Fear, interest and honour: outlines of a theory of International Relations

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I am developing a new paradigm of politics based on the Greek concept of the spirit and applying it to international politics. It is part of a larger project that incorporates this paradigm into a broader theory of international relations, which in turn is nested in a proto-theory of political orders. In this article, I will describe the importance of the spirit for individuals and their organizations, including states, and lay out an approach for its study.

I go back to the Greeks because of their richer understanding of human motives. In his Republic, Socrates identifies three distinct psychic drives: appetite, spirit and reason. Appetite (to epithumētikon) includes all primitive biological urges—hunger, thirst, sex and aversion to pain—and their more sophisticated expressions. The spirit (to thumoeides) is derived from thumos, the organ that is supposed to have roused Homeric heroes to action. Socrates attributes all kinds of vigorous and competitive behaviour to thumos. It makes us admire and emulate the skills, character and positions of people considered praiseworthy by our society. By equaling or surpassing their accomplishments, we gain the respect of others and build self-esteem. The spirit loves honour and victory. It responds with anger to any impediment to self-assertion in private or civic life. It desires to avenge all slight of honour or standing to ourselves and our friends. It demands immediate action, which can result in ill-considered behaviour, but can be advantageous in circumstances where rapid responses are necessary.1 Reason (to logistikon) is the third part of the psyche. It has the capability to distinguish good from bad, in contrast to appetite and spirit, which can engage only in instrumental reasoning. For Socrates, reason has desires of its own: it seeks to understand what makes human beings happy, and to constrain and educate the appetite and spirit to collaborate with it towards that end.2

Since the Enlightenment, philosophers and social scientists have more or less collapsed human drives into appetite and reduced reason to an instrumentality. All existing paradigms of international relations, if not of politics, are rooted in appetite. Following Thucydides, Plato and Aristotle, I maintain that the spirit is present in all human beings and that the need for self-esteem is universal, although

1 Plato's conceptions of the thumos are developed in books V, VIII and IX of the Republic.
2 Plato, Republic, 441c1–2, 441e4, 442c5–6, 580d7–8, 850d11–12.
manifested differently from society to society. International relations is the hardest domain in which to make the case for the spirit as an important, if not, at times, dominant motive. This is because the spirit can express itself only in society, and existing theories of international relations either deny the existence of international society or describe it as relatively thin. The last 150 years of international relations are arguably the most difficult period in which to document the importance of the spirit. Monarchies and their dynastic rivalries gave way to modern states, an increasing number of them democracies. Concomitant with this change, aristocratic and warrior elites were replaced by bureaucrats, lawyers and businesspeople. Philosophers as different as Tocqueville and Nietzsche lamented that modern society had become plebeian, focused on satisfying the most immediate of appetites and devoid of grand projects that fire the imagination and require sacrifice. Has the spirit disappeared from public life as it has from political philosophy and social science?

Honour, standing and security

Even a cursory examination of international relations in this modern period indicates the continuing importance of the spirit. Let us begin with the Cuban missile crisis, one of the key turning points of the Cold War. When President Kennedy was informed that Soviet missile sites had been discovered in Cuba, he exclaimed: 'He [Khrushchev] can’t do this to me!' Most analysts of the crisis have interpreted Kennedy’s anger as a response to the strategic and political dilemmas he suddenly confronted. The national interest and political survival alike demanded that Soviet missiles be kept out of Cuba, but the missile deployment under way could be stopped only by military action or the threat of military action, and either involved enormous risk. There was also a personal dimension to his anger. The Soviet premier had promised the American president through official and informal channels that he would not send missiles to Cuba. Kennedy felt played for a patsy. He was enraged by this slight to his honour, and his first inclination was to avenge himself by attacking the missile sites, thus humiliating Khrushchev. He gradually overcame his anger, and conspired with Khrushchev to allow the Soviet leader to save face by means of a negotiated withdrawal of the missiles.

Standing and reputation subsequently dominated American calculations. Neither Kennedy nor his Defense Secretary considered Soviet missiles in Cuba as much a military as a political threat. A successful Soviet deployment, they reasoned, would confer tremendous prestige on Moscow and its leader, and do equivalent damage to the standing of the United States and its president. The repercussions of a successful challenge would be felt throughout the world, would give heart and courage to pro-communist guerrilla movements, and would undermine the resolve of America’s allies.


Lebow and Gross Stein, *We all lost the Cold War*, ch. 5.
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Concern for standing and reputation was even more apparent on the Soviet side. Khrushchev sent missiles to Cuba to deter an expected American invasion of that island, help redress the overall strategic balance and get even with Kennedy for deploying Jupiter missiles in Turkey. The Jupiters were so vulnerable that they could be used only for a first strike against the Soviet Union or for purposes of intimidation. They infuriated Khrushchev and the Soviet leadership, who interpreted them as the latest in a string of American efforts to humiliate the Soviet Union and deny it the status its military and economic accomplishments warranted. These included repeated drops of weapons and agents into the western provinces of the Soviet Union in the early years of the Cold War, overflights of the Soviet Union by U-2 spy planes ordered by the Eisenhower administration between 1956 and 1962, and the West’s unwillingness to recognize East Germany. On the eve of the missile deployment, Khrushchev told his ambassador to Cuba that ‘The Americans are going to have to swallow this the same way we have had to swallow the pill of missiles in Turkey.’

