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THEORY TALK #53

NED LEBOW ON DRIVERS OF WAR, CULTURAL THEORY, AND IR OF FOXES AND HEDGEHOGS

Theory Talks

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NED LEBOW ON DRIVERS OF WAR, CULTURAL THEORY, AND IR OF FOXES AND HEDGEHOGS



Drawing on classical political theories, International Relations is dominated by theories that presuppose interests or fear as dominant drivers for foreign policy. Richard Ned Lebow looks further back into the history of ideas to conjure up a more varied set of drives that underpin political action. In this *Talk*, Lebow, among others, elaborates on the underpinnings of political action, discusses how war drives innovations in IR theorizing in the 20th century, and likens himself to a fox, rather than a

hedgehog.

What is, according to you, the biggest challenge / principal debate in current IR? What is your position or answer to this challenge / in this debate?

Well, the big challenge in international politics is always how do we keep from destroying one another and that's the negative question. But it is mirrored by a positive question which is, how do we build community and tolerance and peace? And that's not exactly the flip side, but that's always been the big question in IR. And part of that, I think, is how we learn to manage threatening change. Because in my perspective, that's the driving force of conflict: ultimately, both World Wars can be attributed to modernization and its destabilizing consequences. That is also the reason why it is a falsehood to base theory on that little select slice of history during the World Wars, extrapolate it, and try to think its universal. Yet that is what IR theory does: so many theorists, and so many of the people you recently interviewed, are guilty of doing that. So that's the big question and certainly, that's what drove me to study IR in the hope that I could make some small contribution to figuring out some of the answers or partial answers to these questions.

If we turn to what the central debate should be in International Theory, well, I would frame this in two parts: the first should be 'what are the different ways in which we can conceive of international theory and how, by all of us pursuing it the way we feel comfortable with, we can enrich the field without throwing bric-a-brac at each other and find ways of learning from each other?'

A few years ago, I edited a book with Mark Lichbach (*Theory and Evidence in Comparative Politics and International Relations*) as a rejoinder to King, Keohane and Verba's book, which we found deeply offensive. It has the narrowest framework and then they base their understanding on the Vienna school yet they seem to have forgotten that Hempel and Popper would disavow the positions that King, Keohane and Verba (KKV) are anchoring themselves in as epistemologically primitive. And the very examples they give to illustrate 'good science'—[Alvarez and his group addressing the problem of dinosaur extinction](#)—they fail to see that what these people did was in fact code on the dependent variable, which is the big no-no for KKV! And the reason why Alvarez et al

were taken seriously, *was not* because they went through the order of research that KKV promoted, but rather because they came up with an explanation for a phenomenon that people have long known about—yet explanations don't figure at all in KKV's take; they had no interest in mechanisms, it was all narrow correlations. It's absurd! So we edited the book, and we invited people who represented different perspectives, but all of whom had evidence and struggled to make sense of the evidence, to talk to one another and to look at the problems they themselves find in their positions and how one could learn broadly from considering this. That's the kind of debate that seems to me is a useful one. Not who is right or wrong, but how can we learn collectively. And secondly, I think maybe we need fewer debates, and more good research.

How did you arrive at where you currently are in your thinking about IR?

I suppose it's a combination of people, books, and events, and being a dog that constantly gnaws on bones and works it through. Very clearly the Second World War and the Cold War were what brought me to the study of IR. I'm sure in their absence, considering the counterfactual, I would have gone into Astrophysics, which was the other field that really interested me.

I think the first concrete influence was as an undergraduate and then as a graduate, being struck by certain individuals whose minds seemed to sparkle; and I admired them for that and they became role models. And I would make myself, intellectually, a little Hans Morgenthau, a little Karl Deutsch; see the world through their eyes, and play with it. I never really wanted to make myself into them, but rather to benefit by seeing what the world was like when seen through their eyes. So in this sense, let me go back and draw on Boswell, Hughes, and Mill for my answer. They all conceived of identity as something that's a process of self-fashioning in which we mix and match the characteristics that we observe in other people. And the purpose of society is to throw up these role models and provide interaction with them so that we can constantly be engaging in self-fashioning. And ultimately, we create something that's novel that other people want to emulate or reject, as the case may be. And I think that mixing and matching, and ultimately creating a synthesis of my own, I developed my own approach to things.

