Plato’s fictional “Kallipolis” in the Republic is obviously an example of the latter, while the ideal spirit-world is best approximated by Homer’s description of the aristocratic warrior culture of Bronze Age Greece in the Iliad, the subject of L.’s third chapter. L. acknowledges that the ideal-type worlds outlined in Chapter 2 are no more a representation of reality than are Plato’s forms,
but, like the latter, are useful in helping theorists think through the implications and consequences of their models. L. admits that most real worlds partake of, at best, a mixture (rather than a solution) of all three motives, and that individual mixtures affect tendencies towards cooperation, conflict, and risk-taking. L. argues that when reason loses control of appetite and/or the spirit, *nomos*, the set of rules and norms by which the game of international politics is played, breaks down and leads to the anarchy and endemic warfare of the fear-based worlds that are familiar from realist theories. L. ends his second chapter with an attempt to anticipate criticism of his theory by outlining some of its potential methodological and epistemological problems.

Chapters 4 through 9 consist of a series of case studies spanning the ancient, medieval, pre-modern, and modern worlds; the geographical focus is Europe and the Mediterranean area (although imperial Japan receives some attention in Chapter 8). The subject matter of Chapter 4—the ancient world—is L.’s “easy case” since “Greeks and modern-day scholars alike consider it a society in which honor was an important, if not the most important, value for the elite” (p. 165), and, of course, because his Greek-derived theoretical framework maps nicely onto the culture that created it. L. interprets classical Greece of the Peloponnesian War era, Alexander the Great’s Macedon, and the Roman Republic as predominantly spirit-driven cultures and explains the ancient Mediterranean international system in terms of the search for honour, prestige, autonomy, and standing. In Chapter 5 L. examines medieval Europe in the Merovingian and Carolingian periods as an example of a non-honour
society unconstrained by rules, which led to a “race to the bottom” (p. 232) as different groups sought standing and appetite-satisfaction through constant savage warfare and assassinations. Charlemagne attempted to restore the spirit to the motivational mixture by taking the title emperor, displaying his Christian piety, and reviving Classical pedagogy, but he was exceptional amidst a European nobility “driven by appetite” (p. 229). L. then goes on to argue that the period of the Norman invasion of England through to the end of the Hundred Years War represented something of a return to an honour-based world since it was mediated by courtly literature and the chivalric code that had arisen in the interim. In Chapter 5, which takes the story of European international development from the treaty of Westphalia (1648) through the French Revolution, L. argues that, in contrast to the usual (predominantly realist) interpretations of the rise of the nation-state, the endemic warfare of the period was motivated less by security-seeking and consolidation of territory—that is, by appetite—than by the promptings of the spirit, manifest in the drive for prestige, gloire (in the case of Louis XIV of France), and dynastic standing.