Resolution of the missile crisis paved the way for detente. Here too, standing was an important motive. Soviet premier Leonid Brezhnev was willing to make substantive concessions in return for American recognition of the Soviet Union as a coequal superpower. When the Soviet economy stagnated, scarce resources were still directed into strategic weapons and delivery systems, and the military more generally. Western analysts explained this behaviour with reference to security concerns or bureaucratic politics. While I would not dismiss these motives, there is considerable evidence that expenditure on the military was intended above all to maintain the Soviet Union’s claim to superpower status. The extent to which this was an important goal in its own right is indicated by the sacrifices Soviet leaders were prepared to make in other areas to maintain a powerful army and state-of-the-art naval and strategic forces. A not insignificant segment of the population of the former Soviet Union laments its passing, in part because it was a great power whose opinions and interests were respected by the global community. Standing is important for individuals and institutions alike, and to the extent that individuals identify with the state—one of the defining characteristics of nationalism—they tend to project many of their emotional needs on their state (as they do with their favoured sports team) and seek vicarious fulfilment through its successes. We tend to associate the goals of honour and standing with dynastic political units, but, as the Cold War indicates, they are at least as important for modern democratic, industrial and post-industrial states.

The origins of the First World War offer more support for this thesis. Numerous explanations have been advanced of how that conflict came about, many of which stress the security dilemmas of the great powers, their offensive military strategies or domestic problems that encouraged aggressive foreign policies. What these

6 Lebow and Gross Stein, We all lost the Cold War, chs 2, 3.
7 Lebow and Gross Stein, We all lost the Cold War, pp. 152–6.

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explanations have in common is their emphasis on security—of states, leaders, ruling elites or organizations—as the overriding motive of key actors in this drama. Most ignore concern for standing, or subsume it within security. A few historians and political scientists insist, with reason, that standing was a key goal in its own right, and responsible for many of the policies that escalated interstate tensions in the first two decades of the twentieth century. These include the scramble for colonies, the German naval buildup and challenge to France in Morocco, Italy’s war with the Ottoman Empire and de facto move away from the Triple Alliance, and Russian support for south Slav nationalism. None of these initiatives was motivated by security, and indeed arguments could have been made—and in some cases were made at the time—that they were damaging to national security. Some of the key decisions that led to war in the July 1914 crisis, among them Russian support for Serbia and the British decision to intervene once it became clear that Germany would violate Belgian neutrality, were also motivated largely, or in part, by concern for standing and honour. A compelling argument can be made that in the absence of the competitive quest for standing, a war between the great powers in Europe in the early decades of the twentieth century would have been much less likely.

Consider a contemporary case: opposition to the American occupation of Iraq. The Bush administration expected its forces to be hailed as liberators, and they were initially welcomed by at least some Iraqis. The Americans had no plans for a rapid transfer of power to an independent Iraqi or international authority. They assumed a tight hold of the reins of civilian authority, headed by an American puppet exile with little, if any, local support. American forces increasingly came to be regarded as an army of occupation. Violent resistance triggered equally violent reprisals and set in motion an escalatory spiral that further cast the Americans in the role of occupiers. Insensitive to the needs of the spirit, American authorities belatedly attempted to satisfy Iraqi appetites by restoring electricity, providing gasoline and diesel fuel, rebuilding schools and hospitals, and doing their best to provide security. These programmes—which the Bush administration repeatedly cited as evidence of its goodwill and commitment—did nothing to placate the spirit, and were run in a manner that dramatically highlighted Iraqi subordination. The same was true of dilatory American efforts to create an independent Iraqi governing authority and repeated public insistence that Washington would continue to have the last word on all important matters. Interviews with Iraqis from all walks of life indicated fury at their perceived insubordination. One respondent angrily admitted that Saddam may have killed thousands of Iraqi civilians, and the Americans only hundreds; but the American occupation was still intolerable, as he

10 Avner Offer, ‘Going to war in 1914: a matter of honor?’, Politics and Society 23, June 1995, pp. 213–9, is an important exception.
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put it, because ‘Saddam was one of ours’. Such affronts probably would have aroused anger anywhere, but in a traditional culture where questions of standing and honour for the most part take precedence over satisfaction of appetites they elicited particular fury.

