



Stefano Guzzini

**Ned Lebow's Method and Philosophy of Science:  
Psychology, Historical Science and Inefficient  
Causation**

**Stefano Guzzini**

PhD, Senior Researcher, Professor  
sgu@diis.dk

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DIIS· Danish Institute for International Studies  
Østbanegade 117, DK-2100 Copenhagen, Denmark

Tel: +45 32 69 87 87

E-mail: diis@diis.dk

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# **Ned Lebow's Method and Philosophy of Science: Psychology, Historical Science and Inefficient Causation**

STEFANO GUZZINI

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Ned Lebow's work is not primarily driven by the philosophy of science. And although he is obviously interested in as clean a control of empirical findings as possible, methods primarily follow the needs of his empirical and theoretical problematiqués and not the other way round. When he looks for coherence between his theory and meta-theory, he is driven by politics, ethics and political philosophy. For this reason, this chapter will develop his positions out of his different agendas rather than imposing an outsider's meta-theoretical grid on his research; or, at least it will not start from there.

I would instead suggest starting from Ned Lebow's impatience with any argument which says that "things had to come" as they did (when wars break out), or "this cannot happen" (such as the peaceful end of the Cold War), in short, the kind of "I could have told you so"-way of making scientific analysis. Annoyed, at times bored and often exasperated by those easy and ready-made explanations, he would look for the incongruities in personal decisions, the unintended effects of human interactions, and the unexpected twists that history can take. This basic intuition produces a central tension on which he has increasingly come to focus in his research and which features prominently the question of the status of (possible) science. On the one hand, such an emphasis on the contingent and the non-deterministic would make him skeptical of attempts to reduce the human world to the behaviorist outlook fashionable then and now; instead, the specifically 'human' and 'social' pushes his interest towards historical explanations and the philosophical underpinnings of such indeterminacy. On the other hand, there is no doubt that he wishes to stay within a "social science", albeit more "humanistically" conceived, if by this we refer to both the ethical ideal of humanism and the analytical ideal which looks for a more holistic understanding of knowledge.

The two sides run parallel. His scientism takes inspiration from (political) psychology. But whereas many of his peers tried to link it up to cognitive behaviorism (and perceptual input-output analysis), his skepticism about such generalizing reductions made him look for a link to Weberian understanding. Schemes and frames are not just important for being cognitive devices, but for

their cultural content that predisposes to (excluding) particular understandings, hence reasons and actions. Lebow is a student of the mind and of culture at the same time. And yet, although he will find some constant features in human motives, they do not produce theories of regularity, but only set off some paths of “singular causation”. To top it all, his research does not stop at this kind of historical/cultural psychology, since he is equally unwilling to reduce our quest for knowledge to its empirical (or empiricist) side alone: behind lurks the philosopher or theorist whose ontological and ethical concerns drive the research. To put it briefly: Lebow is unwilling to give up the search for some form of regularity only because many have pushed it beyond what the ontology of the social world can bear (Hall 2003); and yet, such regularity can only ground a non-positivist science which can caution against some mistakes and whose aim is to open- our minds, rather than to close them with general (and generic) answers.

In the first section of this chapter, I will elaborate on the theoretical consequences of his stance. In his profound doubt about the “inevitable”, Lebow opens a series of theoretical black boxes which, according to him, allow for the pernicious analytical shortcuts that construct such inevitability in the first place. This will also inform his theoretical predisposition to combine the study of cognitive processes, the role of motives and motivational explanations, and intersubjective identity processes. A second section will then show how these ontological and theoretical dispositions translate into a philosophy of science that eschews both determinism and contingency at the same time. His social science is historical and interpretivist, but also endorses a form of (singular) causation.

