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Review Essay 30

Richard Ned Lebow, Peer Schouten, Hidemi Suganami, eds. *The Return of the Theorists: Dialogues with Great Thinkers in International Relations*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. ISBN: 978-1-137-51644-2 (hardcover, \$120.00); 978-1-349-57788-0 (softcover, \$39.99).

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Published **7 April 2017** | issforum.org

Editors: **Thomas Maddux, Frank Gavin, and Diane Labrosse**

Web and Production Editor: **George Fujii**

Shortlink: tiny.cc/ISSF-RE30

Permalink: <https://issforum.org/essays/30-theorists>

PDF URL: <https://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/RE30.pdf>

Quite a few scholars in International Relations (IR) date its origin as a field of study from 1919; others, including this reviewer, see the years directly after World War II as the point of origin. Either way, IR is the new gang on the block, seriously short on street cred. The block housing the social sciences itself is newish and not much respected in the neighborhood; lots of kids in the newer gangs like to brag about where their ancestors come from, how great they were back then, how they set the tone for everybody in the neighborhood, how it is good to go back and look at what they had to say about life in the 'hood. Our gang does this more than any of the others, or so it seems to me. I do it—a lot. It's easy, it's fun, it makes us feel good, it's not likely to get much notice down the block. Which is also good: the other gangs don't give us much grief. And not so good: they still don't give us much respect. Anyway, it's a game, a kid's game, a story-telling game, “an amusing *jeu d'esprit*” (4), as the editors of *The Return of the Theorists* tell us.

As with many of the pick-up games kids play out on the street, this game has an appealing spontaneity. Three guys got the game going (Ned Lebow plays Andy Hardy), but pretty much anyone who's hanging around gets to play. Since the game involves telling stories, there's a premium on being clever. The game is not really competitive—no one proclaiming the ancestor I'm going to talk about is better, wiser, more important than yours. Not many rules either, but three are clear and strictly enforced by the three guys who started the game. First, the subject of your story has to be dead, though it doesn't matter how long. Second, you or your stand-in have to ask your dead subject questions and have him (or her, in three cases) answer them. Third, you and your subject have only 3000 words to say it all. The third rule is necessary because so many gang members are playing this particular game: 40 in all, 32 of them guys, converse with 40 ghosts, 37 male, 37 from Europe and North America.

Gender issues are duly noted here and there. Beyond an interview with Frantz Fanon, the same goes for racism. Even though we all know that gangs make status and respect central concerns, no one says anything much about sexism and racism in the gang. The unspoken assumption is that our gang is growing rapidly,

new kids from all over are joining up, and they'll change things—eventually. Whether the game fosters any such change is an open question. On the one hand, it has lots of younger kids telling stories. On the other hand, ancestor worship reaches across generations in support of the status quo.

The game's organizers decided that stories should be told in the order of their subjects' birthdates. The first six subjects are Homer (c. 850 BCE), Confucius (551-479 BCE), Lao Zi (5th-6th century BCE, Thucydides (c. 460-c. 395 BCE), Plato (429-347 BCE) and Aristotle (384-322 BCE), with Lebow, Pichamon Yeophantong, Chen Yudan, Lebow again, Christopher Coker, and Anthony Lang telling their stories. Then come the early modern ancestors: Niccoló Machiavelli (1469-1537), Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), John Locke (1632-1704), David Hume (1711-1776), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), with Erica Benner, Michael Williams, Beate Jahn, Hidemi Suganami, David Boucher, and Friedrich Kratochwil doing the honors. Seán Molloy wraps up this group of stories by having Machiavelli and Kant talk to each other. G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831), Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831), Karl Marx (1818-1883), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Émile Durkheim (1858-1917), John Dewey (1859-1952), and Max Weber (1864-1920) come back from the 19th century, their voices provided by Richard Beardsworth, Jan Willem Honig, Joshua Simon, Tracy Strong, Bertrand Badie, Christian Bueger and Peer Schouten, and Lebow yet again.

While some of that third group lived into the twentieth century, all of the remaining subjects made their names in the twentieth century, but not necessarily in the order they were born. Moreover, some of them were directly involved in IR's development as a field of study, some not. Many walked both sides of the street, thus making any order of exposition tendentious. But long lists are not just tedious but confounding, so I offer two overlapping groups. David Mitrany (1888-1975), Arnold Wolfers (1892-1968), Hans Morgenthau (1904-1980) Raymond Aron (1905-1983), John Herz (1908-2005), Charles Kindleberger (1910-2003), Karl Deutsch (1912-1992), Martin Wight (1913-1972), Susan Strange (1923-1998), Kenneth Waltz (1924-2013), Hedley Bull (1932-1985) and Jean Elshtain (1914-2013) have their say as sometimes reluctant IR insiders with help from Jens Steffek, James Davis, William Scheuerman, Ariane Chebel d'Appollonia, Andrew Lawrence, Simon Reich, Andrei Markovits, Ian Hall, Louis Pauly, Adam Humphreys and Suganami, Robert Ayson, and Caroline Kennedy-Pipe. Norman Angell (1872-1967), Lewis Mumford (1895-1990), Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), John Rawls (1921-2002), Frantz Fanon (1925-1961), Michel Foucault (1926-1984), and Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) get their due thanks to Lucian Ashworth, Rens van Munster and Casper Sylvest, Kimberly Hutchings, Huw Williams, Rita Abrahamsen, Iver Neumann, and Anna Leander.

