

The Quest for Knowledge in International Relations: How Do We Know? by Richard Ned Lebow. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2022. 256 pp.

In his book *The Quest for Knowledge in International Relations*, Richard Ned Lebow addresses foundational questions about the academic enterprise of International Relations (IR). What counts as knowledge in the discipline? By which methods and approaches can it be pursued? And on which grounds can knowledge claims be made? These overarching questions structure Lebow's survey, while the topics of individual chapters are approached from the divide between positivism and interpretivism.

According to Lebow, positivism and interpretivism and their different approaches to acquiring knowledge constitute "a core cleavage among IR theorists" (p. 14), a division that also supersedes and cuts across IR paradigms. Lebow defines positivism as "the search for scientific theories or rationalist models that aim to explain and predict", with King, Keohane, and Verba's *Designing Social Inquiry* as the most influential (and notorious) book in this tradition (pp. 38, 143). Interpretivism, on the other hand, is defined as the "antithesis" to positivism, with a wide and diverse range of intellectual influences. What this perspective boils down to, according to Lebow, is the emphasis on intersubjective understandings and the notion that the social world cannot be studied in the same way as the physical world because cultural and historical context and practices of meaning-making must be considered (p. 39).

Lebow's book comprises five parts. It opens with a pair of chapters on knowledge and the contrasting ontological perspectives of positivism and interpretivism. This juxtaposition establishes the structure of the book. The second part entails chapters on what can be broadly understood as methodological perspectives, such as correlational research, experiments, bottom-up explanations, and counterfactuals. Rather than providing a "how-to" guide on methods application, these chapters spell out and reflect upon the methodological assumptions of each approach. Part three engages with the types of knowledge claims these methods allow for and strategies to warrant such truth claims. Part four discusses central concepts such as reason, cause, and mechanisms. The concluding chapter revisits the core themes of the book.

Quest for Knowledge makes a plea for more conscious reflection upon questions of epistemology and the premises upon which our methodologies and methods rest. The book also acknowledges the diversity of approaches in IR, under the broad tents of "positivism" and "interpretivism". As Lebow argues, the categories of positivism and interpretivism "do not exhaust the ways in which we can frame and seek knowledge but do capture nicely the dominant research traditions in international relations" (p. 221). This resonates with a similar argument by Gary Goertz and James Mahoney, put forth in *A Tale of Two Cultures*, namely that empirical studies in the social sciences can be separated into quantitative and qualitative methodological cultures. However, as David Kuehn and Ingo Rohlfing have shown in a pilot study, methods practices could not be neatly classified into two cultures and especially qualitative research showed much more diversity than the common label suggests.

While one may question whether the binary distinction between positivism and interpretivism accurately portrays the field of IR, this does not diminish the substantial contribution of Lebow's book, which should be essential reading for PhD students and more senior researchers alike. The *Quest for Knowledge* successfully lifts the scaffolding of IR research to interrogate what is often relegated to the sidelines or not discussed at all in books on research design and methods. Lebow disentangles prevailing conceptions of "cause" and he keenly identifies the analytical dilemmas that are inherent in the main research approaches. A particularly enlightening passage is the discussion of four research strategies on how to deal with the challenges of causal analysis (pp. 190-97).

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