

Interview - Richard Ned Lebow

Written by E-International Relations

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Richard Ned Lebow is Professor of International Political Theory in the War Studies Department of King's College London, Bye-Fellow of Pembroke College at the University of Cambridge, and the James O. Freedman Presidential Professor (Emeritus) of Government at Dartmouth College. He has published over 20 books and 200 peer-reviewed articles in a career spanning six decades. Among his recent publications are *Constructing Cause in International Relations* (Cambridge, 2014); *The Politics and Ethics of Identity: In Search of Ourselves* (Cambridge, 2012); *Why Nations Fight: Past and Future Motives for War* (Cambridge, 2010); and *Forbidden Fruit: Counterfactuals and International Relations* (Princeton, 2010).

2016 marks your 50th year in teaching international relations. If you could encapsulate your career into just a few key events or milestones, which would they be?

I think the milestones would be the publication of my *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crisis*, which I worked on for 10 years. I put a lot of work into the case studies and the theoretical framework. It made my initial reputation in the field and also set in motion a program of researching the failings of deterrence as both a theory and strategy of conflict management and with that as well a critique of rationalist models more generally, so that very clearly was a milestone.

From my perspective, a second milestone were the initial studies that brought me to the use of psychology which features prominently in *Between Peace and War* and in my subsequent work.

A third milestone is *The Tragic Vision of Politics* which came out in 2003 and is my first work that turns to political theory and the Greeks in particular to understand contemporary international relations. It's a theme that I've been following in several works since and I'm continuing to do so.

How has the field of international relations theory changed over the last five decades, and how do you see the field evolving in the decades to come?

You could actually make it six decades from the time I started as a student, because I went to the University of Chicago – I entered in the late 1950s. At the time, it was clearly dominated by qualitative research that was conceptual as well as empirical in nature. It was not very well formulated in terms of its epistemological foundations, and emerging as a challenge was quantitative work which made more far reaching claims but was also even more epistemologically suspect. That was I think a very striking feature of the study of international relations.

It was also divided among senior practitioners between those who saw themselves solely as scholars and those who wanted to become if not policymakers, influencers. That happens with people like Joseph Nye who is still a representative of that school.

The third feature was the broader effects of the behavioural revolution which led to a purge of everywhere possible of political theory. Political theory only began to make a comeback in North American or U.S. political science departments in the 1990s because departments who were vying for top rankings couldn't get them without having a good theory group, so for that reason it came back. But it isn't really until the early part of this century, where I have

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been one of the people instrumental in doing this, that political theory has linked up with international relations again. It was clearly there in the days of Hans Morgenthau and Hannah Arendt, but then it went by the boards.

You're perhaps most famous for your work *Cultural Theory of International Relations*. How would you define your own theory of constructivism, and how does it differ from the theories of other constructivists such as Alexander Wendt and Peter Katzenstein?

Alex today denies that he is a constructivist and frankly he never was. He was in fact a structural liberal. He's only constructivist in the sense of his famous article on Anarchy being what you make of it, that's avowedly constructivist. But his theoretical works are modelled very much on neoliberalism but have incorporated liberal assumptions so he doesn't count.

Peter is more of a constructivist but also an institutionalist who tries to bridge the two – and why not? To me, the thick constructivists are people like Nicholas Onuf, Friedrich Kratochwil, John Ruggie, and Chris Reus-Smit, who was a former student. That brand of constructivism more properly fits with what we think of as constructivist, with Ted Hopf as another example. I suspect, or I claim, that mine is the only constructivist theory of international relations.

What are the hallmarks of my approach, and that doesn't mean by any means it's the only constructivist approach, is that I'm interested in building a theory of process, not of structure because I identify change as the dominant feature of the world, and reject the notion of equilibria and stability. I'm also interested by other constructivists' understandings, but where I think I differ from them is that so many constructivists put emphasis on identity and make it their master variable. I find that deeply problematic and suffering from all the same problems that power does for realists – my *The Politics of Ethics and Identity* makes this point and tries to go on from there to think about it in another way. Rather than framing in terms of identity, I frame it in terms of cultural values, I create ideal types and particularly an ideal type of society in which thumos is the most important value but argue they're only tools for beginning to make sense.

I recognise that societies vary in their relative emphasis on these values, and while the values or drives of appetite for spirit and reason are universal, as is fear in international relations, they're manifested in different ways, cultures and ethics.

Many scholars cite the end of the Cold War or September 11th as events that radically changed their thinking. Has there been a singular event in history that has defined or radically altered your thinking?

World War II was the dominant event. I was a refugee from Europe, the only member of my family to survive, went to an orphanage, was adopted by an American family, and grew up in an immigrant neighbourhood in New York City. I was trying to figure out how this had all happened and doing my best to prevent something like this from happening again.