## **1. Opening Black-boxes: Beyond Systemic Theories and Behaviorism**

Lebow targets a first black box which he identifies in those allegedly easy explanations that stay at the macro level of analysis. Similar to those who argue for a need to make case studies and process tracing, he is bothered by the problem of “equifinality”. This refers to the fallacy of inferring from a correctly hypothesized outcome that a theory has been vindicated. Yet, as long as one has not checked the possible alternative causal paths that could have produced the same outcome, there is no vindication whatsoever. Lebow is highly critical of this macro-level shortcut.<sup>1</sup>

This said, the issue is not that much whether theories are structuralist or individualist, i.e. whether the ultimate dynamic of the theory is driven by the whole or the part. In Lebow’s approach, the *explanatory logic* is structural at times, or at least not reducible to purely individualist approaches. Cognitive processes

<sup>1</sup> It is evident that such a position, which does not double-check as long as the outcome fits, is only acceptable for dominant theories. Challengers need more than to say that they can come to the same result. This partly explains Lebow’s ambivalence towards realism. Although he sees himself heir to its classical tradition (even if redefined), the more realists tend to be smug and/or determinist, the more they become his first and most important target.

are obviously structuralist in their explanatory nature, since they short-circuit agency and perhaps even will. That such structuralist theories are located at an individual *level of analysis* does not change anything related to that matter.

The important point is rather whether any analysis can do without passing through, or indeed without starting from, the individual level of analysis. With some similarity to Weber, Lebow makes it a *sine qua non* that any analysis starts from the individual level of analysis. There is a version of methodological individualism, if by the latter we mean the obligatory starting point at the individual *level of analysis*. Religions, ideologies, etc. may all well exist, but for us to get to know them, we look at individuals and their beliefs. Lebow (arguably just like Weber) uses an individualist methodology while allowing for social ontologies.

This can be nicely exemplified by his first book, which tries to explain the ultimately unsuccessful colonial policy of Britain with regard to Ireland. In that book, he took issue with the plausible and easy thesis that British racism is best explained as a reaction by those classes most affected by modernization processes in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Lebow 1976). But instead of being satisfied with an explanation only because it sufficiently dovetails with the then dominant modernization paradigm and the observed behavior of scapegoating, Lebow wanted to double-check and found it empirically not accurate. Looking for an alternative explanation, he argued that concentrating on macro-economic processes alone missed a crucial component of the analysis. In his reading, racial prejudice was so important and tenacious since it helped to alleviate the tension between metropolitan norms and beliefs, and actual colonial behavior. It stabilized a British self-understanding otherwise in shambles. If the actual behavior was to be justifiable, then some version of the “white lie-syndrome” had to come into place: for example, colonizers were out to save lost souls by missioning, or, in another version, they end up denying that “natives” are subjects to the same norms (“dehumanization”). In the Irish case, the racial prejudice became a way of addressing cognitive dissonance by denigrating the other. Not only did racism become a stereotype, i.e. a socially shared image which is closed, sealed off from change, since any change would upset its ability of dissonance reduction,<sup>2</sup> but this “perceptual prison” (Lebow 1976: 103) predisposed against those very political options that could have saved British colonialism. In other words, it led to an outcome that was both unintended and de facto uncontrolled by British politics. As he writes, “[t]hus the stereotyped image of Irishmen, a concomitant of colonial rule in Ireland, also proved to be a major factor in the undoing of colonial rule. The stereotype reduced dissonance but did so at the expense of an accurate perception of political and social reality in Ireland. It rendered Britain unable to pursue that course most likely to preserve her influence in Ireland” (Lebow 1976: 86). Macro explanations may sound reasonable, but impose more external order

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., chapter 2. Lebow moves from the individual psychological to the collective/discursive level in terms of a homology. See Lebow (1981), p. 198: “Like individuals, nations will distort reality to maintain their self-images”.

on the events than they had (and as he would say later: could have) and may miss the political point of the analysis.

While Lebow asks us not to follow systemic theories which black-box the micro-level by omitting any significant reference to the character and politics of its units (Lebow 2008: 4-5), he does not for this invite us to use rationalist approaches, since they do the same at the micro-level. This may sound counter-intuitive: is rational choice not exactly meant to include more agency by starting from individual choices? Yet if individualist approaches follow a behaviorist rational choice setup, then they end up black-boxing processes at the individual level. Lebow is not against rationalism in general, since, as we will see, he follows a post-Weberian version of it. But he certainly opposes a behaviorist setup which consists in applying a “stimulus-response” scheme to rational choice. Here, given preferences and the mechanism of rational choice translate certain external constraints into behavioral outputs in an automated manner. In this setup, the individual is treated as a “through-put” which we can abstract from since the translation from input to output is done via an externally established rationality. As he writes, “[r]ational choice and other rationalist approaches take individual actors as their unit, but effectively deprive them of meaningful agency by analyzing their behavior as responses to external constraints and opportunities” (Lebow 2014: 4).

