Richard Ned Lebow’s latest research seeks to define a theory of politics situated in a theory of history based on ontological and epistemological factors. His theory stems from the three parts of classical Greek psyche, comprised of appetite, spirit, and reason. Lebow thinks that strong community, and therefore order, stems from a balanced intersection of all three: strength in reason can restrain whims of appetite and spirit, by suggesting that these psychic needs are best sated by the merits of a strong community balanced by reason. Lebow thinks this leads to order, and that order is lost when there is a loss of control over appetite or spirit.

Lebow believed that contemporary theories about order focus on structure and are not theories of change. He is proposing a theory of process and order, infused with his interpretation about the role of psyche and order/disorder, and he theorizes the processes that drive change, not just the structures that are impacted by it.

Lebow focuses specifically on the Greek understanding of spirit (one aspect of which is self-esteem); he thinks it is a concept that has been ignored in contemporary understandings of politics, which tend to focus on “appetite.” He argues, for example, that spirit is different in the modern world than in the ancient world, for a variety of reasons, and proposes looking at how “standing,” as an example of spirit, impacts contemporary politics.

Standing, Lebow explains, is not based only on wealth or military strength, but on how you use it. Canada, for example, has standing not because it has military power, but because it uses its wealth to build on ideological strengths, and is gaining standing in the international community because of the belief that a nation can become stronger by building a better life for its citizens.

The United States, instead, seems to hold onto the idea that standing is strengthened by the use of military might, and Lebow thinks that the Iraq war might be the last attempt to gain influence via the use of military power. Standing and power, he argues, don’t emerge from a strong exertion of power (and the hope that other nations will bandwagon to it), but may prove to actually undermine power. The United States has gone from having power had from admiration conferred by others out of respect to a system where it is trying to keep power through the use of threats and bribes, which he sees as destructive and costly.

As evidence that power is shifting away from standing based on military power, Lebow points to the U.N. security council, where nations hold seats not based on traditional military strength, but on “something else,” something that confers standing independent of size of military or economy.

Lebow’s theory, which attempts to look at the intersections between appetite, spirit, and reason, how they’ve changed over time, and how the impact contemporary society, will appear in his forthcoming book.