

Interview - Richard Ned Lebow

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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 *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge, 2009), winner of the Susan Strange Prize for best book in international studies and the Jervis-Schroeder Award for best book in international history and politics; *Forbidden Fruit: Counterfactuals and International Relations* (Princeton, 2010); *Why Nations Fight: Past and Future Motives for War* (Cambridge, 2010); and *The Politics and Ethics of Identity: In Search of Ourselves* (Cambridge, 2012), winner of the Alexander George Award for best book in political psychology.

2014 sees the publication of three more books by Lebow: *Archduke Franz Ferdinand Lives! A World without World War I* (Palgrave Macmillan); *Constructing Cause in International Relations* (Cambridge); and *Good-Bye Hegemony! Power and Influence in the Global System* (Princeton), coauthored with Simon Reich.

In this interview, Professor Lebow discusses his intellectual development, the concept of identity in IR, conflict, and his latest research.

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How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

My political memory begins with D-Day and the world has undergone several monumental transformations since then. To a great degree, my pursuit of a career in international relations was a response to World War II and its Cold War aftermath. For the first few decades of my career, I wrote about conflict management and prevention, and especially about the ways in which deterrence could provoke the very behavior it was designed to prevent.

The IR discipline in the U.S. was not very responsive to my critique of deterrence for intellectual and political reasons, and I concluded that I might have more influence in the longer term by examining the philosophical and psychological assumptions that frame the way policymakers view the world. All the books and most of the articles that I have published in this century address these assumptions in different ways.

I hoped that the end of the Cold War would “unfreeze” the mind set of the American national security community and make it more receptive to new ways about thinking about their country's role in the world. This has not happened, and realists and liberals who maintain the illusion of American hegemony pander to it. They do not speak truth to power, which Hans Morgenthau thought was the primary responsibility of IR theory.

The end of the Cold War and the breakup of the Soviet Union certainly influenced my thinking in directing my attention to a different set of substantive problems, among them the politics of memory, the nature of individual and national identifications and their political and ethical implications, and the reasons why the U.S. remains mired in Cold War thinking.

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Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in contemporary IR theory?

I don't find much utility in the recurrent debates about IR theory. Like sex and sports, it is something better practiced than talked about. As for IR research, there are many exciting new fronts. I'm particularly interested in work that builds bridges to political theory and psychology, and emphasizes the ways in which culture shapes politics, how agency matters and how decisions involving risk are emotionally fraught and rarely amenable to purely rational analysis.

In *The Politics and Ethics of Identity*, you criticize the notion that there is such a thing as “identity” in any fixed, stable sense. Also, you suggest that human beings are deeply preoccupied with questions of identity, and at times such preoccupations can yield tragic and terrible political consequences. Can you explain why you take this position on identity?

There is no contradiction between the human fixation on identity in modern era and the lack of empirical support for identity. It is the linear descendant of the soul, another fiction, but one that had powerful behavioral implications. My argument about identity is too complex to summarize here. Let it suffice to say that self-identification is an analytically more useful and empirically more defensible concept. We have multiple self-identifications and they in turn are based large on our affiliations, roles, relationships to our bodies, and our histories. These identifications are labile, rise and fall in importance over time, and often in conflict. We are fragmented selves, although we delude ourselves that we have, or could have, unitary and consistent identities. As our identifications rise and fall as a function of priming and context, they offer no real guide to ethical or political behavior. Recognition of this truth, however, could have important positive political and ethical implications.

I'm just finishing a second book about identity, about national identifications and their political consequences. It builds on the argument of my earlier book and analyzes the key similarities and differences between individual and national identifications, explores the implications of the latter for foreign policy and international change, and also how they are responsive to changes in domestic and international society.

You are perhaps most famous for your *Cultural Theory of International Relations*. What led you to draw upon classical thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle when developing this theory?

I am drawn to the richer ancient Greek understanding of the human psyche, which I believe offers more insight into human behavior. It gives equal emphasis to thumos and reason as it does to appetite, whereas moderns have reduced the psyche to appetite and instrumental reason. Plato and Aristotle are the great theorists in the tradition.

In *Why Nations Fight*, you examine the distribution of wars across three and a half centuries and argue that, contrary to conventional wisdom, only a minority were motivated by security or material interest. Instead, you suggest that the spirit (thumos), appetite, and reason are the principal causes of war across the centuries. As such, do you essentially feel that there can sometimes be an inherent irrationality to war and conflict?

“Can sometimes be” should read “more often than not is” when describing what you call “irrationality.” In this book and elsewhere, I argue that rationality is, in the first instance, a culturally-shaped concept and that the understanding used in social sciences is biased and cramped. I document how none of the leaders of the states responsible for what are called “systemic” wars in the discipline engaged in any kind of careful assessment of the risks of war or of its possible gains and costs. Recent work on 1914 by historians offers more grist to my mill here, as does work on the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq.

Given that inter-state conflict seems to have significantly declined, why do you feel that intra-state conflict has become the dominant form of contemporary conflict?

Intra-state violence has also declined, although the current slaughter in Syria is certainly pushing up the death count in this decade. There are big differences between inter- and intra-state war as many of the important restraints that

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have reduced the frequency of the former do not operate, or do so as strongly, in the case of the latter.

This year marks the centenary of the start of World War I that claimed nearly 40 million lives and set the stage for World War II, the Holocaust, and the Cold War. In your new book, you examine the chain of events that led to “the war to end all wars” and what could reasonably have been done differently to avoid it. Do you feel that there was one particular event or decision that stands out above others as a driver for this conflict?

There were many drivers of this conflict, although I argue it was highly contingent in both its underlying and immediate causes. Europe was not “dry kindling waiting for a spark to set it aflame,” a metaphor encouraged by former policymakers who sought to escape their responsibility for this catastrophe. For reasons I elaborate, if Franz Ferdinand and his wife had not been assassinated, Europe might have escaped war in 1914, and by 1917, the leaders of Austria-Hungary, Germany, and Russia would have become increasingly risk-averse for different reasons.

In your forthcoming publication with Simon Reich, you argue that global hegemony is a fiction propagated to support a large defense establishment to justify American claims to world leadership, and that the United States has often been a source of global, political, and economic instability. Taking this into consideration, what role do you feel the U.S. should be playing in modern world affairs?

Simon and I consider three roles: agenda setting, economic custodianship, and sponsorship of global initiatives. We argue these roles normally attributed to a hegemon are widely shared in the international community. The U.S. should accommodate to this reality and attempt to play a more muted and constructive role in all three respects. Such a policy would increase, not diminish, its influence.

As someone who spent part of their career working in the U.S. intelligence community, what are your thoughts on the Obama administration’s use of intelligence agencies, particularly in regards to the recent controversy surrounding intelligence gathering?

Frightening! What can you possibly learn by tapping the phones of allied leaders that has any chance of offsetting the black eyes, mistrust, and loss of influence that follows the inevitable exposure of such behavior? Worse still, it now appears that the NSA has been spying on foreign companies and law firms to give American companies and allies a leg up. Obama and Holder are law professors, which makes their support of these activities more reprehensible.

What key advice would you give to IR scholars starting their careers?

Don’t feel you need to follow trends. Do your own thing, but take no shortcuts and combine original thinking with good empirical research.

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*This interview was conducted by **Al McKay**. Al is an Editor-at-large of E-IR.*