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Review Essay 31

Richard Ned Lebow. *National Identities and International Relations.* Cambridge University Press, 2016. ISBN: 9781107166301 (hardback).

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Throughout the 1990s, the study of nationalism, and state and national identities gained momentum in the discipline of International Relations (IR). With the emergence of ethno-national claims across the globe and the dissolution of multinational states, authors sought to comprehend what drove national interests and behaviors both domestically and internationally. Recently, literature on identities and cultures has again been burgeoning—with one major difference. In the 1990s, national identities and cultures were largely depicted as uniform, cohesive 'units' that would explain states' behaviors and interests. Literature on strategic culture is a relevant case in point.[1] Currently, authors seem to be focusing instead on the diversity of identities and recognition of difference. Andrew Hurrell's decade-long research agenda on pluralism and global international relations is an illustrative example.[2]

The 'turn' towards seeking to understand the multiplicity of identities and cultures is certainly a reflection of current politics as characterized by calls for particularism and contestation of—if not, as put by Pankaj Mishra, *anger* against—dominant orders.[3] Though belated, this turn is also, at least in IR, the result of a striking realization, that identities are complex and diverse. Thinking about them in homogenous terms might not be so accurate.

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[1] Peter Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, New Directions in World Politics (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Elizabeth Kier, *Imagining War: French and British Military Doctrine between the Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

[2] As a recent example of this research agenda see Andrew Hurrell, "Towards the Global Study of International Relations," *Revista Brasileira de Politica Internacional* 59:2 (2016), http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/0034-7329201600208.

[3] Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (Penguin, New York: Penguin, 2016).

Richard Ned Lebow's *National Identities and International Relations* speaks directly to this scholarly trend. Lebow's book proposes a refined account of national identifications—a term that, despite the title, the author seems to prefer to 'identities' and certainly to 'identity.' Lebow tells us that while IR scholars—and constructivists in particular—have for a long time taken national identities as monolithic 'entities' able to directly explain states' behaviors and interests, the reality is actually more complex than often depicted. Lebow embraces the complexity that he describes, and he does so rigorously, analytically, but also with an impressive array of illustrations.

The main argument of *National Identities and International Relations* is that national identity is not unitary and is not consistent. Nor is it a logical explanandum for state behavior and foreign policy. Lebow defines national identifications as a composite of roles, affiliations, relationship to bodies (territory and people), and national histories. These identifications are multiple and conflicting. As with individuals, national identifications are constructed 'internally' and' externally.' Unlike individuals, though, states do not construct their identifications: "as states have no 'I', they cannot accept or reject attributions made by others" (44). Hence, whether domestically or internationally, identities are imposed upon states because these, unlike people, lack a reflexive self.

National identifications shape states' behavior even if, as Lebow carefully stresses, this is not a mono-causal relationship. These multiple identifications have different sets of implications for domestic politics, foreign policy, and order in international society. In turn, international logics also shape national identifications in various ways (4-5). Lebow also tells us that national identifications are constructed through a constant swing between rapprochement and dissociation. Whilst, to make sense of identity construction, constructivist studies largely focus on processes of 'othering,' they omit what the author sees as the reverse aspect of the process: "identity construction is dialectical in that the seemingly opposed processes of distancing oneself from another actor or actors can occur at the same time one draws closer to them" (62).

To disentangle these intertwined logics and comprehend how national identifications are first constructed and then shaped internally and externally, Lebow argues that three steps are needed. First, the author calls for the consistent application of psychology to the study of international relations and for the value of granting greater attention to emotions—positive ones in particular (110). Concentrating on friendship and trust rather than hostility and hatred might provide for a more accurate picture of foreign policy decisions, for it allows grasping affiliations among states rather than just discord between them (110). Second, Lebow argues, states are different from individuals and thus ought to be studied differently. Individuals have a psyche and emotions; states do not. States are instead "passive receptacles" (28) for the multiple identities and narratives that are imposed on them by individuals—whether domestically or internationally. In making this point, Lebow advances a powerful (and chapter-long) critique to proponents of ontological security, who at times, "come close to treating states as people" (35).

Third, the author exhorts IR scholars to consider the domestic and the international together. If national identities that are built domestically influence foreign policy, Lebow tells us, the reverse is also true. International and regional societies are "thinner" than domestic ones "because of the diversity of values and practices among its many actors" (78). In spite of that, Lebow explains (borrowing many of Ayse Zarakol's

arguments)[4] that regional and international societies influence national identifications constructed within states (166-175). Lebow's theoretical point is fundamental and, as he argues, IR scholars have overlooked the mutually constitutive nature of the domestic and the international. However, in writing *State Identities and the Pathological Homogenisation of People* in 2002, Heather Rae (who is not cited in the book) argued precisely for a holistic understanding of the domestic and the international. Discussing the construction of state identities Rae suggested *contra* Alexander Wendt that, "the corporate and social aspects of state identity stand in a dialectical, mutually constitutive relationship." [5]

Lebow's overarching point on multiple national identities directly engages with constructivist scholarship that, he claims, has for too long considered said identities to be fixed wholes. But Lebow seeks to make a set of additional contributions to constructivism's research agenda. Some of the additions are more compelling than others. I discuss two here.