These several examples highlight the importance of standing as a powerful motive for individuals, organizations and states. They indicate that at the inter-state level, standing and security are distinct, albeit often related, motives. In some situations, standing and security are diametrically opposed. Colonies and navies were symbols of great power status in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and pursued by France and Germany at the expense of their security. The French challenge to Britain in Egypt and the Sudan provoked a crisis in 1898 that threatened to embroil France in war with Britain, a country the French should have been wooing—as they later did—to provide a counterweight to Germany. German construction of a blue-water navy precluded an Anglo-German alliance, actively sought by British Foreign Secretary Joseph Chamberlain at the turn of the century, and, by threatening Britain, pushed it towards accommodation and military cooperation with France. On other occasions, standing was valued in its own right by leaders of both superpowers, but was also considered important for their security. This was true for American and Soviet policy-makers throughout much of the Cold War.

The third logical possibility—leaders sacrificing standing for security—is more problematic. As standing in the international community has traditionally been based on military and economic power, and as security policies have the goal of preserving or increasing that power, it is difficult to find situations where leaders believed their standing would suffer from policies designed to enhance their security. One example from the missile crisis is Robert Kennedy’s objection to a pre-emptive air strike against the Soviet missile sites in Cuba on the grounds that it would be a Pearl Harbor in reverse. Eight years earlier, President Eisenhower had ruled out the use of atomic bombs in Vietnam to save the French garrison surrounded at Dien Bien Phu; one of the reasons he gave was that the United States could not afford to use a nuclear weapon against Asians again. For both men, concern to avoid loss of standing and the expected political costs associated with that loss ruled out policies that other officials were advocating in the name of national security.

The Bush administration came down on the other side of the question. The President authorized the Department of Defense to hold people swept up in the invasion of Afghanistan at the American base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, indefinitely, without charging them with any crime and without access to legal counsel. The White House subsequently allowed the CIA to ‘render’ prisoners to

12 Interviews conducted and quote provided by Prof. Shawn Rosenberg, University of California at Irvine.
15 For detailed information, see Human Rights Watch, http://www.hrw.org/doc/?t=usa_gimno, last accessed 12 April 2006.
other countries where information might be extracted from them by methods that would be illegal in the United States. Both practices, critics charged, were contrary to international law and practice and to the core values of American democracy. They also doubted that any useful information could be extracted by means of torture. The administration insisted that the security benefits of these practices were real and outweighed any loss of reputation they might incur, though it did try—unsuccessfully, as it turned out—to keep the export of terrorist suspects a dark secret. Administration officials have made similar, and equally disputed, claims with regard to email and telephone surveillance without court warrants. Though it is still too early to tell, it is reasonable to suppose that American initiatives associated with the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq have led to a precipitous loss of standing among allies and third parties and will have important, long-term implications for the ability of the United States to influence these countries on a wide range of issues.

The problem of standing

Standing is a social construction. First in the European political system, and then in the international one, it has been achieved primarily on the basis of military and economic power. Revolutionary regimes (e.g. the United States, the French Republic, the Soviet Union, the People’s Republic of China) unsuccessfully claimed standing on alternative criteria, and ultimately sought it on the basis of their material capabilities. Multiple challenges to these criteria for claiming standing are now under way, raising the prospect that we are in the early stages of a reformulation of the nature of and criteria for standing. Evidence for this assertion is drawn from the world wide negative reactions to the US–UK invasion of Iraq and the justifications for UN Security Council seats put forward by Japan, India, Brazil and Germany, most of which are based on claims that have nothing to do with military power. Alternative criteria for standing have been most fully articulated by Canada and some of the states of the European Union, and by Iran and Islamic fundamentalists in the Middle East. If any of these conceptions gain support—they already have substantial appeal on a regional basis—the consequences for the goals of actors and the nature of influence will be profound. Historically, goals and influence are closely related. To the extent their resources permit, political units tend to adapt to their environment, and gravitate towards those levers of influence they consider most effective. Over time, such a process can shift the nature of the goals they seek, as particular means of influence are more conducive to certain goals and inappropriate to others. Shifts in goals can transform the identities of actors, and, in consequence, the character of the system.

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The international arena can be considered a site of contestation where different actors—by no means all of them states—claim standing on the basis of diverse criteria. They often invest considerable resources in publicizing and justifying their claims in efforts to gain support. I do not know of any surveys that have asked questions specifically aimed at ranking the prestige of states, or tracking how these rankings might have changed over time. There is, however, strong evidence for a precipitous decline in American standing since the end of the Cold War. Public opinion polls indicate that respect for the United States has plummeted by reason of its unilateralist foreign policies and military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. This decline is independent of perceptions of American power, which remain high, and indicates the extent to which criteria other than military and economic power have become important. This shift in attitudes, documented among elites and public opinion in almost all regions of the world, may help explain why the United States may be the most powerful state the world has ever witnessed, yet finds it increasingly difficult to translate that power into influence.

We can conjure up quite contrasting visions of the future. If current attempts to restructure the basis of standing fail, military power is likely to remain the principal criterion for ranking states. If there is a shift in the nature of standing, and especially one that delegitimizes the use of force for anything but the most immediate defensive purposes, or in humanitarian intervention with the backing of large segments of the world community, America’s standing—in the absence of a major reorientation of the country’s foreign policy—will continue to decline.

