Culture and International Relations: The Culture of International Relations

Richard Ned Lebow

In a response to my critics I further elaborate some of the concepts central to A Cultural Theory of International Relations. I explain why it is a cultural theory, as distinct from a theory of culture; the different levels of reason conceptualised by the Greeks and their utility in moving our thinking beyond the exclusive focus on instrumental rationality of modern social science; and Aristotle’s concept of anger and its implications for the behaviour of the weak and the powerful. I justify my case selection and its Western bias, but defend the universality of my theory and its non-hegemonic application to the study of other cultures.

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Richard Little has written a thoughtful essay that meets the criteria of a good review: it recapitulates the argument of the book, situates it within the broader literature and identifies parts of the argument that would benefit from further elaboration or with which the reviewer disagrees. He raises three points in particular that invite comment: my treatment of culture, the relationship between affect and reason and competing realist readings of key 20th-century cases.

Professor Little would like me to be more specific about my understanding of culture. It provides the foundation for my theory, but paradoxically is the least theorised concept in my book. Even by the loose standards of social science, culture is a vague, catch-all term that has been used in so many ways for so many ends that there is little to be gained, and perhaps much to be lost, from attempting to impose my own definition, especially the kind of narrow and technical understanding essential to operationalise the concept. Instead, I have chosen to work with less comprehensive and more easily defined and applied concepts that capture salient features of culture: the hierarchy of motives in a society and the ways in which they are channelled. The motives I address – appetite, spirit (thumos) and reason – are universal but their relative emphasis and

I am grateful to the editors of Millennium for organising this forum and hope that readers will be sufficiently intrigued to read my book and engage its arguments in a thoughtful way and with an open mind.
expression is local, as is the degree to which they are theorised. Diversity in these several dimensions would allow me to categorise cultures; I do not do this as my goal is to explain variation in foreign policy and patterns of international relations.

Professor Little’s second point is the relationship of affect to reason, especially in fear-based worlds. He rightly notes that, following the Greeks, I describe three levels of reason: instrumental, *phronēsis* and wisdom. Instrumental reason, also known as strategic reason, is used by actors to attain goals. *Phronēsis*, or practical reason, encourages actors to rethink their goals, or impose limits on the ways in which they are achieved, on the basis of experience, first-hand or vicarious. Wisdom (*sophia*) also leads actors to reframe their objectives, but in response to a holistic understanding of the world and one’s place in it. Modern social science restricts itself to instrumental reason, the most superficial kind of reason, and largely ignores affect. Most political scientists and psychologists who have addressed affect, emphasise the ways in which it degrades the quality of decision-making. The ancient Greeks understood – and modern neuroscience is beginning to demonstrate – that affect can also play a positive, perhaps, an essential, role in high quality judgements. Variation in the level of reason and the kind of affect generates a range of possibilities. The two most relevant combinations for international relations are negative affect (i.e. fear, suspicion, hostility) linked with instrumental reason, and positive affect (i.e. respect, friendship) coupled to *phronēsis*. The former is endemic to fear-based worlds and helps to bring them about. As Thucydides recognised, it is destructive in its consequences and not the norm in any society. This is why he presents the Melian Dialogue and the debate before Plataea, its Spartan analogue, as pathologies. I argue in *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* and elsewhere, that realism, by urging leaders to treat this pathology as the norm, makes it much more difficult for states to build cooperative relationships and threatens to make its view of the world self-fulfilling.

*Phronēsis* combined with positive affect enables the kind of cooperation that allows states to escape from what realists describe as the security dilemma. It does so by focusing attention on the benefits of cooperation – and of conflict – conducted in accordance with a tacitly or explicitly agreed-upon set of procedures. Instrumental reason does not lose its importance in this context, but is shaped – as it always is – by the values and commitments of actors. It will be more constrained by rules and less destructive in its consequences. Realists and strategic action models err in treating instrumental reason as a universal and value-free logic, when it is nothing of the kind. *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*...

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Relations offers a framework, or at least the outlines of one, for thinking about the cultural basis of reason and the consequences of different kinds of reason yoked to different kinds of affect. It leads me to a critique of prospect theory and its applications to international relations. I contend that risk taking with respect to gains and losses differs depending on the principal motive (appetite, spirit, fear) of actors.

Professor Little’s third point concerns the realist response to my book. He suggests that realists are not deaf to considerations of standing, as neorealists stress the importance of relative gains. More importantly, he notes, realists will challenge my interpretation of cases and offers the Cold War as an example.