First is the author's contribution to the problem of change in international relations. Lebow tells us that constructions of national identifications are one source of change in international relations. They reflect transformations in affiliations, national "bodies" (that the author defines as territory and people), and "biographies" (chapter 5). They also reflect transformations in the roles that states hold (chapter 4) and, more broadly, in what he sees as the values of justice that sustain and organize international orders (chapter 7). This, surely, is an important point to make. The discipline of IR, and constructivism in particular, are not best equipped to understand and explain change in world politics. As the study of IR is witnessing a historical turn, reflections on what constitutes (relevant) change seem necessary. And yet, despite Lebow's manifold examples taken from the past, *National Identities and International Relations* remains very much attached to an account of 'modern' nation-states, whose chronology is often elusive. Readers may find several references to what the author terms 'modernity' (82, 148-9) but its origins are never fully defined nor discussed. Lebow focuses on the current system of nation-states, referring somehow indistinctly to the 'traditional' societies (139, 148) which predated them and their transition to 'modern' ones (38).

Second is Lebow's contribution to the debate in IR about agency. The author tells us at the start of Chapter 6 that many IR theories, including constructivism, tend to have a thin understanding of agency (147). They either overemphasize structures or, as is the case with constructivism, grant too much importance to socialization processes. Either way, they downplay the capacity of individuals and institutions to act independently from said structures and processes (147). By calling for greater scholarly attention to be paid to agency, Lebow makes a sharp theoretical point. And yet, in the practical illustrations of his theoretical point, the author seems to be writing less about agency than about states' behavior. Similarly, in his efficacious discussion of deviant states, Lebow defines deviance as "agency that lacks legitimacy" (166). Perceptions of deviance entrench international hierarchies and marginalization, while often leading to self-stigmatizations and sentiments of frustration domestically. Is this, though, a discussion of agency or of deviant behavior?

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[4] Ayşe Zarakol, *After Defeat: How the East Learned to Live with the West* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[5] Heather Rae, *State Identities and the Homogenisation of Peoples* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 23.

After all, as Lebow suggests a few lines below, "deviance is a pejorative label for behavior that violates social norms, rules or laws" (166).

This last point leads me to a further potent contribution that *National Identities and International Relations* makes, perhaps less directly, to IR scholarship on the theme of international hierarchies and order in international society. While Lebow's work is primarily a key contribution to constructivist literature on national identities, a second narrative emerges in particular from the discussion of what the author terms 'agency' (chapter 6) and states' roles in international society (chapter 4). This powerful story speaks directly to some of the concerns of the prospering literature on hierarchies in IR. It does so in at least two ways. On the one hand, it offers a 'holistic' account of national identities in which the domestic and the international are interweaved. On the other, through the conclusive discussion of justice in international society (188-199), something that may not have been so clear at the start of the book emerges. Lebow tells us that there is a tension in the contemporary international order between two values of justice that define international societies: fairness, underlying logics of hierarchy, and equality (198). Lebow defines fairness as implying that "goods or benefits should go to those who have done the most to produce them or, alternatively, to those who need them the most" whilst equality signifies "an even distribution, or alternatively, equal opportunities to acquire benefits" (190). "In the course of the last 150 years" the idea of equality has expanded. However, "the principle of fairness has not disappeared, and contemporary international society reveals a marked tension between it and the principle of equality" (203).

National Identities and International Relations is impressive both in terms of rigor and richness. The introduction announces a wide collection of themes and subthemes that will emerge throughout the book, some to which, such as justice, we only return to in the conclusive chapter. Chapters 2 and 3 form a pair, making an overarching call for the need to distinguish peoples' identities and identification processes from national ones. Chapter 5 tells the reader a thought-provoking story that almost constitutes a separate contribution, about the construction of national identities domestically through national (and, at times, nationalistic) narratives, territories, and allegiances. Chapters 4 and 6 work well together: each in their own way, they deal with the question of hierarchies in international society. Finally, chapter 7 brings together many of the themes of the introduction and locates the debate (at the risk of reducing Lebow's wide-reaching claims) to challenges posed to constructivism.

Some of the themes, such as justice, appear in circle: first in the introduction and then in the conclusion. There is, however, one question that is discussed as a starting point and, somehow surprisingly, does not emerge again. This is the "society versus system" (13) distinction that the author posits among the various starting points of the book. Lebow argues for the term 'society' (domestic, regional, or international) because, he claims, the concept of 'system' suggests a predominance of structure over agency. Christian Reus-Smit has made the point that 'system', just like 'society', is inherently social.[6] A brief discussion as to why this might not be the case would have been useful, especially since Lebow insists that, "the application of system to international relations is pure metaphor" (14). Collapsing the distinction between the two English School terms 'world' and 'international' society, Lebow argues that, "it is more accurate to consider international relations (…) as taking place within societies" (14).

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[6] Christian Reus-Smit, *Individual Rights and the Making of the International System* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 17.

Why, though, is this distinction so important here? Whilst navigating through the book and its varied illustrations, the 'society vs. system' divide is somewhat unclear. Even if the variety of actors and positions within international society is repeatedly stressed, at times, 'international society' appears almost to be depicted as a single entity capable of acting. Possibly a mere linguistic effect, this could nevertheless be disorientating in a book that has pluralism and diversity as its *leitmotivs*.

National Identities and International Relations is a rigorous and powerful work that will be profitable to constructivists but also to other scholars of national identities, hierarchies, and international society. It is concise yet rich, clear yet complex. Richard Ned Lebow advances powerful theoretical explanations for the study of the multiplicity of national identities that, often, rely on binaries that more or less collapsed: state/individual, difference/similarity, hierarchy/equality, international/domestic, friend/enemy, *etc*. In this way, Lebow posits central themes for reflection, on all fronts: from the study of emotions, to the question of change through connections between the domestic and the international, to the study of hierarchies in international society. At stake, then, is the understanding of the past and present of current orders – be they domestic, regional or international - and the conflicting grounds upon which they lie.

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