L.’s final three chapters will perhaps be of the greatest interest for readers of IHR and scholars of modern international relations more generally. Chapter 7 examines the period from the French Revolution through to the modern world, taking into account the imperialisms of the nineteenth century and the causes of the First World War. These are, as L. admits, the “hard cases” for his theory since it is “a world in which the spirit has been relegated to ghost-like status and appetite is assumed to dominate,” a problem compounded by the fact that “the spirit … has
become increasingly entwined with appetite” in historical accounts of the period (p. 30). But L. boldly proceeds, harnessing the insights of Joseph Schumpeter’s *Imperialism and Social Classes* (1919) to demonstrate the continuities with the past, particularly as concerns the spirit’s continuing influence on international policymaking. L. agrees with Schumpeter’s point that aristocratic warfare in the late long nineteenth century was an anachronistic atavism of an earlier age, but also attacks Schumpeter’s thesis on a number of fronts, including its assumption of a uniform imperialist attitude on the part of European elites, its lack of reference to the middle classes, and, most importantly for L.’s thesis, its emphasis on appetite as the most important aristocratic motive. L., by contrast, regards the spirit as the most important motivating factor, and argues that elite perceptions of self-esteem, most frequently expressed in nationalist terms, trickled down to the middle classes, who in turn embraced imperialism with even greater enthusiasm than Europe’s political elites. L. then turns to the First World War and argues that insecurity and fear were at best secondary motives behind its outbreak, and that the spirit more convincingly explains in particular the motivation and strategic irrationality of Austrian officials, on the one hand, in undertaking a war against the Serbs, which they knew would embroil them in an unwinnable war with Russia, and of the Germans, on the other, who adopted an offensive strategy towards France which they knew would fail—to say nothing of the “political and strategic lunacy” of their challenge to Great Britain at sea (p. 359).
Appetite and fear, L. argues in Chapters 8 and 9, cannot explain the outbreak of the Second World War, the Cold War, or the current US fiasco in Iraq. L. examines in-depth the decisions of the major fascist powers in the first case and discovers that their policies often defied economic and security desiderata that appetite- and fear-based explanations so often stress. During the Cold War, spirit, appetite, and fear were all in evidence at first, but after the Cuban Missile Crisis, the arms race and related manifestations indicate that the spirit was in the ascendant. John F. Kennedy’s famous outburst when informed of the discovery of Soviet missile sites on Cuba—“he [Khruschev] can’t do this to me!”—was not a response to the political or strategic dilemma the US now faced, but an angry response to the slight to America’s honour and the perceived betrayal by the Soviet premier of his earlier promises not to send missiles to Cuba. Thereafter, “Moscow and Washington were locked into a global competition for standing, at great financial and material cost that was increasingly at odds with any legitimate security needs” (p. 456). The contemporary war in Iraq likewise reflects George W. Bush’s personal search for self-esteem, and in particular for the respect of his father, whose attention and love he craved but never quite secured. “The clincher,” in L.’s reading of the professed motives behind the Iraq war, is Bush’s comment that “after all, this is the guy [Saddam Hussein] that tried to kill my dad at one time” (pp. 470-71). Dick Cheney had his own motivations, of course, but these were just as spirit-driven as his president’s: “Cheney felt disgraced by the American failure in Vietnam. He wanted a military victory that would erase that stain and also free the executive from the
remaining shackles imposed on it in its aftermath” (p. 470). As for the “war against terrorism,” the anger of the US after September 11, 2001 was Aristotelian in the sense that important US landmarks were destroyed (the twin towers) and severely damaged (the Pentagon) by “a rag-tag cabal of Middle Eastern terrorists” (p. 473), foes felt to be unworthy of status equivalence with the US. The desire for revenge, played out in such dark corners of the American psyche as Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad, Camp X-ray at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan, and untold numbers of CIA-manned “black sites” throughout the world, marks the apothecosis of the spirit as a driver of US foreign policy in the early twenty-first century.

L. ends his analysis on an optimistic note: “from the vantage point of, say, the year 2030 we might look back on the Iraq War as one of the defining moments of the international relations of the twenty-first century because of the way it delegitimized the unilateral use of force and accelerated the emergence of alternative measures of standing” (p. 502). The pendulum, in other words, may swing back in the international sphere just as it has in US domestic politics since 2006 with the electoral victories of the Democrats and Barack Obama. The alternative is that the world will become increasingly fear-driven as the spirit continues to be unconstrained by appetite and reason, and as other states—Iran, North Korea, and others—compete for standing and honour in the international community. The recent North Korean missile launches and Iran’s ongoing commitment to its nuclear program both appear to be symptomatic of an imbalance in the international system brought on by an
excess of the spirit. L. places the blame for the chronic insecurity of recent times squarely on the realists: “realist approaches to foreign affairs helped bring about and justify [fear-based] worlds”; the benefit of L.’s epistemology, by contrast, is that it “provide[s] leaders with the conceptions they need to grasp the potential and the feasibility of bringing about positive change in the nature of international politics” (p. 502). In other words anarchy, as Alexander Wendt famously suggested, is what states make of it.3