The Iraq war is likely to play an important role in determining the nature of standing. Military power is likely to be validated, and the United States to remain at the top of the international pecking order, to the extent that it can impose its preferences on Iraq and the Middle East more generally. This was certainly the expectation of key policy-makers in the Bush administration, who recognized that the greatest comparative advantage of the United States was its powerful and technologically sophisticated military instrument. They counted on Operation Shock and Awe to soften up Iraqi resistance and impress a watching world with the ease with which US and British ground forces could go on to topple Saddam Hussein and install a puppet regime in Baghdad. They expected other countries to bandwagon, and Iran, Saudi Arabia, Palestine and North Korea to become more pliant. None of this happened, in part because of Washington’s flawed political and military strategy, but more fundamentally because of the difficulty of imposing one’s will on an occupied country—especially when its occupier is isolated politically and its internal adversaries are in receipt of outside physical and moral support. When a future generation of international relations theorists looks back on the Iraq war, they may see it as a decisive turning point in international history, as the beginning of a post-Clausewitzian era in which it became all but impossible to use

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force to achieve political goals by bending or breaking the will of an adversary.

Existing theories of international relations do not ask questions of this kind, nor are they capable of answering them. They have impoverished conceptions of human motives, and either do not address the question of standing or subordinate it to security. They fail to recognize the diversity of goals that states and their leaders seek, or how the hierarchy of goals can change within states or across cultures and epochs, and how goals and means are influenced by the robustness of regional and international societies and their conceptions of standing. These are questions pertinent to international relations, not just to foreign policy, because they influence, even perhaps determine, the character of the system.

The spirit tends to express itself in a negative way when threatened. Affronts to the integrity or independence of actors accordingly arouse anger and resistance. This phenomenon helps to sustain the Iraqi insurgency, as it does Palestinian opposition to Israel’s occupation of the West Bank. More positive expressions of the spirit require a relatively robust society. To achieve standing, there must be some consensus about how it is won and lost, formal or informal rules for making this determination, and actors or institutions responsible for this task. Standing can be attained within groups and organizations, and the incentive to do so can be exploited by leaders to advance their political goals. Hamas and other groups that have sponsored suicide bombings have publicized the names of successful bombers, paid stipends to their families and encouraged young people to lionize them.19 Society has always been most problematic at the regional and international levels, but it has often been thick enough, especially at the regional level, to allow, and even regulate, competition for standing among participating units. This was certainly true in fifth- and fourth-century BCE Greece, and at various periods of Indian and modern European history.

Appetite can be satisfied outside society. In ancient times, raids and brigandage were accepted ways of procuring wealth and women. Affluence and sex are acquired differently within society, and the former, if not the latter, can be pursued and enjoyed more effectively when actors understand and adhere to a common set of rules or norms. Modern industrial economies are distinguished by mechanical sources of power and the division of labour, both of which, as Adam Smith was among the first to observe, permit more efficient production and wealthier societies.20 These developments occur only in societies that are physically secure, where contracts are protected by laws and courts, and where there are no unreasonable barriers to raw materials, labour and markets. Economists maintain that efficiency and overall wealth are further facilitated by the extension of these conditions beyond the confines of individual political units.


20 For a contemporaneous and somewhat jaundiced account of the social consequences of the division of labour, see Adam Smith, An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations, ed. Edwin Cannan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), ch. 1.
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The problem of order

As the degree of order and its character determine the character of politics, any theory of international relations must be rooted in a broader theory of society. Existing paradigms and theories within them are inadequate in this regard. Realism all but denies the existence of society at the international level, and realist theories generally treat the character of international relations as universal, timeless and unchanging. Liberalism recognizes a strong two-way connection between the character of state actors and the nature of their relationships; but it says little or nothing about what shapes the character of actors or how they evolve, and, moreover, is restricted to one historical epoch. Constructivism emphasizes the decisive role of society in constituting actors and shaping their identities, but has as yet failed to produce a full-blown theory of international relations. Marxism links society and international relations in a more comprehensive manner, because it is fundamentally a theory of society. It nevertheless fails in its accounts of history and of international relations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

As politics and society are inseparable, the first requirement of a good theory of international relations is that it provide a theory of society, or at least those aspects of it most relevant to the character and evolution of politics at the state, regional and international levels. This is a daunting task. It also involves something of a Catch-22, because understandings of society and politics presuppose each other, at least in part. Their codependency harks back to a paradox that troubled Greek philosophers of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. If true knowledge is holistic—and I believe it is—we need to know everything before we can know anything. Plato developed his theory of a priori knowledge to get around this paradox. He posited a soul that had experienced multiple lives in the course of which it learned all the forms. Knowledge could be recovered with the help of a dialectical 'midwife' who asks appropriate questions.21 Thucydides pioneered a more practical strategy: he nested his analysis of the Peloponnesian War in a broader political framework, which in turn was embedded in an account of the rise and fall of civilization. By this means, the particular could be understood—as it had to be—by reference to the general. Knowledge, once retrieved and transcribed, could become 'a possession for all time'.22 I hope to emulate Thucydides—certainly not in writing a possession for all time, but in explaining the particular with reference to the general. I offer my theory of international relations as a special case of a theory of political order. Both theories are embedded in an understanding of the historical evolution of society.

