The Quest for Knowledge in International Relations

What do we mean by theory in international relations? What kinds of knowledge do theories seek? How do they stipulate it is found? How should we evaluate any resulting knowledge claims? What do answers to these questions tell us about the theory project in international relations, and in the social sciences more generally? Lebow explores these questions in a critical evaluation of the positivist and interpretivist epistemologies. He identifies tensions and problems specific to each epistemology, and some shared by both, and suggests possible responses. By exploring the relationship between the foundations of theories and the empirical assumptions they encode, Lebow's analysis enables readers to examine in greater depth the different approaches to theory and their related research strategies. This book will be of interest to students and scholars of international relations theory and the philosophy of social science.

Richard Ned Lebow is Professor of International Political Theory at King's College London and Bye-Fellow of Pembroke College, University of Cambridge. He is author or coauthor of more than forty scholarly books addressing international relations, comparative politics, political theory, political psychology, history, classics, and philosophy of science. Among his recent books are *The Rise and Fall of Political Orders* (Cambridge University Press, 2018) and *Reason and Cause: Social Science in a Social World* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

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How Do We Know?

RICHARD NED LEBOW
King's College London
Pembroke College, University of Cambridge

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To all who seek truth but
are content to live with uncertainty

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Preface

This is a book about international relations theory. It grows out of my long-standing interest in fundamental ontological and epistemological questions central to our quest for knowledge in any field. Only in recent years have people begun to teach courses on this subject. Fritz Kratochwil and I introduced such a seminar at Ohio State in the 1990s, much to the annoyance of a department that warned students against enrolling. Most universities teach methods as a required course, a commitment that reflects the positivist preference for avoiding any examination or questioning of their enterprise and getting on with their research. All methods rest on epistemological foundations – some of them very weak or incomplete and all of them to some degree problematic. Epistemology might be described as the 900-pound gorilla in the room of social science. We need to recognize its presence and give serious attention to the kind of knowledge we seek, how we expect to find it, and how we make truth claims. Methods are often described as a response to the problems we investigate, but even more they reflect our understandings of what constitutes knowledge. The same can be said about the theories we construct, the evidence for which we search, and what we offer as research findings.

Colonels execute many coups. Their middle position in the military hierarchy gives them personal contacts with the generals who run the army and also with the officers beneath them and, sometimes, with the ordinary ranks who must occupy the president's house, the parliament, government ministries, radio and television broadcasting studios, train stations and airports, and central squares if a coup is to succeed. I plan no uprising. The analogy is apt in the sense that I am a member of a generation that resembles colonels in its personal connections with the founders of my field of international relations and also with those younger scholars currently at its forefront.

I entered university in the late 1950s allowing me to study or work with Hans Morgenthau, Harold Lasswell, Raymond Aron, John Herz,

and William T. R. Fox. Along with E. H. Carr, Alfred Zimmern, Margery Perham, Hersh Lauterpacht, Nicholas Spykman, Quincy Wright, and David Mitrany, they are among the most prominent representatives of the first generation of international relations (IR) scholars. Most were born in the last years of the nineteenth century or the first years of the twentieth. They came of age during World War I and struggled to make sense of the rise of communism and fascism, World War II, the Cold War, and decolonization. My generation of IR scholars was born in the late 1930s and early 1940s. It includes such well-known IR scholars as Joseph Nye Jr., Robert Jervis, Robert Keohane, Robert Axelrod, and Janice Stein. We started school during or just after World War II and watched with professional eyes the Cold War, decolonization, acute regional conflicts, nuclear proliferation, the European project, globalization, and the rise of China. Our students and "grand students" are now at the height of their careers. We also knew and worked with important scholars who came of age between the founding generation and our own, people like Karl Deutsch, Martin Wight, Hedley Bull, Susan Strange, Ernest Haas, Kenneth Waltz, Alexander George, Robert Gilpin, Stanley Hoffman, and Ole Holsti. They are now, alas, all deceased.

My cohort is no more important than any other but is uniquely placed in its ability to look backward and forward. We have had personal relationships that span the entire first century of our field. We are accordingly familiar firsthand with the beliefs, expectations, agendas, and accomplishments of those who created IR, their immediate successors, and the two-plus generations that have followed us. I have watched the IR project unfold and heard about what I missed from those in on its beginnings. For better or worse, I am midway into my sixth decade as a university professor, so I have had ample time to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of competing epistemologies and theories.

I worked out my ideas in a seminar entitled "What Is Knowledge?" that I taught in the War Studies Department of King's College London. I am grateful for the questions and comments of my students. I owe thanks to Seán Molloy and Simon Reich for their helpful feedback on drafts and to the several readers dragooned into reading my manuscript by Cambridge University Press. Thanks again to John Haslam for his support in what is now the eleventh book we have worked on together since 2003.