My conceptualisation of standing is not in any way comparable to the neorealist formulation of relative gains. The latter pertain to material, military or political advantages vis-a-vis other states. Standing – realists use the term prestige – only matters to them if it confers these kinds of advantages. For Morgenthau and Gilpin it is a mere instrumentality, never an end in its own right. A Cultural Theory of International Relations treats standing or prestige as both an end and means. It conceives of standing and honour – standing achieved according to a set of widely accepted rules – as an expression of the universal human drive for self-esteem, which is often sought vicariously through the accomplishments of groups, organisations, sports teams or nations with which one affiliates. My goal is to broaden our understanding of human motives and their implications for international relations, not to restrict them as realists, liberals and Marxists try to do.

As for alternative readings of my cases, they already exist and in some cases (e.g. World Wars I and II, the Cold War) have become conventional wisdom. I try to show why realist (security-based) interpretations are inadequate and misleading in all three conflicts. They are, in fact, at odds with core assumptions of realism, as the behaviour that led to both World Wars and sustained the Cold War was so often instrumentally irrational in terms of the goals leaders sought and these goals themselves are often difficult to reconcile with any substantively rational definition of the national interest. Realist readings often use evidence selectively by only addressing behaviour that might be explained in terms of the search for security. Such interpretations so stretch the meaning of security as to make the concept entirely indeterminate. My theory, by contrast, acknowledges the role of fear, interest and honour, and looks at how they interact to produce sets of behaviour that appear contradictory. One of the strengths of my theory is its interest in highlighting apparent anomalies and even predicting the mix we might expect with different mixtures of motives.

Dr Shilliam is supportive of my attempt to theorise affect and use it to help explain critical foreign policy choices. He nevertheless overstates my claim. I do not contend that ‘the psychical feeling of social structures and inter-relations, determines political action’. I eschew determinism of any kind, and recognise the tensions between culture and institutions on the one hand and agency on the other. Summarising my project in his own language, Dr Shilliam describes it as an ‘affective praxis of modernity’. By this he means it attempts to expose the psychological drivers of identities and their associated status hierarchies. He considers it a ‘bold and productive endeavour’ because of its potential to theorise a transformation of the international system. In my view, it helps to make such a transformation possible by offering actors incentives to initiate change in their behaviour and institutional setting and describing the conditions under which such changes are likely to succeed. As Hans Morgenthau observed, the role of international relations theory should never be limited to describing reality; it must educate actors about the necessity and feasibility of improving it.3

Dr Shilliam is unhappy that I pay no attention to colonisation and decolonisation from the perspective of the colonised. He devotes his essay to showing how the writings of Franz Fanon illuminate ‘the psychic sources of affect in modernity that remain obscured when the European elite is conflated with the subject’. He maintains that my reliance on Aristotle, especially his understanding of anger, leads me to deny subaltern agency. This criticism is unfair.

I do analyse colonialism only from the perspective of the coloniser. The cases I analyse in the modern era all have to do with great powers because they are the home turf of the realist and liberal paradigms. I want to show that my theory does a better job of accounting for these cases. I have previously written a book – White Britain and Black Ireland: Social Stereotypes and Colonial Policy – on colonisation from the vantage point of both coloniser and colonised.4 I show how colonialism required a discourse that dehumanised or infantilised the colonised and how this discourse ultimately undermined colonialism. This discourse and its variants arose in pre-modern times although were adapted to modernity, which drew out their contradictions, especially in metropoles that moved towards liberal, capitalist democracies.

Aristotle’s undeniable misogyny and seeming support of slavery does not disqualify him as a source of invaluable insights. Indeed, if we excluded from serious consideration all authors who were racist, misogynist, anti-Semitic, anti-feminist, anti-common people, inclined towards aristocracy or monarchy or did not display sympathy for the

dispossessed, disabled or suffering of peoples of the developing world, our literature would be severely restricted. Not only would Plato, Aristotle, Shakespeare and the Founding Fathers have to go, but perhaps everyone who did not write in the last few decades and was politically correct. I am careful how I use Aristotle; I situate him in context and take concepts from him without the prejudice with which they might be associated. His treatment of anger helps us to understand contemporary as well as ancient politics. As he suggests, the weak must constrain their anger – and, better yet, suppress the emotion – to avoid further humiliation or punishment. This does not mean that they must remain passive. My former classmate Jim Scott has explored the range of indirect ways and partially masked ways in which the oppressed group can display resistance, build self-esteem and develop solidarity.5

The seeming compliance of oppressed groups is often superficial. In this context, Aristotle’s conception of anger provides a useful vehicle for exploring the behaviour of the oppressed.

The broader thrust of Dr Shilliam’s critique is to offer Fanon’s affective praxis of modernity as a superior analytical construct to mine. It is not evident that our understandings are as different as Dr Shilliam seems to imply. Fanon and I both explore the connection between individual psyches and status hierarchies and how they are embedded in more general patterns of relations. I turn to culture to understand these patterns while many interpreters of Fanon invoke Marxist analyses of colonialism, which I find seriously flawed.