Of necessity, then, my project has a double theoretical focus: political order and international relations. As each theory is implicated in the other, a simple linear approach is out of the question. I can neither formulate a theory of political order and extend it to international relations, nor develop a theory of international relations and base a theory of political order on it. I adopt a more complicated,

21 Plato, Meno, 86b1–2, and Cratylus, 400c.
22 Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, 1.22.4. For an account of this framework, see Richard Ned Lebow, The tragic vision of politics: ethics, interests and orders (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), chs 3, 4, 7.
layered strategy. I begin with the problem of order, and propose a framework for its study, but not a theory. This framework provides the scaffolding for a theory of international relations. As I noted at the outset, I develop a paradigm of politics based on the spirit and apply it to international relations. I subsequently intend to integrate this paradigm into a more comprehensive theory of international relations. I will ultimately draw on my theory to refine our understanding of order. Like the calculus, such a series of approximations can bring us closer to our goal, if never actually there.

Do we need another grand theory?

Social scientists have been working away at the problem of order for a long time—though none of them, to my knowledge, has analysed it in terms of Plato’s and Aristotle’s categories. Scholars have worked from the bottom up, tackling small and more manageable pieces of the puzzle, and from the top down, in the form of grand theories in the tradition of Hegel and Marx. Both approaches are valuable, and it is arguable that the former would be much more difficult to do in the absence of the latter. Grand theories establish research agendas that enumerate the more discrete questions that scholars attempt to answer. They are also responsible for many of the frameworks and concepts that shape this research.

The heyday of grand theories in the social sciences was in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For scientific and normative reasons they became an increasingly disreputable enterprise. They ignored the extent to which their concepts and premises were the products of specific historical circumstances. They devalued agency and individuality. Wittgenstein and Feyerabend in philosophy, Benedict and Geertz in anthropology, and Mills in sociology all sought to replace such theories with local and contingent understandings. Post-modernism is even more hostile to grand theories. Jean-François Lyotard defines post-modernism as ‘incredulity toward meta-narratives’ and the idea of progress they encode. He calls upon scholars to replace them with open-ended, multicultural, relativistic, non-judgemental accounts.23 Some of the opponents of grand theories (e.g. Feyerabend, Kuhn and Foucault) have been accused of favouring a relativism that borders on incoherence. Quentin Skinner notes with irony that some of the writers (e.g. Wittgenstein, Foucault, Derrida) most opposed to theory have themselves authored such theories.24 Other figures, like Althusser, Habermas and Rawls, returned quite self-consciously to the project of grand theory in the 1960s and 1970s.

Many early modern and Enlightenment figures, and all nineteenth-century grand theories, generally assumed both epistemological and social—historical progress. Reason would lead us to a better understanding of the human condition and the course of history. The future would be better than the present, and understanding the course of history would help bring a better world into being. Marxism is the


quintessential example of such a theory, but many modern thinkers—Locke, Kant and Hegel among them—were optimists in this sense. Nietzsche broke with this tradition. To the extent that he envisaged an ‘end to history’, it took the form of cultural desolation. Two world wars and the Holocaust sounded the death knell of philosophical optimism, and appeared to many to confirm Nietzsche’s view of history. Post-structuralists like Foucault and Derrida rejected the Enlightenment ‘project’ and its progressive narrative of history as a defunct and dangerous fiction.25

Epistemological optimism, which reached its high-water mark in prewar Popperian neo-positivism, has also been seriously eroded. Hermeneutic approaches have made great inroads. They stress the importance of understanding and self-reflection, which constitute a kind of knowledge that is not described by science. Theory is limited in a double sense: it cannot possibly encompass all there is to know; and it is undermined by self-reflection, which leads people to remake their worlds, and by doing so to invalidate any social laws that previously described their practices.26 Hermeneutics has reduced epistemology to a subset of knowledge; but, as Rorty has argued, it is not unalterably opposed to epistemology.27 It rejects all privileged standpoints, but is not relativistic. North American neo-positivism, well entrenched in economics and political science, seems the only outpost of neopositivist social science.

I appreciate both objections to grand theory. The post-Second World War disillusionment with the Enlightenment represents a predictable response to the horrors of that conflict, recurrent episodes of ethnic cleansing and genocide, the threat of nuclear annihilation most recently associated with the Cold War, and the ever more real possibility of environmental catastrophe. Like all historical moments, it is a unique one, not a privileged position from which to make objective judgements. There was probably more pessimism at the end of the Thirty Years War, yet within a century it gave way to the extraordinary optimism of the Enlightenment. One cannot rule out a similar reversal in the future, given the dependence of the moods and practices of philosophy and social science alike on developments in broader society. There are nevertheless sound epistemological reasons for questioning meta-narratives of progress. Even if they rely on a dialectic as their mechanism to move history forwards, it is always through a series of progressive stages and towards a predetermined telos that represents an end to history. All grounds for judging one epoch or socio-economic order as superior to another are arbitrary.