No summary of the contents of such a complex and sweeping analysis can possibly do justice to what L. has achieved. In addition to reformulating and reinterpreting the motives for international behaviour in the various cases outlined above, he also reframes and reconceives a number of theories and ideas central to the study of modern international relations and political orders. So, for example, he recasts the impetus behind the rise of the nation-state in the post-Westphalia period as the quest for standing and honour, which sometimes manifested itself in warfare, but often enough in conspicuous consumption (the construction of grand palaces, the celebration of spectacular fêtes, the staging of magnificent balls, and so on) as well. L. also reformulates prospect theory, which states that people are willing to take greater risks to prevent losses than they are to make gains; in spirit-based worlds, argues L., states are risk-accepting to extremely risk-accepting in situations where both gains and avoidance of loss pertain. L. also develops a theory about

“parvenu powers”: rising powers that seek acceptance as great powers are aggressive in the short and medium terms, and indeed may remain so long after they have achieved great-power status (in Schumpeterian fashion), especially if they were previously ostracized or humiliated by status-quo great powers. Finally, L. modifies the conventional understanding of power-transition theory: rising powers are motivated by more than appetite and declining hegemons by more than fear; both, in fact, are under the influence of the spirit. This is evident in the strategies rising powers employ to assert their status—emulation of the hegemon, deviance (becoming “rogue states”), and rebellion—as well as by the accommodations hegemonic powers usually attempt to make with rising powers. More often than not, wars by rising powers are not so much intended to overthrow or change the existing system, but rather to help them “join the club” of the great powers.

As with all grand theories of international relations, L.’s cannot avoid significant epistemological traps and problematic exceptions. Prominent among them is his (more accurately, Aristotle’s and Plato’s) tripartite appetite—interest—reason ontology. L. is of course aware that the threefold nature of the human psyche’s motivation does not conveniently map onto the four ideal-type worlds he identifies, those based on appetite, interest, reason, and fear. Realist critics would be inclined to suggest that the problem arises from L.’s counter-intuitive (at least from the realist perspective) proposition that fear “is not a drive of the psyche, but an emotional response that comes to the fore in proportion to reason’s loss of control over spirit and appetite” (p. 113). This would seem merely to beg the question, and it
is perhaps an indication of L.’s overdetermined critique of realism that such a
dilemma arises in the first place. Although elite ancient sources like Aristotle may be
satisfied with L.’s explanation for excluding fear as a motivator, modern theorists
(and, one imagines, popular opinion) would beg to differ. Thucydides, for his part,
regarded fear as the driver behind Athenian imperialism in the first instance; honour
and interest came in later on (Thuc. 1.75.3).

Then there is the age-old problem of tracing historical motivation to its
underlying causes. In antiquity, Polybius struggled mightily with this issue and
suggested that the causes of great conflicts could be broken down into three parts, in
descending order of importance: the truest cause (aitia), the pretext, or stated cause
(prophasis), and the beginning of conflict (archē) (Polyb. 3.6-7.3). L. also grapples with
the messiness of complex historical causation, but his theoretical framework has
trouble accounting for it all, and occasionally inhibits clear understanding of
complex behaviour. So, for example, the difficult problem in the modern world of
conspicuous consumption (p. 95): when does the spirit-motivation behind it stop
and the appetite-motivation begin? How can his theory work out the proportions in
the motivational mixture? A similar dilemma arises when L. states that “government
officials routinely invoke security to justify policies motivated by spirit or interest
because they believe it is easier to sell them to the public” (p. 96). True enough, but
just because government officials claim that the interest of national security lies
behind a policy does not necessarily mean that they do not believe it to be true.
L. is certainly to be commended for going beyond the usual “cherry-pick[ed] quotes from Thucydides” (p. 12) and bringing the world of Homer’s Iliad into the epistemological mix of international relations theory. His reading of the epic, however, is entirely historical and ideological rather than literary—and the Iliad is, first and foremost, a literary work. This is less of an issue so long as L. attempts to explicate the importance of honour in ancient Greek culture, but becomes increasingly problematic as he develops it as the basis for an overarching theory of political order based on the spirit. L. acknowledges that Homer is at various points critical of the brutality and destructiveness of war, but at no point does he allow that the Iliad may be a subversive text in the larger sense that the author regarded the Greek spirit of competition and striving for prestige as in themselves highly problematic. L. analyzes the conflict between Agamemnon and Achilles, the driving force behind the plot of the Iliad, strictly in terms of the imbalance between standing and honour that spirit worlds often generate, but ignores the possibility that Homer purposely deployed this conflict as an implicit critique of his society’s core value-system—and that this critique was understood and appreciated by the elite Greeks for whom Homer wrote.