The three organizers get the game going with a brief Introduction notable for what it doesn't say. While they are "committed to framing International Relations broadly" (necessarily, since at least half the ancestors died before the field was born), this commitment hinges on what storytellers think IR includes (3). Now here's a problem. There are some kids in the next block called political theorists who don't along so well with the political science gang and like to play with us; we give them quite a bit of deference when they do (and more deference than they get in their own gang). It's not just that the organizers asked a number of these other kids to join in, or even that a lot of us (including me) like to think of ourselves as political theorists. We genuflect to many of the same ancestors that political theorists do: most obviously, Machiavelli, Hobbes and Kant. The big thinkers. And 'thinker' is the term we find in the book's subtitle and throughout the Introduction, not 'theorist.' What matters though is the other side of the coin: which of *our* ancestors do political theorists tend to overlook or underestimate?

As a latecomer to the social sciences, IR started off as an odd amalgam of refugees from old quarters of town known as international law and diplomatic history, respectively identified by liberal internationalist and conservative nationalist attachments. Lifting passages from Thucydides, Machiavelli and Hobbes gave the latter group, self-styled as realists, the aura of big thinking, while the former group relied on its own history of big thinkers: Grotius, Pufendorf, Wolff and Vattel. Esteem for Kant came only after liberal institutionalists gave up on international law; nineteenth-century liberal thinkers never got any sustained attention. Indicatively, none of our storytellers pick historians of international relations or legal minds for their stories. Where, for example, are A. H. L. Heeren (1760-1842, now an English School favorite), Friedrich von Gentz (1764-1832, whom the ghostly Bull mentions in passing), Heinrich von Treitschke (1834-1896), Friedrich Meinecke (1862-1954, who has come to Machiavelli's attention), Arnold Toynbee (1889-1975, whom Coker disguised as Alfred North Whitehead mentions to Plato and Aron quotes), Adda Bozeman (1908-1994), or F. H. Hinsley (1918-1998)?

Even more conspicuous is disregard for legal thinking. Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) was a towering figure in European thought for the better part of two centuries; in my view it makes little sense to talk about Hobbes except in conjunction with Grotius and Samuel Pufendorf (1632-1694). Yet we did so shamelessly. In our game, however, Grotius gets mention twice in passing, Pufendorf, once, by Rousseau, quite properly on the subject of human nature. Like Grotius and Pufendorf, Christian Wolff (1679-1754) and Emer de Vattel (1714-1767) wrote great treatises effectively institutionalizing 'international society' (a term Vattel used). Wolff's conception of a great republic, adopted by Vattel, situates Kant's *Perpetual Peace* as a derivative contribution to world-order thinking in the Enlightenment. Later legal theory fares no better. Hans Kelsen (1881-1973) gains attention from Morgenthau and Herz, appropriately since he was their teacher and a major thinker in those fraught years; to have heard Kelsen's response to the rise of realism in IR would have made a good story. Kelsen's student Hersch Lauterpacht (1897-1960) rivals Wight in giving the English School its bearings; anyone writing about human rights does so in the shadow of Louis Sohn (1914-2006).

It's not just that there are no stories about *jus naturae et gentium* (Pufendorf's formula) and how it morphed into positive international law. Liberal internationalism and its institutional concerns are generally shortchanged. If Locke, then why not Adam Smith (1723-1790) and J. S. Mill (1806-1873) even more? We have Angell and Mittrany, but why not Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924, mentioned twice), John Maynard Keynes (1883-1946), or Dag Hammarskjöld (1905-1961)? The tilt in favor of political theory helps to explain these silences (those kids aren't much into Mill either), and so does the history of the field's first decades. But then where are the geographers—A. T. Mahan (1840-1914), Halford Mackinder (1861-1947), Karl Haushofer (1869-1946)—with whom the early, field-defining realists so often engaged? For that matter, realists could hardly ignore nineteenth-century imperialism, but none of its theorists are summoned forth. Although Arendt had much to say about imperialism and racism in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she makes no mention of it in her 'conversation' with Hutchings' 'young party activist.'