Dr Shilliam takes me to task for restricting my analysis largely to Western cultures although he acknowledges my justification that this is where my linguistic and historical knowledge lie. I do not understand why this ‘curtails the vision and possibilities of [my] affective praxis, just as Sartre’s did of Negritude and Fanon’s did of Algerian women’. In my judgement, A Cultural Theory of International Relations offers a conceptual framework and analytical tools fully appropriate to understanding non-Western sensitivities and experiences in a non-judgemental and non-hierarchical way, and I hope will be used by others with appropriate qualification towards these ends.

Aristotle’s concept of anger also provides a vehicle for addressing my third critic: Andreas Osiander. Plato and Aristotle express a widely shared Greek understanding of anger as provoked by challenges to our status or autonomy. They recognise that challenges are not objective but defined subjectively by actors. Contemporary psychological research indicates that people do not resent the achievements of others so long as they are not in the domains in which they have chosen to compete for standing. The Osiander review unwittingly confirms the validity of

these propositions. In paragraph two, he acknowledges his ‘proprietary feelings’ towards this kind of subject matter, having recently published a monograph that up to a point adopts a similar approach to international relations. The rest of his essay discusses his book or criticises mine where it differs. He makes no attempt to describe or engage the core arguments of *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*.

Dr Osiander’s criticisms are far from the mark. He alleges that I fall into the trap of projecting ‘a vision of the past very much in conformity with our present world’. If anything, I might be accused of projecting a vision of the past on to the present as I use Homeric and ancient Greek understandings of honour to make sense of a world where these concepts are no longer thought to apply. I am alleged ‘More so than Waltz or Wendt’ to ‘take the state utterly for granted’. In practice, I talk more about societies than I do about states, which is certainly not true of Waltz or Wendt, and I distinguish between ancient Greek, Roman medieval, early modern and modern forms of political organisation. I describe the state as a purely modern development and offer a novel explanation for its emergence. More bizarre still is the assertion that I am ‘blinded’ to the problem of structural change by my ‘reliance on our discourse of eternity and its reassuring message that no matter where you are (or, more importantly in this case, when), the state will be there to make sense of the world’. This is completely unfounded as is the claim that I use few primary sources or use them out of context. My case studies draw on relevant primary and secondary materials and I devote almost an entire chapter to a hermeneutic reading of the *Iliad*, my principal source for understanding Western honour cultures.

I am accused of selective attention to the evidence in order to relate my findings to my ideal types, although no evidence is provided in support of this allegation. My historical narrative, moreover, ‘is so replete with factual errors as to give rise to some scepticism regarding the value of [my] analysis’. Here examples are mobilised, but turn out to be differences of interpretation, not departures from fact. I note that in the *Iliad* there is no mention of economic exchange. Osiander introduces his own definition of money to ‘include any measure of value routinely used for exchange purposes and for judging wealth’ which he then uses to challenge my claim. Homer does not in fact describe economic exchange, and items of value given by warriors to other warriors are presented as gifts. Gift exchange is critical to Homer, a point to which the reviewer is apparently oblivious. Osiander refuses to see any parallel between the Persian plea to Athens to surrender and that of the Athenians to the Melians. He is, of course, entitled to his opinion, but my treatment of the Melian Dialogue, developed at length in *The Tragic Vision of Politics*, has been widely accepted by classicists.6

I also stand by my readings of Sallust, Livy and Fontane. Other ‘egregious mistakes’ include my use of the Vatican – surely a conventional shorthand – to refer to the papacy regardless of the period and even though St Peters cathedral was not built until the late 14th century. I characterise Lepanto as the last great sea battle between rowed vessels. Yes, the Russo-Swedish war of 1788–90 involved rowed vessels, but no great sea battles. Louis XIV’s armies went in for wholesale destruction – a fact I note – and one that is at odds with his use of war to attain gloire. We are told that Augustus II of Saxony did not have the 454 illegitimate children imputed to him – although well-respected secondary sources credit him with this number – but only eight. Readers of the review are falsely encouraged to conclude that I attribute Saxony’s failure as a state to the sexual excesses on its ruler. These various criticisms are wrong, pedantic and beside the point.

In the last paragraphs of the review, Osiander suggests that the really important changes in the context in which international relations takes place are technological, not cultural (e.g. gunpowder, printing), and that my book is accordingly limited in scope and ‘less than convincing’. This is an assertion, not an argument, and part and parcel of the reviewer’s propensity to make any claim that might inflate the value of his book and diminish that of mine.

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