Similar problems arise when L. reads Tacitus’ Germania as an historical document rather than a literary artifact. As is well known amongst classicists and ancient historians, Tacitus’ Germans are almost entirely a literary construct designed to make a polemical point about the author’s first- and second-century AD contemporary Romans. The honour-bound Germans of Tacitus are ancient Romans
manquées, that is, they are meant to evoke what Tacitus believes the Romans must have been like in their primordial state. The problem with taking the *Germania* at face value is apparent when L. argues that because Tacitus’ Germans seem to have different values from those of their descendants in the Frankish kingdom 700 years later, the former honour-bound tribal culture of Tacitus’ text must have declined in the face of rising prosperity and become an appetite-driven society. This is rather too congenial to L.’s thesis—and entirely ahistorical: it is highly unlikely that Tacitus’ Germans and those of seven centuries later were the same group of people in any meaningful sense, much less that the many different tribes to whom Tacitus applies the label “German” would have self-identified as such. It is perhaps better to recognize Tacitus’ *Germania* for what it is—a highly polemical, ideological, and above all literary account of a region and a people that bears little resemblance to historical reality.

L. is to be commended for straying outside his comfort zone of classical Greece and analyzing in addition Alexander the Great’s Macedon and Republican Rome. The results, however, do not seem to justify the attempt. Alexander’s spirit drive to conquest is self-evident (ancient writers stressed the king’s *pothos*, his “yearning” to achieve greatness), which is perhaps why L. devotes only two and a half pages to a discussion of it. His thesis would have been better served by an analysis of the period after Alexander, the Hellenistic period, which was

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characterized by perpetual warfare amongst the successor kingdoms run by his generals and their descendants, to which L. devotes a mere two sentences (p. 218). The period is particularly fertile ground for modern international relations theorists. Ancient historians during the Cold War interpreted the Hellenistic period as one in which a multipolar balance of power was gradually worked out in the Mediterranean world, but in 1986 M.M. Austin subverted this view by arguing that the Hellenistic kings were constantly at war with each other throughout the period not to preserve a balance, but to subvert it. The endemic warfare of the Hellenistic period was driven by the rigid requirements of the political economy of Macedonian society; succinctly, the Hellenistic kings had to provide for the economic wellbeing of their dependents—their nobles, retainers, and soldiers—with an unending stream of spoils and plunder from successful warfare; failure to do so brought the risk of assassination, usurpation, or defection of their supporters to a more successful monarch. In the Hellenistic world, “a weak king was a contradiction in terms.”

The immediate post-Alexander period was thus, in L.’s terms, a predominantly appetite-driven world, but presumably fear and the spirit had a role to play as well. By choosing to focus on the rather special case of Alexander the Great, L. unfortunately missed a golden opportunity to apply his model to a geopolitical situation that has considerably more to teach modern international relations theorists.

When L. turns to Rome, he argues that Roman society was originally a spirit-based world in which Roman aristocrats competed for honour according to a