The second element of this is to pick problems that engage me, and stick with them. My first book in IR was about international crises and I worked on this, it must have been 8, possibly even 9 years. I started out initially convinced that [deterrence theory](#) made sense but wouldn't fit the historical evidence. Then one day, while playing around, I realized the theory was wrong and by reversing it, I could understand why it didn't work and see there were very different dynamics at play. So working on a problem constantly and going back and forth between theory and empirical findings, you gradually develop your own sense of the field.

It also helps, over the course of an intellectual lifetime, to work on different kinds of problems: I've just finished a book on the politics and ethics of identity; I finished a manuscript up for review on the nature of causation and different takes on cause; and the previous two books were on counterfactuals and the origins of war. And I learned something theoretically and methodologically by throwing myself into these problems and also, in some cases, by going beyond what one would normally consider the domain of IR to look for answers. I've often done philosophy and literature in the identity book. I also go to musical texts: I have [a reading of the Mozart Da Ponte Operas](#) as a deliberate thought experiment to test out ancient regime and enlightenment identities under varying circumstances to expose what's wrong with them and to work toward a better approach of *Così fan tutte*. And I read the music, not only the libretti, to get at an answer. Of course, when you've been doing it a long time, it keeps you alive and alert when you look at something new. I'm just finishing my 46th year of University teaching. It's a long time!

Thirdly, there were a few pivotal books. I read George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* in the early 50s. Both of those were very powerful books. I also read in about 1950 - Life Magazine produced a large volume on WWII and it had fabulous photographs and of course Life was famous, [Robert Capa's photographs](#), and the text by John Dos Passos. A big big book that I read and re-read and that was a powerful influence on me. I'd say the Diary of Anne Frank, when it came out, which was not all that dissimilar but had a different ending from my own war experience, and then in high school I read, or struggled to read—I don't think I understood it—*Ideology and Utopia* (full text [here](#)) by Karl Mannheim, and then I read *Politics among Nations* and the *Twenty Year's Crisis*. And both those books made enormous sense to me at the time. But I think the book that over the course of my lifetime has had the most influence on me of anything is Thucydides' *The History of the Peloponnesian War* (read full text [here](#)).

What would a student need to become a specialist in IR or understand the world in a global way?

I am tempted to give you a flippant answer that an expert is somebody from out of town; what used to be with slides would now be with a PowerPoint presentation. I think frankly you need to do two things: you need to be analytically sophisticated and original on the one hand, but to do it well, you have to have an empirical base. There has to be some problem or set of problems that you've rolled up your sleeves, looked at the data, talk to the people who are on the ground doing these things, and you need to go back and forth between that empirical knowledge and conceptual one. *That's* success as a social scientist.

And traditionally, there's always been another key. You must have one foot in society in which you belong and another foot outside so you can do it as an outsider as well as an insider. That's terribly important. I think, in this sense, that Americans are more parochial than other people. They are good insiders but they are not very good outsiders and they just don't understand the rest of the world and when you read what they write about the rest of the world, you wonder what planet they are living on. If you don't see the rest of the world, you can't look at the America from another perspective. It's like people who take hegemony seriously; it's like believing in Santa Claus, except Santa Claus is benign. To gain a deep experience of the world in itself is a pre-requisite. Do a year abroad in some other culture. Learn a language. Have a relationship with someone from a different culture—you begin to learn the languages and all the rest will come. That's the way to start.

You are most famous to most people for your *Cultural Theory of International Relations*(2008). What does it comprise and can you say something about its classical roots?