Grand theories can be purged of normative assumptions and teloi. We can describe changes in human societies, and their organizing principles, without

embedding judgements about which societies are superior, more conducive to justice or better able to meet human needs. We can even incorporate a concept of ‘development’ (although not of ‘progress’) in our analysis without smuggling in normative assumptions, if by development we mean nothing more than increasing complexity. The theory of evolution understands development in this way. In the course of the past few decades, biologists and other serious students of the subject have moved away from the longstanding portrayal of evolution as the upward ascent of life to the pinnacle of Homo sapiens to recognition of it as a process not driven by any purpose and not leading to any particular end. Evolution is the quintessential theory of process, and the appropriate model for the kind of theory I have in mind.

Post-modernists also oppose grand theory on the grounds that it is inimical to freedom, self-definition and choice because it imposes analytical categories on societies and their members and, by doing so, creates or strengthens pressures on them to conform to these archetypes. Many social scientists understand that neither typologies nor propositions can possibly capture the diversity of behaviour and beliefs. Such formulations do not, of necessity, deny agency, although most theories that rely on so-called structures to do their heavy lifting have strong incentives to downplay the role of actors. I am sensitive both to the need for organizing principles and to the ability of actors to transcend them. This is one of the reasons why my foundational concepts are based on the Greek understanding of the psyche. It generates a useful set of ideal types. As is true of all Weberian ideal types, they do not describe real individuals or societies, which contain elements of all three ideal-type worlds I describe. My theory celebrates diversity and explores its consequences for both order and agency. It derives its analytical power from changes in the distribution of the three motives associated with the psyche, their consequences for order at the individual, societal, regional and international levels, and the implication of this for interactions across these levels of aggregation.

Why international relations?

International relations is clearly the hardest and most interesting case for any theory of political order. Does it make sense to begin a study of order at the international level? Why not approach it at the less complex levels of the individual or the group? Plato opted for this strategy; he develops a theory of individual order in the Republic, which he then extends to society. Thucydides uses a roughly similar formulation to bridge individual, polis and regional levels of order. Modern psychology also starts with the individual, and progresses to group and mass behaviour. I do something similar, starting with the individual and working my way up to international society and system. Following the Greeks, I contend that the dynamics of order are more or less the same at every level. I nevertheless emphasize different kinds of challenges to order at different levels of social aggregation, and see different resources available for coping with them. The most important divide is between groups and societies on the one hand and nations
and international relations on the other. They differ with respect to the overlap between legal and social norms, the extent to which behaviour conforms to norms of both kinds, and the nature of the mechanisms that can be used to encourage or enforce conformity. In developing his concept of organic solidarity, Durkheim observes, and subsequent research tends to confirm, that legal and social norms are more in accord, and informal mechanisms of social control more effective, in smaller and less developed societies (e.g. villages and towns), where the division of labour is relatively simple. Moral disapproval of deviance is also more outspoken in these settings, and a powerful force for behavioural conformity. So too is tolerance of deviance when it is understood as closing ranks against outside interference. On the whole, however, tolerance of deviance varies directly with the division of labour; it is most pronounced in larger and more complex social systems. Order is more difficult to achieve and sustain at higher levels of social aggregation.

Regional and international orders are particularly challenging because they are likely to have competing, rather than reinforcing, norms, and more glaring contradictions between norms and behaviour. In these orders, moral outrage is generally a strategy of the weak, and is frequently associated with agents who are not even recognized as legitimate actors. Some striking instances aside—among them, the boycott of South Africa to end apartheid, and the Montreal Protocol and subsequent agreements to ban chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and restore the ozone layer—moral suasion only occasionally serves as a source of social control or catalyst for change. As informal mechanisms of control are more important than formal ones in domestic societies, their relative absence—and not the absence of central authority, as realists insist—may be the defining characteristic of the international society and system. The lack of normative consensus, paucity of face-to-face social interactions and the greater difficulty of mutual surveillance all but preclude effective social control at the regional and international levels. That we observe any degree of order at these levels is truly remarkable, and makes it a particularly interesting puzzle.

Regional and international orders are set apart by another phenomenon: the human tendency to generate social cohesion by creating distinctions between ‘us’ and ‘others’. The research of Tajfel and others on ‘entativity’ suggests this binary may be endemic to all human societies. It was first conceptualized in

28 Regional orders come in between and display considerable variance. Regional order in Europe more closely resembles a domestic society, whereas regional orders in the Middle East or South Asia—to the extent that we can even use the term ‘order’—more closely resemble international relations. Thucydides and Plato distinguished Greece from the rest of the ancient world on the basis of its cultural unity, which led to a different structure of relations among its political units.


