Constructing Cause in International Relations

Cause is a problematic concept in social science, as in all fields of knowledge. We organize information in terms of cause and effect to impose order on the world, but this can impede a more sophisticated understanding. In his latest book, Richard Ned Lebow reviews understandings of cause in physics and philosophy and concludes that no formulation is logically defensible and universal in its coverage. This is because cause is not a feature of the world, but a cognitive shorthand we use to make sense of it. In practice, causal inference is always rhetorical and must accordingly be judged on grounds of practicality. Lebow offers a new approach – "inefficient causation" – that is constructivist in its emphasis on the reasons people have for acting as they do, but turns to other approaches to understand the aggregation of their behavior. This novel approach builds on general understandings and idiosyncratic features of context.

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To Steve, a most wonderful cousin/brother for 72 years and Gail, an equally wonderful cousin/sister-in-law, coming up on 42 years

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Acknowledgments

I grappled with the question of cause only tangentially in *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* (2008) and *Forbidden Fruit: Counterfactuals and International Relations* (2012). In both books, and arguably in *Why Nations Fight: The Past and Future of War*, cause resembles the apocryphal 900-pound gorilla in the room, to whom everyone defers but no one mentions. All three works deploy the concept and make substantive causal inferences but never define or interrogate it. I believe it important to work through the notion of cause and its implications, not only because it is important to my own research but because it is perhaps the most fundamental epistemological question in the social sciences. Is cause the cement of the universe, or, as David Hume concluded, mere human artifice often imposed rather crudely on the world to help us make sense of it and get on with our business? I follow Hume in believing it is the latter, and argue that this is why none of our formulations of cause map neatly on to the physical or social worlds. The open-ended character of the social world, the subjective nature of all our conceptions about it, and the reflexivity of its actors confound the Humean search for "constant conjunctions" and compel us to develop thicker understandings of causation. Each of these formulations encounters insuperable obstacles, confronting us with the following conundrum: we require, or want to use, cause to understand the world, but none of our formulations of it are logically consistent and empirically comprehensive. This book is about how we might respond to this problem in the context of international relations.

I would like to thank the many people who inspired or assisted me in working through my approach to cause. Jens Bartelson, Carol Bohmer, Fritz Kratochwil, Dorothy Noyes, Nick Onuf, Stefano Guzzini, and David Lebow each read chapters or a draft of the manuscript and provided useful comments and criticism. Nick emphasized my need to address the problem of mechanisms, and Stefano generously shared his thoughts on the problem, many of which went into the conclusion

of his edited book on geopolitics (*Return of Geopolitics*). David and Fritz, my toughest critics, pushed me on points where arguments were inadequate, unclear, or, in their opinion, wrong. Heikki Patomäki instructed me in the finer points of critical realism. Dartmouth physicists Jim LaBelle and John Thorstensen read and critiqued my treatment of cause in physics, as did my elder son Eli, a mathematician. Jan Hönig and Andrew Latham did the same with my case study of art and the territorial state. I am indebted to three anonymous reviewers, especially the one who provided thirteen single-spaced pages of comments. Once again, John Haslam, now my editor for five books with Cambridge University Press, offered invaluable advice and support.

I began my research in Vienna, while teaching a mini-course on the philosophy of science at the Diplomatische Akademie. It was the ideal venue as it was once the home of the Vienna Circle, whose members and associates contributed so much to our understanding of cause. Markus Kornprobst, my host, ably carries on their tradition of the free and cordial exchange of ideas. I conducted more research in Hanover, New Hampshire, and London, England. The Dartmouth College library has a wonderful collection of books that can actually be found on the shelves where the catalog says they are filed. I did additional research while Centennial Professor at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE).

I did most of the writing in Sweden, where, courtesy of Jens Bartelson, his colleagues, and the National Research Council, I spent the year at the University of Lund as the Olof Palme Professor. The position came with salary, accommodation, interesting colleagues, and no teaching responsibilities. I am doubly grateful to Jens for his enlightening comments on cause and feedback on evolving conceptions over many drinks and dinners during the long Scandinavian winter. I completed the final draft in Wellington, New Zealand, thus tracing almost in reverse the biographical trajectory of Karl Popper from Vienna to New Zealand to London and the LSE.

Final drafts are never final and I made additional revisions and checked copy and page proofs back in London and Cambridge. Having retired from Dartmouth, I am now professor of international political theory in the War Department of King's College London and Bye-Fellow at Pembroke College, University of Cambridge. I am grateful to all three institutions and my colleagues there for encouragement and support.