Arguably later developments in the field bring ancestors in from outside, but only so many outsiders can be subjects before the whole game becomes too big and unwieldy. Just from the point of view of the field's later theoretical tendencies, it's good to have Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Durkheim, Arendt, Fanon, Foucault and Bourdieu, but then adding, say, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951, mentioned several times), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976, mentioned once), Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), Karl Mannheim (1893-1947, mentioned), Theodor Adorno (1903-1969), Emanuel Levinas (1906-1995), Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995), Andre Gunder Frank (1929-2005), Jacques Derrida (1930-2004, mentioned in a footnote), or Edward Said (1935-2003, mentioned) would have made it better. Who then to kick out? I guess I'd start with Dewey,

Mumford and Rawls, but with misgivings. After all, technology gets short shrift in the line-up, so maybe I'd keep Mumford and add Bernard Brodie (1910-1978), Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980), Herman Kahn (1933-1983, mentioned), or Donella Meadows (1941-2001).

When it comes to outsiders, it's all too easy to overload the list with personal favorites. Why don't Cicero (106-43 BCE), Augustine of Hippo (354-430), Justinian I (c. 482-565), Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406/732-808 AH), Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) get to tell us how the 'hood got from Aristotle to the Renaissance? Haunted as we are by 'the science question,' we might want to hear from Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543), Francis Bacon (1561-1626), G. W. Leibniz (1646-1716) on his differences with Isaac Newton (1643-1727), Auguste Comte (1798-1857, mentioned twice), Charles Darwin (1809-1882), Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) as Social Darwinist, or, tendentiously, Arthur de Gobineau (1816-1882). Too much? A three-way conversation with Karl Popper (1902-1994), Thomas Kuhn (1922-1996) and Imre Lakatos (1922-1974) might do the job.

While I'm at it, I might as well voice my disappointment that the insider list does not include Quincy Wright (1890-1970), F. S. Dunn (1893-1962), the Sprouts (Harold, 1901-1980, and Margaret, 1903-2004, the latter mentioned in passing), Harold Lasswell (1902-1978, also mentioned), Robert Strausz-Hupé (1903-2002), Adam Watson (1914-2007), Ernst Haas (1924-2003), David Singer (1925-2009, mentioned), Stanley Hofmann (1928-2015, mentioned) and Hayward Alker (1937-2007, mentioned). To dismiss them all, if implicitly, as second-tier canonites denies the field its richness and vitality—at least as I have experienced it over the last half century. Obviously, no list of forty ancestors will satisfy everyone. Just to make a point (well, a series of points), I added another sixty or so. Had the book's editors commissioned TRIP surveyors to ask the whole gang for the top twenty in our personal pantheons, the insider list would probably look like the one at hand. Who the outsiders might be, and how many, is not so obvious and would surely depend in exactly how the question is framed. In an important sense, any such concerns are beside the point: we're still in the gang even if we all have different stories to tell, books to write.

After calling *The Return of the Theorists* an amusing *jeu d'esprit*, the editors go to say that their book "is also a serious contribution to the scholarly literature in political theory and international relations" (132). It's hard to see how anyone can make a serious contribution in so few words, especially when it is necessary to expend some of those words setting up the encounter with a dead thinker. Story tellers had to make a series of choices with no guidance from the editors:

(1) How much do you think your ancestor has to say about his or her work? What concerns or themes in that work should be emphasized? By and large, story tellers play it safe and reprise ancestors' best known concerns and ideas. I don't doubt I'd have done the same, and I am impressed by the skill with which story tellers carried this task off, both in the questions asked and the responses elicited. Getting those whom I earlier called outsiders to bring their concerns to bear on latter-day international relations is hard enough. To have them size up the field is an even tougher task, too often too sketchily performed to be anything more than suggestive.

(2) Do you meet with the ancestor yourself or select a stand-in? When and where does the encounter take place? The general pattern is to have the story teller recount a personal encounter in the present day. There are numerous exceptions: Coker's Plato meets with Whitehead in 1947; Chen's story has Lao Zi conversing with a contemporary; Lang's story is set in the near future, where Aristotle faces a panel of five obtuse IR scholars; students meet with Machiavelli, Locke, Hegel; a 'modern scholar' goes back to Hobbes as an old