Instead, Lebow will open these two black boxes – of the micro-level and of the individual agent – in no less than three ways. The first way is his strong reliance on cognitive psychology, which we have already met above. Systematic non-rational behavior asks for systematic reasons in cognitive processes, which are more reliable guides to understanding behavior than rationality: “Experiments show that mental rules can bear little relationship to formal logic.” (Lebow 1981: 103) The second way is his motivational analysis, which is the core of his theory of action and interaction (usually centered on cooperation or conflict) and of his analysis of world order in his cultural theory of international relations (Lebow 2010). Lebow posits four motives: one emotion, “fear”, and three drives, namely “appetite”, “spirit” (self-esteem), and “reason”. Third, he starts his theory of action from the content of worldviews. Cognitive frames are the “visual and intellectual frameworks that we use to organize the world and our relation to it” (Lebow 2014: 63), and they represent his link to a Weberian understanding where they provide the reasons for action.

Although the relation between these three starting points is not always clear (also when identity enters the fray), an important point to note is that Lebow’s analytical decisions seem mainly driven by his ontological reflections or, if one wishes, by a certain vision of Human Nature. Brain processes and drives are a truly essential component in this ontology, i.e. the entire theoretical building is erected upon these fundamentals. There is, however, no naturalist reduction, or if there is, then of a special kind, since one cannot read behavior out of them. For he insists that humans are not just social animals, able to organize together, compete and collaborate, but cultural animals. It may seem odd to build a *cultural* theory of international relations on the hierarchy of innate human drives, which sounds perhaps as un-cultural an approach as there can be. Yet he does exactly that:

“Psychology enters the picture because I use the variation in the hierarchy and expression of the drives of appetite, spirit and reason as my criteria for distinguishing one culture from another” (Lebow 2008: 119). For him the reason for making culture central to his theory is that culture is central for human beings: by socially *expressing* their motives<sup>3</sup> they constitute culture, just as that culture constitutes the actual expression. His human ontology drives his social theory of action and order, and his humanist ethics (Lebow 2003). It will also prove crucial for his understanding of knowledge and the possibility of science.

## **2. Determinism, Counterfactuals and Causation in the Social World**

Parallel to Lebow’s aversion to black boxes runs his concern about determinism in explanations. And so, when the Cold War came to a peaceful end, he quickly pointed out that the people allegedly in the know had no theoretical means to deal with this change (Lebow 1994; Lebow/Gross Stein 1994, 1995). Earlier, in his second book, the main culprits were those who seem to have known all along that the First World War was inevitable (Lebow 1981: 2-3). He calls this a “creeping determinism”, the tendency towards determinism in the process of retrospection (itself a psychological process). But things could have gone otherwise – thus our need to study the process, the “crisis” (Lebow 1981: 4).

It is important to understand that Lebow does not reach the then quite fashionable research focus on “crisis management” for the same reasons as other psychological approaches in IR. He is certainly interested in using the moment of crisis for taking a uniquely privileged snapshot where psychological explanations can easily feature and undermine a behaviorist rational choice model. But he is also intrigued by the *process* itself. It is not only that certain psychological mechanisms or heuristics predispose perception and misperception and hence induce possibly irrational behavior; it is that events can sequence and concatenate in a way which escapes rational control.

It is here where his review of rationalism is both political and theoretical, as most clearly seen in his relentless critique of deterrence policy and theory during the Cold War (Jervis/ Lebow/Gross Stein 1985; Lebow 1981, 1987). It is political, since the dual challenge of sub-conscious psychology and open historical process makes a strategy primarily based on rational deterrence rather unreliable and potentially dangerous. But it is also theoretical precisely because it exposes the creeping determinism of ex post rationalizations. Mastermind practitioners, whatever they may think, are hardly able to control the social world. Mastermind observers can provide exquisite formal models of the process that seem to fit and yet bear little resemblance to what actually happened.