I return to classical theory of conflict and cooperation because I find that in modern theory, all drives of human action have been reduced to appetite, and reason to mere instrumentality. The Greeks, by contrast, believed there were several fundamental drives—drives that affected politics—and while these included appetite, they weren't *just* appetite. Reason was more than instrumentality; it also had the goal of understanding what led to a happy life; then, next to reason and appetite, the third drive was spirit or self-esteem (the Greek *thumos*), which is very different and often opposed to appetite. It is about winning the approbation of others to feel good about ourselves. The difference between honor and standing—two variants of self-esteem—is that honor is status achieved within a fixed set of rules, while standing is whenever you achieve status by whatever means.

Now most existing IR theories are either only built on appetites—as liberalism and Marxism—or fear. And for the Greeks fear is not a human drive but a powerful emotion which can become a motive. And when reason loses control over either appetite or spirit, people begin to worry about their own ability to satisfy their appetites, their spirit, or even protect themselves physically. That's when fear becomes a powerful motive. Realism is of course the paradigm developed around fear. I differ in that my theory recognizes multiple motives, that are active to varying degrees at different times. They don't blend the way a solution does in chemistry, but they retain their own characteristics, even if jumbled together. So my theory expects to see quite diverse and often conflicting behavior, whereas other theories only pay attention to state behavior that seems to support their theory, and feel the need to explain away other behavior inconsistent with their theory. I revel in these variations. Second, I vary in describing what derives from these motives as (Weberian) ideal types—which means, something you don't encounter in the real world, but rather, an abstraction, a fictional or analytical description, that helps to make sense of the real world but never maps onto it exactly. So, a fear-based world gives you a very nice description of a foundation of anarchy. But of course this is an ideal-type world. Fear is only one motive. You have to go to a place where civil order has broken down, like Somalia or the trenches in WWII, to see fear-based models compete.

Starting from these three motives and the emotion of fear, I argue that each of these generates a very different logic of cooperation, conflict and risk-taking; and each is associated with a different kind of hierarchy. And all of them except fear rely on a different principle of justice. Just to give an example: for actors—whether individuals or states—driven by self-esteem, they tend to be risk prone (because honor has to be won by successfully overcoming ordeals and challenges); it leads to a conflictual logic because you are competing with others for honor; and it can be rule-based (although the rules can brake down and move into fear); and the principle is one of fairness, in contrast to interest or appetite which has a principle of equality. The hierarchy is one of clientelism, where people honor those at the top, which, in return, provides practical benefits for those on the bottom. The Greeks called this *hegemonia*; the Chinese had a similar system.

But because any actual system is not an ideal type, we have to figure out what that mixture is and we can begin to understand foreign policies. And I try to give numerous examples in the book. And the big turning point, I argue, is modernity, where it becomes more difficult to untangle the motives and their discourses. Because in modernity both Rousseau and Adam Smith try to understand why we want material things, so the two become connected. You could argue that even in Egyptian times they were connected, in the pyramids, which are nothing if not erections of self-esteem. But it becomes more difficult and so, rather than saying, using literary texts, artistic works and political speeches as a way of determining the relationship, I approached the problem differently with the examples of the World Wars, the Cold War, and the Anglo-American Invasion of Iraq. I said let's run a test of seeing how carefully we can explain the origins and the dynamics of these conflicts on the basis of interest, on the basis of fear, on the basis of self-esteem. And I think that's methodologically defensible.

Now the interesting point is that the honor or self-esteem explanation is gone completely from modern IR explanations but does at least just a good a job—if not better—at explaining these conflicts I mention above. There is an important sense—and this is my latest book—in which going to war was the dominant way to get recognized as a great power, and I feel that the example of the war in Iraq illustrates that that principle is on the retreat.