I offer you the counterfactual that in its absence I'd probably have gone into physics and studied cosmology which to me has always been very fascinating.

Then I was a university student and a graduate student for the Berlin Crisis of 1958-59, the Cuban Missile Crisis and Kennedy assassination of 1963, and the beginnings of the early period of the first year of Johnson's build-up of Vietnam, so that was the other major event that shaped my thinking. I suppose it was coincidental but important in its consequences that I first read Thucydides at the height of the First Berlin Crisis.

In particular, which scholars and authors have had the greatest impact upon your career?

One of the things I've done, and in a sense followed my description of the liberal identity project of *The Politics and Ethics of Identity* is that society offers us role models. We emulate people, we sometimes mix and match qualities from different people in the hope of formulating ourselves. If we do it long enough and create something interesting, we in turn become role models, better or worse for other people. So those thinkers whom I found very interesting I

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tried to become little versions of them and to see the world through their eyes. Ultimately I would see problems with this and I'd move away from it, but a little part of them would stay and ultimately I put a me together that combined in not-so-harmonious ways bits and pieces of these various people.

As an undergraduate at the University of Chicago I was very much influenced by Herman Finer, by Hans Morgenthau and I was a research assistant to both of them. I was influenced in a negative way by Leo Strauss and by Hannah Arendt and I think I also was very much taken by the authors of *The Lonely Crowd* which was an important book for me. Subsequently came Karl Deutsch and Jon Herz, and I studied with Isaiah Berlin who had a tremendous impact on me.

I have a book that's just come out and I'm waiting to receive the first copy, I'm a co-editor with Hidemi Suganami and Peer Schouten – it's called *Return of the Theorists: Dialogues with Great Thinkers in International Relations*. We interview 30 thinkers from Homer to Foucault who have had some impact on how we think about international relations and they're all about 10 pages. They're fictional of course because they're all dead, and we ask them to explain seeming contradictions or open questions in their work – how they've responded to how they have been interpreted subsequently and whether they think their ideas are relevant to today. This project is an outgrowth of my course paper for Isaiah Berlin because Berlin had us write a paper – this was 19th century philosophy.

Imagine you're holding a dinner party and you can invite any one or two philosophers. Write it up, and carry on your conversation with them and I remember inviting Mozart and one of his librettists, Lorenzo De Ponte, because I believe those operas had offered avant la lettre critiques of not only the Ancien regime identities but also of Enlightenment ones and I wanted to draw this out in the conversation. Berlin liked the paper and it stuck in the back of my mind what an interesting way to approach political theory because if you're immersing yourself in the mind and work of any theorist, you're in effect carrying on imaginary conversations with them, so why not make them explicit.

Which areas within international relations theory today do you see as either too heavily-focussed or neglected?

There are subjects about which less needs to be written. One of them is power which is overdone and in my view it's not a very helpful way of thinking about international relations. I'd much rather focus on framing things in terms of influence because material capabilities are only one source of power. Power is only one source of influence, and influence is intransitive.

As an extension of that, work on polarity of the system and power transition I have no respect for any of it, as they're subjective categories. Unipolarity is a pure invention of Americans to advance their particular political project; it's not scholarly, it's political.

Do you think progress has been made in the field?

At the end of this *Return of the Theorists* book, we have an imaginary panel in Atlantis and the panel is Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Morgenthau, Hedley Bull and Karl Deutsch and the question that is posed is 'Has the field of international relations advanced at all since the time of Thucydides?' Deutsch insists that the field has but all the others are more dubious.

What do we mean by advance? We're not a science where we accumulate knowledge. We're a social science and so to my way of thinking we advance by moving from one question to another and by finding newer and more interesting or better perfected methods of asking and studying these questions, so in that sense of course there's progress.

What advice would you give that young political scientist beginning his career in teaching 50 years ago?

I suppose I would tell him 'just relax, it'll be alright' because graduate students and young professors all worry terribly about surviving in the field and getting ahead. When I started out there was another twist. You got paid much worse than you are paid now, and I was offered three jobs in the 1960s: an appointment with the State Department, an

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assistant professorship at Columbia, and an assistant professorship at City College of New York. Columbia offered me \$6,800 a year and I got them up to \$7,200, City College offered me \$10,600 and I bargained them up to \$11,000 and it made the difference between not relying on food stamps. To give you a base, \$11,000 was the starting salary of somebody who sold tokens on the New York City subway. Today, Dartmouth College, the last American university at which I taught, is paying around \$80,000 for new faculty. So even though the scholarly world is still underpaid, it's a lot better than it once was.

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This interview was conducted by James Resnick. James is an Associate Features Editor of E-IR.