Lebow’s interest in process increases over time and is part of his focus on

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 73. His use of the term “expression”, which does not reduce behavior to the realization of psychological processes alone, is similar to the use of “genetic expression” in another field, which similarly does not reduce human behavior to mere genetic makeup.



counterfactuals (Lebow 2000, 2010). In order to assess the value of a certain action or event in the concatenation of a historical process, counterfactuals provide a useful heuristic tool. Again, Lebow uses them in a political analysis when devising experiments with observers and in theory when probing causality. Historical events are unique and hence variation is introduced synchronically by comparing with other selected historical episodes or diachronically by imagining other possible historical paths.

His use of counterfactuals can perhaps best be understood when set against a critique mounted by the historian Richard Evans, who is visibly annoyed by what he believes to be the “rage of the day”, i.e. the re-writing of the history of 1914 by introducing changes in the past: “what if” “fantasizing”, as he snipes (Evans 2014a). Two of Evans’ problems with counterfactual history are relevant for our purpose: counterfactuals pretend to save agency against determinism but actually use small changes for then utterly determinist paths, and they encourage a “great man of history” approach and, related, a “Kings and Battles” view of the past.<sup>4</sup> The first critique correctly refers to the fact that any counterfactual paths proceed by a *ceteris paribus* assumption. But Lebow’s book on the events of 1914 shows several possible parallel scenarios, which argues rather for contingency than determinism (Lebow 2014a).

The second critique is more interesting, since Lebow’s focus on psychology and crises indeed tends to privilege “great” individuals. This is not necessarily so, since one could see in individuals simply unwitting “track-shifters” of larger structural forces. But his methodological individualism, which sees in the explanation of behavior its main focus, ends up not just criticizing systemic theories, as mentioned above, but also excluding the role of structuralist explanations if they are not, as psychological theories are, located at the individual level. “I try to demonstrate that my starting assumptions of the three-fold nature of psyche, the different kinds of orders to which they give rise, and the related concept of balance and imbalance, go a long way in accounting for the goals of actors, their approaches to cooperation, conflict and risk, and the causes of order in individuals, societies, and regional and international systems” (Lebow 2008: 113). That contrasts quite strongly with historical approaches focusing on the *longue durée* and its different structural layers and speeds. The latter will indeed find counterfactuals hard to come by, since the process under investigation is much longer and the structural effects less a mere aggregate of individual actions.

Yet, both sides agree that one cannot replace one determinism (about history that “had to come this way”) by another where the same determinacy is now based upon small historical “what-if” changes. The issue is not counterfactuals versus history, but what kind of determination and causality is possible in history. The place given to counterfactuals stands paradoxically both for a general interest in causality and a general unease about causal explanations, since it stresses the chance and contingency of outcomes. The “solution” can neither lie in denying any causality in historical *argument* more than history itself (although the use of

<sup>4</sup> Evans (2014b) has applied some of these in his review of Lebow’s book on 1914.

such historical argument is part of our history) nor in re-imposing determinacy in terms of an efficient causality.

It is therefore not accidental that Lebow was led to take up the issue of causality at length. As before, it is his underlying ontological standpoint which moves the analysis. For him, the social world is open-ended and moves in non-linear ways; and for that ontological reason, a type of Humean causality in terms of constant conjunctions can simply not apply. But then, if Lebow does not give in to the sirens of neo-positivism who lure him into believing that some probabilistic fine-tuning of Hume will do to save regularity, he still has his universals of human needs and emotions, brain processes and motivations to look for some sort of causal explanation short of probabilistic regularity.

Reflection on causality is present as a major interest from early on. It opens his book *Between Peace and War* (Lebow 1981: 1). There, in the discussion between the underlying and immediate causes of war, he upgrades the importance of immediate causes to escape determinacy, but he gives no clear idea on which base the underlying causes are to be founded, something his ontological assumptions will do later.

Later, with his cultural theory and the role of counterfactuals in place, his analysis of causality will explore the space between impossible regularity and pure contingency. He opts for “singular causation” and ‘inefficient causation’. Singular causation follows a post-Weberian scheme where our knowledge, although generalizable to some extent, is used to establish the path towards a certain event and does not start from events and their aggregation to construct laws of regularity. Causation is a means of understanding an outcome and not the end of generalization itself. Out of this he defines singular causation: “we can construct causal narratives about these outcomes, but they cannot be explained or predicted by reference to prior generalizations or narratives” (Lebow 2014b: 6). This refers “to non-repetitive events that appear causal in nature, but cannot be explained by regularities or laws” (Lebow 2014b: 54). And social sciences become a historical science.