I obviously use Greek thinking as a source here of—again, I wouldn't use the word knowledge—but as a source of insight into human nature and the recurring problems regardless of society. Some of the great writers and thinkers cannot be surpassed as sources of knowledge that we as social scientists are shadows on the cave by comparison. And I find the Greeks particularly

interesting for several reasons. One, they had a richer understanding of the psyche that moderns who have adduced everything to appetite and reason to a mere instrumentality, this is, to me, an incredibly narrow, crude way of thinking of the human mind. And, for whatever reason, they were gifted with tragedians who pierced to the core of things. So I find them as a source of inspiration but it's by no way limited to the Greeks. You can pick great authors from any culture, in any century, and read them and learn a lot.

How should we understand your cultural theory of international relations in relation to the 'big' paradigms?

My theory is constructivist, at every level. I can go even further and claim that my theory is the *only* constructivist theory. Alexander Wendt is not a constructivist. If anything, he's a structural liberal. It did have preexisting identities and has a teleology as he believes a Kantian world is inevitable— that's quite a statement to make! And I hope he's right. On the other hand, I define constructivists in a broader way. Most constructivists start with identities and identities are certainly an important feature of my work, but my theory rests on a different premise, and that is the notion of there being certain core values which are germane to politics, and they vary in relative importance from society to society, and they find expression in different ways. So it is constructivist, I think, in the Weberian sense: we have to understand from within the culture what makes things meaningful. And, in that sense, you could bring in the notion of inter-subjective reality, but I go beyond it, because other values are always present in this mix and therefore there's behavior that appears contradictory that is often misunderstood if you apply the wrong lens to it. So there's a lack of interdisciplinary understanding as well: you have to look at both to see how the world works. So cultural theory is constructivist and it allows us to reframe and expand what constructivism means.

If I apply this constructivist thinking to one of the core principles in our approach to world politics: what is a cause? I start by asking, what does 'cause' mean, in physics? Why physics? Because physics is always the field that political scientists look at, we have 'physics envy', so to speak. And interestingly, in physics, there is no consensus about what cause means. Some physicists think that very notion of cause is unhelpful to what they do. Others are happy with regularities and subscribe to causal thinking. Still others think that you need to have mechanisms to explain anything. Still others, and here statistical mechanics can be taken as a case in point, invoke Kantian understandings of cause. Within physics there's no argument between people adhering to these different understandings of 'cause', because you should do what works! They don't criticize one another. So if they have this diversity, why shouldn't we? Why shouldn't we develop understandings of cause that are most appropriate to what we do? So I develop an understanding I call 'inefficient causation' (download full paper [here](#)), sort of playing off of Aristotle. And it is a constructivist understanding, but it also incorporates elements that are distinctively non-constructivist. And identities are only a small piece of the puzzle.

Is there any sense to make of the way IR has evolved over the 20th century?

I think if you look at some of the central figures, it's quite easy. There are 2 great cohorts of International Relations theorists. Those born in the early years of the 20th century comprise Hans Morgenthau, John Hertz, E.H. Carr, [Harold Lasswell](#), [Nicholas Spykman](#), [Frederick Schuman](#), and Karl Deutsch—who was on my dissertation committee together with Isaiah Berlin and John Hertz. The second cohort is born between about 1939 and 1945, and it comprises Robert Jervis ([Theory Talk #12](#)), Joseph Nye ([Theory Talk #7](#)), Robert Keohane ([Theory Talk #9](#)), Oren Young,

Peter Katzenstein ([Theory Talk #15](#)), Stephen Krasner ([Theory Talk#21](#)), Janice Steinberg... And I'll tell you what I think the reasons are for these groups to emerge at these particular moments: the first cohort lived through World War I. And did so, fortunately, in at an age where they were too young to be combatants for the most part, but they certainly had to deal intellectually and personally with its consequences and then watch the horrors unfold of the 1930s.