30 Brian Lavery, in ‘Scandal? For an Irish parish, it’s just a priest with a child’, New York Times, 22 Jan. 2003, p. A6, describes local support for a 73-year-old Roman Catholic priest who fathered the child of a local school teacher and unwillingness to talk about it to representatives of outside media. The local bishop was also supportive and did not remove the priest from his pastoral duties.


the eighteenth century in response to an emerging pattern in western Europe of promoting domestic cohesion and development by means of foreign conflict. Immanuel Kant theorized that the ‘unsocial sociability’ of people draws them together into societies, but leads them to act in ways that break them up. He considers this antagonism innate to our species, and an underlying cause of the development of the state. Warfare drove people apart, but their need to defend themselves against others compelled them to band together and submit to the rule of law. Each political unit has unrestricted freedom in the same way individuals did before the creation of societies, and hence is in a constant state of war. The price of order at home is conflict among societies. The ‘us’ is maintained at the expense of ‘others’.33

Hegel built on this formulation, and brought to it his understanding that modern states differed from their predecessors in that their cohesion does not rest so much on pre-existing cultural, religious or linguistic identities as it does on the allegiance of their citizens to central authorities who provide for the common defence. Citizens develop a collective identity through the external conflicts of their state and the sacrifices it demands of them. ‘States’, he writes in ‘The German Constitution’, ‘stand to one another in a relation of might’, a relationship that ‘has been universally revealed and made to prevail’. In contrast to Kant, who considers this situation tragic, Hegel rhapsodizes about the life of states as active and creative agents that play a critical role in the unfolding development of the spirit and humankind. Conflict among states helps each to become aware of itself by encouraging self-knowledge on the part of citizens. It can serve an ethical end by uniting subjectivity and objectivity and resolving the tension between particularity and universality.34

International relations as a zone of conflict and war was further legitimized by the gradual development of international law and its conceptualization of international relations as intercourse among sovereign states. The concept of sovereignty created the legal basis for the state and the nearly unrestricted right of its leaders to act as they wish within its borders. It also justified the pursuit of national interests by force beyond those borders so long as its application was in accord with the laws of war. Sovereignty, first popularized in the sixteenth century, is a concept with diverse and even murky origins. At that time, more importance was placed on its domestic than international implications. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century jurists and historians, many of them Germans influenced by Kant and Hegel (e.g. Heeren, Clausewitz, Ranke, Treitschke), developed a narrative about sovereignty that legitimized the accumulation of power by central governments and portrayed the state as the sole focus of a people’s economic, political and social life. Without


empirical justification, they described the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia as ushering in a novel, sovereignty-based international political order. The ideology of sovereignty neatly divided actors from one another, and made the binary of ‘us’ and ‘others’ appear a natural, if not progressive, development, conferring a similar status on conflict and warfare among states. This binary was reflected at the regional level in the concept of the European ‘system’, which initially excluded Russia and the Ottoman Empire as political and cultural ‘others’. There was no concept of the ‘international’ until the late eighteenth century, and its development reflected and facilitated the transformation of the European system into an international one in the course of the following century. Here too, sharp distinctions were made, initially between the European ‘us’ and Asian and African ‘others’, most of them societies not yet organized along the lines of the European state. The antagonism that Kant describes reasserted itself at the regional and international levels.

Twentieth-century international relations theory took shape against the background of the Westphalia myth, which became foundational for realists. Their writings made interstate war appear the norm, and enduring cooperation an anomaly that required an extraordinary explanation. They plucked lapidary quotes out of context from Thucydides, Machiavelli and Hobbes to lend authority to their claims that the international arena was distinct from the domestic one and that anarchy and warfare were its norm. Watered-down versions of the realist worldview have come to dominate the policy communities on a nearly worldwide basis. Sovereignty and untrammelled pursuit of the national interest revealed themselves to be mutually constitutive. They are also in part self-fulfilling, as foreign policies based on narrow constructions of self-interest, made possible by the legal edifice of sovereignty, appear to confirm realist depictions of international relations and the fundamental differences they assert exist in politics within states and between them. Writing in the mid-1960s, before the emergence of constructivism, Martin Wight lamented that the realist project precluded any serious theorizing about international society. The ‘theory of the good life’, he observed, is applicable only to orderly societies, and realists framed the international arena as a ‘precontractual state of nature’, where no real theory is possible. Within this framework, the most theorists could do was to describe patterns of interaction among units.

If the challenge of studying order at the international level is intriguing, the prospect of doing so is a little less daunting than it used to be. There has been mounting criticism of ‘us’/‘other’ dichotomies, and of the false, or at least exaggerated, binary constructed by historians, jurists and realists between domestic and international politics. Important differences between politics at these levels

36 Bartelson, *A genealogy of sovereignty*, ch. 5.
nevertheless remain, and between both of them and individual behaviour. One of the key insights of the Enlightenment, since elaborated by social science, is the extent to which systems produce outcomes that cannot be predicted or explained by knowledge about the actors that constitute the system. It is nevertheless impossible, as the failure of neo-realism has made abundantly clear, to build good theories solely on the basis of system-level characteristics and processes.