Inefficient causation is an instance of singular causation, which, in “its strongest form...hypothesizes a necessary but insufficient condition for a given outcome. Weaker forms of causal claims offer ‘possible’ but insufficient conditions.” Consistent with his earlier analysis on both psychology and historical process, indeterminacy in the analysis is captured through mechanisms both at the individual level (for re-tracing behavior) and at the aggregate level (for the aggregate and sequential effects of interactions). Those mechanisms make (causal) comparisons across the event and outcome possible. In other words, generalization does not happen by inferring from the outcome to another one. The event is an outcome which is not to be understood as a “single case within a universe of cases”. Generalization is rather a transfer of knowledge from one to another causal path, and it happens through the presence of mechanisms and their

comparison.<sup>5</sup>

In general, therefore, no point prediction and also no probability-informed prediction are possible, but only forecasts based on (multiple) scenarios (Lebow 2014b: 154). That is all this kind of causation can yield, but also – and because of this – this is all that the ontology of the social world can yield.

## Conclusion

Opening black boxes and not letting scholars get away with easy shortcuts at the systemic level or in behaviorist psychology is the common thread for Lebow's theorization. His Weber-inspired theory is individualist in its methodology, but not its ontology. It shows several similarities with another Weber-inspired scholar, Raymond Aron. Both have little patience with purely systemic theories, like Morten Kaplan's *System and Process* in Aron's days, or Waltz's later.<sup>6</sup> They prefer theories of action. But in those theories of action, they have little sympathy for understandings of "the" national interest, which only appears unique because it short-circuits the irreducible diversity of motives (Lebow) or of human goals, such as the Hobbesian triad of glory, power and ideas (Aron 1962: chapter 3). Similarly, they are wary of our capacities to control outcomes. Aron's critique of Morgenthau's analysis of power is legend (concentrating more on Morgenthau's political theory, Lebow's (2003: chap. 6) reading is more sympathetic). And both insist with Clausewitz on the impossibility of effectively controlling collective action, such as war (Aron 1976; Lebow 2003, chap. 5). Too much fate in rationality can call in its own *nemesis*. Indeed both could probably agree with Kissinger (for once): "Not for nothing is history associated with the figure of Nemesis, which defeats man by fulfilling his wishes in a different form or by answering his prayers too completely" (Kissinger 1957: 1). Finally, both are classical realists for their sense of the tragedy of history while cautioning against human *hubris*, which can have different reasons, but almost always catastrophic consequences (Lebow 2003; Aron 1993: 741). And if Aron's approach has been dubbed a type of "historical sociology" (Hoffmann 1983: 845). for including the sociological "forces profondes" in his analysis, Lebow's version is probably more a kind of historical psychology, if the latter is very widely defined. But both theories and philosophies of science draw post-Weberian lessons for a *Geisteswissenschaft*, a science of the humanities. And perhaps, as Sheldon Wolin (1981) has argued for Weber, their stance in the philosophy of science is driven by their political theory rather than the other way round.

Besides opening black boxes, Lebow thus surely wants to open minds. It is probably impossible to know whether his legendary impatience (better:

<sup>5</sup> In the end, it is perhaps not entirely clear whether the contingency stems from the open character of the mechanisms themselves prior to their interaction or from the interaction of different mechanisms which produce open outcomes (as in: unintended effects) when, in themselves, they are quite determinist as in Lebow (2008: 518), or both, depending on different historical circumstances.

<sup>6</sup> See respectively: Morton A. Kaplan (1957) and Kenneth N. Waltz (1979).

*insofferenza*) with “closed minds” prompted his research interest in cognitive and interpretative mechanisms that produce such closure or the other way round. In any case, behind his deconstruction of behaviorism and structural determinism lurks not only an ontology of the social world that is open-ended and non-linear, but also an ethics of responsibility that asks us to try our creativity despite the odds – and because of them.

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