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broadly accepted set of rules, but that in the late Republic the rules of the game broke down as individual aristocrats, driven by appetite, ran roughshod over these traditional constraints. This is a sensible account of Rome’s internal problems, but seems to have little to do with international relations per se in the period. The Roman civil wars that resulted from the breakdown of consensus amongst the aristocracy were fought across a vast expanse of territory that was already—and remained—“Roman” in the fullest sense of the word: Sicily, Spain, Gaul, Illyria and Africa were all provinciae, territorial units under Roman control. The world outside the empire, moreover, barely figured in the internecine conflict between individual Roman aristocrats. L.’s interpretation of the later, Imperial period of Roman history might also be questioned: he suggests, for example, that in most circumstances the spirit took a back seat to fear and appetite in this later period, but a glance at Susan Mattern’s Rome and the Enemy (which does not appear in the bibliography) would have demonstrated the continued importance of the spirit in many emperors’ decision-making. As Mattern argues, Roman “responses [were] based on a concern for the empire’s status or ‘honor’ … Rarely was the drive to expand the empire in itself an impetus for war; money in the form of plunder, and personal glory for the emperor or military commander, were also secondary considerations.”

L. also misconstrues the nature and motives of those peoples who resisted the Romans. Thus he suggests that “the Celtic cities who fought the Romans [knew] they would

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lose” (p. 212), but their reason lost control of their spirit; inevitable self-immolation was the result. On the other hand, Polybius writes of the Celtic invasion of Italy in the mid-220s BC that it was “the most serious that had ever occurred, [and] all the Italians and especially the Romans had been exposed to great and terrible peril” (Polyb. 2.31.7). The Romans, moreover, thought the Celtic threat so great that “they would not even be safe in Rome itself” if it were not confronted. The massive Celtic invasion of the 220s, in other words, had a good chance of succeeding and was indeed an existential threat to Rome (and to Italy as a whole) as late as the latter part of the second century BC.

It would be very surprising if a work of this length and evidently short schedule of composition and publication were entirely error-free. There are several errors of fact: “The University of Hobart” (p. x) is actually “The University of Tasmania”; the date of the Athenian capture of Spartan forces on Sphacteria is 425 BC rather than “426 [BC]” (p. 186 n. 87; the correct date appears on p. 191); Polybius, not “Plutarch,” was the author of a now lost treatise on Tactics and accompanied Scipio Aemilianus at the siege of Carthage (p. 208); the Roman general Sulla is misidentified as “Sullus,” and his first march on Rome is misdated to 91 BC rather than 88 BC (p. 209); and Gruen argues that amicitia, not clientela, was “toothless” (p. 214). There are numerous typographical and spelling errors as well: “to do” for “to do so” (p. 40); “tells” for “tell” (p. 41); “pelonexia” for “pleonexia” (p. 50 n. 18; the correct spelling appears earlier in the same footnote); “circumstance” for “circumstances” (p. 87); “sleights” for “slights” (pp. 125 and 163); “ἀξέυη” for
“ἀρετή” (pp. 172 n. 31 and 642); “Turannis” for “Turannus” (p. 181 n. 60); the possessive “Thucydides’” for “Thucydides” (p. 192); “communis utilitatis” for “communis utilitas,” which should appear after “public interest” rather than after “private [interest]” (p. 209); “campus” for “camps” (p. 210); “Eric” for “Erich” (p. 214); “Gius” for “Gaius” (pp. 217 n. 213 and 520 n. 16); “trial” for “treatment” (p. 214); “Plataean” for “Plataeans” (p. 214); “regna” for “reges” (p. 228); “virtu” for “virtus” (pp. 260 and 523); “curius” for “cuius” (p. 263); “met” for “meet” (p. 277); “amicitia” for “amicitiae” (p. 214 before n. 208); “tale” for “take” (p. 330). There are also errors of punctuation, and missing and superfluous words: a superfluous comma appears after “today” on p. 125; a comma is missing after “late Republic” on p. 207; a conjunction is needed after “216 BCE,” on p. 208; “of” is required before “location” on p. 235; there is an extra space before the full stop in the last line of p. 220; “than” is superfluous on p. 479.

These errors, most of them obviously accidental and attributable to oversights in the editing process, cannot detract from the major achievement that L.’s new book represents. Despite L.’s protest that he does not seek to rival Thucydides’ “possession for all time” (Thuc. 1.22.4), I, for one, hope that the insights in his book will be absorbed by the international relations community and become the foundation of a new theoretical paradigm for the study of international politics. The future peace of the world may indeed depend on it.