man; ‘Dave’ Hume endures an academic career in our own time; Rousseau has a conversation with his dog more than two centuries after they died; Kant’s exchange with Machiavelli takes place in the first circle of Hell, evidently in 1900 since Nietzsche is banging on the gate; Strong interviews Nietzsche in 1888; in the book’s cleverest set-up, Ashworth has a young journalist—too young to be Susan Strange?—ask an anonymous acquaintance about a dinner party with Angell that took place in 1938, and not 1963 as the journalist assumes; Cox interviews Carr near the end of his life; an anonymous interviewer talks with Morgenthau a few years after his death; Hutching’s ‘young party activist’ talks with Arendt forty years after her death; ‘an eager but somewhat anxious student’ talks with Wight soon after ‘Why Is There No International Theory’ had appeared in 1960, and a British student who’d like to see ‘a Marxist interpretation of Wittgenstein’ talks with Rawls in 1952 when he is working out the argument for what would become *The Theory of Justice*; Waltz has to deal with two imagined professors when defending his dissertation in 1954 and again in 1967 when Waltz has ventured into comparative foreign policy; Abrahamsen has an editor of a ‘cutting edge IR journal’ (her scare marks) interview Fanon at a conference in 2011 celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of his death; on Ayson account, Bull’s *The Anarchical Society* is coming along slowly in 1973 or thereabouts, and so he has to fend off a publisher’s representative who wonders when the book will be done.

(3) How much does your ancestor know about events taking place after death? About the reception of his or her work? About IR today? There’s no general pattern, at least that I can detect. In some cases, ancestors mingle freely on the other side; they know everything and they are, as Clausewitz says, “a lot of argumentative prima donnas” (132). In other cases, their interlocutors have to explain what has happened before ancestors can comment. Lebow solves the problem by sending Weber books ahead of time. Even so, Lebow felt compelled to summarize Morgenthau’s theoretical stance, about which, oddly enough, Lebow’s Weber has nothing to say. When ancestors are asked what they think about this or that event, daily life today, or the international scene, their answers are pretty much what I’d expect them to be. No surprise that electricity fascinates Aristotle, Marx is surprised the socialism never had a chance in the U.S., Carr has a hard time acknowledging the ossification of the Soviet Union, Arendt is interested in Scottish nationalism, Deutsch loves the internet.

Ancestors’ opinions about later thinkers tend to be livelier and less predictable, but more in the way of asides. While ancestors often reflect on their ancestors, there’s little sense that they are willing (or permitted) to learn from those who followed them. Just for example, Williams tells Hobbes that we might call his position on sovereign power ‘social constructivist.’ Hobbes retorts that this a strange and infelicitous term. “Words matter” (71). Yet some constructivists have argued that words do indeed matter, that they are, as we say, ‘performative,’ and that this is not just a matter of rhetoric. Given Hobbes’s striking claim that ‘the Person is the Actor; and he that owneth his words and actions, is the AUTHOR: in which case the Actor acteth by Authority’ (*Leviathan I*, xvi), one would think he would immediately endorse speech act theory—if Williams had given him a chance. Even less do we see ancestors acknowledging that they might have been wrong about some things. At least Foucault admits to having learned from his critics during his lifetime. The clear message is that important thinkers know what makes them important, and who would mess with that? They are indeed a big bunch of *prima donnas*, not likely to concede much of anything to anyone. In this respect, Leander’s interview with Bourdieu is especially telling.

The book’s amusing conceit that we can talk with the dead, though briefly because there are so many to talk to, defeats any hope that the book contributes to international thought as such. The editors have a more modest hope—that the book is a serious contribution scholarly literature—and in this they may be right. The book does convey a cumulative sense of how this ragtag gang of ours got to be what (we think) we are. Its

omissions reveal what we choose to forget in forging an identity—if that's what it is. Better to say, the book is a collective enactment of selective reflexivity, a memory palace of mirrors and shadows. As such, it is most valuable to students—a socialization shortcut.

The book's conclusion very much reinforces this function. It stages a panel at the International Studies Association annual conference in Atlanta become Atlantis. Lebow chairs; Thucydides, Hobbes, Morgenthau, Deutsch and Bull talk about themselves and each other; the book's two other editors comment; an audience consisting of ancestors, some other notables, and at least one student gets a few minutes at the end. Nobody on the panel says anything very startling. From the floor Ibn Khaldun asks the obvious question: why is there no one like him on the panel? Confucius asks another pertinent question, and then a Ph.D. student from Aberystwyth asks about "epistemic violence" (382). The audience becomes restless, the chair asks panelists to respond to these pointed questions, which they do defensively and evasively; Fanon walks out and discussion moves on. On display: facetious and formal conduct weirdly blended, panelists talking past each other and talking down to the audience, self-aggrandizement from all sides. The first time any student experiences the rituals of a typical scholarly panel, so effectively put on display in this book's conclusion: now that's an education.

Nicholas Onuf happened upon IR theory when he was a nineteen year old kid, and when half of the returning theorists were still alive. He began teaching IR more than fifty years ago, and has taught in North and South America, Europe and Asia. He has written extensively on international legal theory, constructivism in IR, and republican international thought. He recently completed a book project entitled *'The Mightie Frame': Epochal Change and the Modern World* (quoting Milton's *Paradise Lost*).