And the second, my own, cohort was born at the outset of the Second World War. I think, in that group, I may be the only one of them born in Europe (France). The rest of them were born in the US. And we came of age during the most acute crisis of the cohort. So I was either in university or graduate school during the Berlin crisis, during the Cuba crisis, and certainly had an interest first in the consequences of WWII and how something like this could happen, and then living through the horrors of the Cold War, not knowing if indeed one *would* live through them. And that created a very strong incentive and focus for our group of people. Now a surprising number of this second group did their graduate studies at Yale: Janice Stein, I, Oren Young, Bruce Russett, Krasner, later all at Yale with Karl Deutsch. The rest, Jervis, Keohane and Krasner at Harvard with Samuel Huntington. I think you have the odd person who's born somewhere in between – so, Ken Waltz ([Theory Talk #40](#)), for instance, is younger. He must be a 1920 person, almost exactly in between these two, just as Ernst Haas.

And I wouldn't be surprised now if there is another cohort emerging, the people of around the age of Stefano Guzzini, Jens Bartelson, Patrick Jackson ([Theory Talk #44](#)). What ties this third cohort together is that they all watched the end of the Cold War and are coping with its aftermath. So I believe that it's probably two things: the external environment and the extent to which you're in an intellectually nurturing institution. And of course for our cohort, it certainly helped that there were jobs. That was not true of the earlier cohort. Almost all of them, except E.H. Carr, ended up in the US as refugees. Did you know Morgenthau started as an elevator boy in New York? Then he got a job teaching part-time at Brooklyn College because someone fell ill. His wife cleaned other people's apartments to supplement their income. Then he got a job at the University of Kansas City, which was a hellhole, and finally Harold Lasswell got called to Washington for some war work and got Chicago to hire Morgenthau to replace him.

What is the issue with the discipline today if, as you noted before, we fail to ask the most interesting questions and instead focus on method?

Well, it of course depends on which side of the pond you sit. On the American side of the pond, positivist or game-theoretical behaviorist or rationalist modeling approaches dominate the literature; it's just silly, from my perspective. It's based on assumptions which bear no relationship to the real world. People like it because it's intellectually elegant: they don't have to learn any languages, they don't have to read any history, and they can pretend they're scientists discussing universals. Intellectually, it's ridiculous. Bruce Bueno de Mesquita ([Theory Talk #31](#)) is a classic case in point. He's made a huge reputation for himself with *The War Trap* (1981). That book and the corresponding theory are based on a simple assumption, namely, that there's a war trap compelling states into war, because initiators win wars. But just look at the empirical record from 1945 to the present—initiators lose between 80-90% of the wars they start. And that really depends on the definition of victory. If you use the real definition, the Clausewitzian one, you have to ask: do they achieve their political goals through violence? Then the answer is, even fewer "victories". Well, let's cut them some slack, use a more relaxed definition: did they beat the other side militarily? Initiators still lose 78 or 82%—I forget exactly which percentage of their wars. And the profession right now is so ignorant of history that nobody said 'Wait a minute!' the day the book came out. Instead IR scholars all focus on this model and fine-tuning it—it's ridiculous!

And well, I don't want to go on with a critique, but this is a serious problem, for it concerns a huge misunderstanding regarding one of the most important problems out there.

But what happens now is this kind of thinking metastasizes throughout the discipline because what students in International Relations or Political Science more generally are taught are calculus, statistics—and I'm not against this, one should learn them; I use them myself when I wear my psychologist hat and do quantitative research and statistical analysis—but they don't learn languages, they don't learn history, they don't learn philosophy. They are so narrow! Much of this of course has to do with the reward structure in the United States. It's clear that the statistical scientists are at the top of the hill. So, economists transform themselves into scientists; but the social scientists copy them because there are clear institutional rewards. If you look at our salaries in comparison to the salaries of anthropologists, historians—then if you sit at the edge of your chair and look over the abyss you might see the humanists down there in terms of what they get. So very clearly, there are strong institutional rewards. Once the positivist crowd got a lock on various foundations and journals, if you want a job, if you want to rise up through the profession, students tell me you have to do this stuff. IR graduate students are bricklayers that get turned out of these universities. That's the tragedy! It's no longer a serious intellectual enterprise. It's not connected to anything terribly meaningful.