A wise scholar might be tempted to stop here. There are, however, compelling reasons to forge ahead. The most powerful one is normative. As I noted at the outset, justice is best served by an ordered world, but one that must be pliable enough to allow, if not encourage, the freedom, choice and overall development of actors. No existing order can be considered just, but many domestic orders—social and political—come closer to meeting the conditions in which this might become possible than do regional orders or the international system. Failed states (e.g. Somalia, Afghanistan, Haiti) and the international system as a whole are undeniably the most anarchical kinds of political systems, and the most in need of our attention, practical as well as theoretical. Understanding both levels of ‘order’ in comparison to other levels can provide insights that cannot be gained by studying them in isolation. Given the connection between theory and practice, it is important to create an alternative narrative that lends additional support to those scholars and practitioners who are attempting to move beyond narrow concepts of sovereignty and understandings of regional and international relations that assume that war is an unavoidable fact of life. For intellectual, ethical and practical reasons alike, we need to pursue our investigations even if our answers are partial, tentative and almost certain to be superseded.

Overview of the argument

My theory of international relations is based on a simple set of assumptions about human motives. Following the Greeks, I posit spirit, appetite and reason as fundamental drives with distinct objects or ends. I describe the different characteristics of spirit-, appetite- and reason-based worlds for individuals, societies, and regional and international political systems. As the three drives are always present—along with, often, fear as well—real societies are mixed worlds that combine multiple motives in varying degrees. They are also likely to be lumpy, in that the mix of motives differs among the units or regions that make up the system.

The most stable and just individuals and societies are those in which reason is able to constrain and educate spirit and appetite to work with it to achieve a happy life. Such a state of balance is uncommon among individuals, rarer still among the societies in which they live, and hardly ever seen in the regional or international systems in which these societies interact. Imbalance occurs when reason never gains control of the spirit or appetite or subsequently loses control over

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Fear, interest and honour

either. Imbalance is a matter of degree, as is the disorder it brings to individuals or systems. Imbalance is almost always one-sided in the direction of either spirit or appetite.

Individuals, societies, and regional and international systems exist at different levels of social aggregation. They differ in numerous ways, but, again following the Greeks, I treat them as similar for analytical purposes on the grounds that each level of aggregation can fairly be characterized by its mix of motives and degree of balance. This assumption allows me to bridge levels and develop a theory of change that explains movement towards order and disorder in terms of changes in balance and imbalance at the level in question and the ways in which it affects, and is affected by, balance and imbalance at adjacent levels. I offer two types of explanations for balance and imbalance: breakdown of traditional constraints among elite actors; and broader changes associated with modernization and exposure to alternative discourses.

I describe the mechanisms that translate imbalance into social disorder and breakdown. I argue that both spirit-directed and appetite-directed societies are delicately balanced, even when well functioning. Spirit and appetite alike are satisfied through competition, and spirit-driven competition for standing is particularly intense because of its relational nature. When not held in check by reason, competition for either standing or wealth can transgress the accepted constraints and lead to a rapid unravelling of order. Imbalance in the direction of spirit can intensify intra-elite competition to the point where a critical mass of elite actors come to fear that they will be denied standing or even forfeit their lives. This fear becomes paramount when one actor or faction (or state or alliance) appears on the verge of capturing the mechanisms of state (or abusing its power to establish unwanted authority over others) in pursuit of its parochial goals. In these circumstances, violence or warfare may break out, precipitated by a bid for power by one side or pre-emption by the other. Imbalance in the direction of appetite on the part of an elite is likely to lead to both emulation and resentment by other actors. It risks unravelling the social order through widespread violation of nomos and increasing class tensions that ultimately lead to the same kind of fear and responses to it associated with an excess of spirit.

Social orders at every level undergo cycles of consolidation and decline. As it is always easier to enter fear-based worlds than to escape from them, realism is the default social condition. Human history at this level is cyclical, as realists contend. However, there are broader historical trends. Over the span of human existence, societies, which are originally appetite-based, have evolved into spirit-based worlds, and then back into worlds of appetite, but ones that emphasize material well-being at the expense of other appetites. I raise the prospect of further evolution in the form of a return to a spirit-based world that would be not a warrior society, but one with diverse, if still competitive, forms of recognition and standing. This evolution is discontinuous, far from uniform, and driven by neither a single nor a necessarily dialectical process. Breakdowns of existing orders are an essential component, as they make way for change, but also stimulate
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learning (in the form of a renewed commitment to constrain and educate spirit and appetite). Evolution also exploits technological developments, for purposes of building and destroying orders. Although spirit-, appetite- and fear-based worlds have existed in pre- and post-industrial societies, with strikingly similar characteristics, technological, intellectual and social changes have contributed to transitions between them. Future advances in bio- and nanotechnology, and the ways in which they shape our thinking, might be expected to do the same.