And mind you, I must say, while on the other, European, side of the pond there is more diversity (one of the reasons I feel more comfortable here), at the same time there is a strong tendency to go for a certain heavy-handed brand of post-modernism. If you don't start an article with a genuflection to Foucault or De Saussure or Derrida, you don't get published. And by not looking beyond these 20th century thinkers, people in Europe are often given credit for inventing things which were common knowledge for hundreds and hundreds of years. Utterly ridiculous. But in between, there are of course people who are trying to make sense of the world, including many people in the positivist tradition who are doing good quantitative research and trying to address serious problems in the world. The difficulty is that these two extremes are often people who approach IR as a religion and they think that their way of doing research is the *only* way and they have no respect for others. And that's a kind of arrogance to which, to me, is a violation of what the university is all about.

Ultimately, what is good theory? One approach would be to say that a good theory is one that appears to order a domain in a way that is conceptually rigorous - to the extent that that's even possible - that is original and that raises a series of interesting questions which haven't been asked before, but which are amenable to empirical research and finally it should have normative implications. This is what Hans Morgenthau meant when he said that the purpose of IR theory is not to justify what policymakers did, but to educate them to act in ways that would lead to a better and more peaceful world. And that, I think, is the ultimate goal of IR theory that we should not lose sight of.

You indicated that Isaiah Berlin was on your dissertation committee. He famously tries to explain Tolstoy's philosophy of history (in *War and Peace*) through the [parable of the hedgehog and the fox](#). If theorists constraining themselves to one drive underpinning policy choices would be hedgehogs, how would you see yourself? A fox or a hedgehog?

I am clearly a fox! I do different things. Whether I do them well is debatable. But I certainly think that I'm a man of many tricks. Of course the distinction also implies not believing in an overarching truth, and indeed, I try hard not to think about truth because I don't think you can get very far when you do. Epistemologically and eclectically, I'm a great believer that we can never really establish a cause, truth, and knowledge. One of the great problems here goes back to

Plato who was shocked that craftsmen equated technical ability to produce things with knowledge—Sofia, which is wisdom. And today you have the problem one step up, so another category of knowledge for the Greeks was *episteme*. Aristotle would describe it as ‘conceptual knowledge’ or that which might even be represented mathematically. And the people who would be ‘expert’ in episteme think they have *sofia* and their claim to being a hedgehog is the same kind of conceit, a form of hubris. Berlin’s distinction between hedgehogs and foxes is a very useful and nice concept to play around with.

Yet it’s a bit much to reduce Tolstoy to that tension. You could do it as a game but it doesn’t do much justice because there is so much else in Tolstoy. He’s tilting against the French historians of the 19th century who have erected Napoleon into this strategic genius. And he does a very convincing job of showing that what goes on on the battlefield has nothing whatsoever to do with what Napoleon or anyone else who is wearing a general’s ebullience or theorists hat says. And also, and in this sense, one could see him as the beginning of subaltern history of social science, he’s telling the story—admittedly about aristocrats, not commoners—but he’s telling the story of ordinary people on the battlefield, not the people making the decisions. So the war is in a way a background to the lives of the people, focusing our attention a very humanist way, on people. This, too, is revolutionary for his time.

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Related links

- Read the first chapter of Lebow’s *The Tragic Vision of Politics* (2003) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Lebow & Kelly’s *Thucydides and Hegemony: Athens and the United States* (Review of International Studies 2001), [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Lebow’s *Deterrence and Reassurance: Lessons from the Cold War* (Global Dialogue 2001) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Lebow’s *The Long Peace, the End of the Cold War, and the Failure of Realism* (International Organization, 1994) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Lebow’s *The Cuban Missile Crisis: Reading the Lessons Correctly* (Political Science Quarterly 1983) [here](#) (pdf)