Interview - James Fearon

https://www.e-ir.info/2013/12/16/interview-james-fearon/

E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, DEC 16 2013

James D. Fearon is Geballe Professor in the School of Humanities and Sciences at Stanford University and a Senior Fellow in Stanford's Freeman-Spogli Institute for International Studies. He is a member of the National Academy of Sciences, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and a program member of the Institutions, Organizations, and Growth group of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research. Fearon's research has focused on the causes and correlates of interstate war, civil war, and ethnic conflict. He has also published on positive theories of democracy, the problem of intervention in "failed" states, and on how states signal intentions in militarized interstate disputes.

In this interview, Professor Fearon discusses responses to the civil war in Syria and offers his thoughts on the passing of Ken Waltz and the academic study of civil wars.

—

Kenneth Waltz sadly passed away recently. What impact did Prof. Waltz's writings and teaching have on your intellectual development?

I hadn't majored in Political Science as an undergraduate, and was pretty clueless about the field when I started as a grad student at Berkeley. There were a couple of things I read in my first year that essentially decided my path of study, and Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* was one of them. I found his writing and style of thinking really compelling.

I'm not sure I have this exactly right, but I think Ken was on leave for my first year and didn't teach the IR theory seminar my second year. In any event I had essentially no interactions with him, except through reading his work, till my third year, when I TAed for his course on U.S. defense policy. I asked him if he would chair my dissertation committee because what I wanted to do was somewhat closer to his interests and general analytical style than Ernst Haas'. Haas was the other senior IR scholar at Berkeley at the time and I had had a lot more courses and other interactions with him to that point. I thought Haas was tremendous, but he had his own thing and a dissertation using game theoretic methods to analyze how and when interstate disputes escalate or don't escalate to war was not close enough.

At least in my case, Ken was a fairly hands-off dissertation adviser, which suited me fine. He had certain things he was very insistent on, such as the distinction between deterrence and defense, or being very careful about how nuclear weapons change things in interstate crises. Otherwise he let me develop the dissertation as I saw fit. At that time he was pretty supportive of the attempt to apply game theoretic thinking to those problems — I recall him noting more than once that he had read Von Neumann and Morgenstern's *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* in the 1950s and thought there were valuable insights in it that he drew on for his first book. But there was ambivalence as well. Certainly by his later years he seemed to have decided that all those quantitative and formal approaches weren't really necessary. He appreciated and encouraged the more historical parts of my dissertation, to be sure.

Ken had an unusual intellectual style, a style that has become even more unusual as time has passed. He chose very big questions, and would go at them in a slow, careful, deliberate manner. He didn't spin off ideas left and right,

or bounce between them, or publish lots of articles on one thing and then another. Because his writing is often highly condensed, students and people in the IR field often underestimate the strength of his positions. So interactions with him frequently would have the quality of Ken explaining why you needed to go back and think about his arguments again. In my experience this is usually right. If you think Waltz is just plain mistaken about this or that, you usually do need to go back and think about it some more. Of course, there are lots of things I disagree with him about, or think he didn't get quite right, but as a general rule of thumb, if you think he's wrong about something it's a good idea to go back and make sure you really understand what he is saying and the full set of arguments for the position.

The civil war in Syria has become a hotly debated topic, particularly the issue of whether a military intervention should be implemented. Do you feel that this would be an effective way to resolve the crisis?

At this point, a massive military intervention is probably the *only* effective way to end the war, but that doesn't mean this would be the right thing to do. First off, such an intervention would be over the strong objections of Russia, Iran, and other states, thus escalating interstate conflict, with a number of possible bad downstream consequences. Second, such an intervention would be highly costly, since the interveners would surely face — and further stimulate — protracted violent opposition from Islamist insurgents even if intervention overcame the Assad regime and its international supporters. Third, and probably most important, even if an intervention could depose the Assad regime and end the current war, the third parties would then be responsible for creating a stable political order that would allow them to depart without a return to war. We appear to have no idea how to do this. So, no, I don't think a major military intervention (going to war against the Assad regime) would be a good approach to ending the war in Syria.

Throughout the nineties, politicians and the international media argued that many of the civil wars that emerged around the globe were caused by ancient ethnic hatreds. These explanations were falsified by scholars, yet this template of understanding is still highly popular with politicians and the media. Why do you think that this is the case and do you feel that adopting this ancient ethnic hatreds narrative can have negative political consequences?

Well, depending on what we count as "ancient," I'm not sure I'd say this sort of explanation is always wrong, or wrong in all cases. There is a lot of variation here. There certainly are some conflicts where there is a long history of intense animosity between members of the ethnic groups in question, and where it is plausible that past episodes of violence created cultural memes that get recycled in new contexts, or that may increase the odds of violence by making it more mutually expected. Or where intense dislike of the other group just disposes people to be more accepting or supportive of politicians who are advocating for ethnic cleansing.

But of course there are many other ethnic conflicts where there really isn't much history of past violence between the groups, or it doesn't go back very far. David Laitin and I have recently been doing some research on long-run persistence of armed conflict in particular places around the world. One of the "side" findings that I think is interesting is this: There are remarkably few instances where members of two ethnic groups who fought on opposite sides of a Correlates-of-War-coded conflict post-1945 also fought on opposite sides of a COW-coded conflict before 1945. (These include interstate, civil, colonial, and what COW calls "non-state" wars.) Now, these are relatively high-level conflicts, due to the COW criteria, so I'm sure that if you considered lower-level conflicts you will find more cases of repeated fighting between members of different ethnic groups that go back 100 or 200 years (although it should be stressed that when you look at conflicts in the 19th century and earlier, "ethnic conflict" was often not how the leaders thought about what they were doing). But still, I was struck by how few — like three or four — such cases appear at the COW-war level.

Why are "ancient hatreds" stories so popular in the media? I don't know, I could only speculate. "History repeats itself" is a common explanatory trope for journalists in general. And since it is typically assumed that ethnic groups are age-old things — indeed this is practically built into the concept, even though it is usually factually wrong — perhaps it seems natural to people that therefore ethnic conflicts must be ancient. And of course labelling a conflict as "ethnic" can be a way of marking it as atavistic and thus not something we can do much about.

Can incorrectly explaining a conflict as a product of ancient hatreds have negative political consequences? Perhaps your question was inspired by the famous example of President Clinton supposedly being strongly influenced against intervention in the Balkans by Robert Kaplan's book *Balkan Ghosts*. This is usually exhibit A here. It's hard to gauge how important such thinking is case to case. Usually there are other, probably more decisive political or military considerations against intervention, so the ancient-hatreds story may just be cover. Probably in general the more dangerous negative political consequence is when some members of a group themselves come to subscribe to a factually inaccurate nationalist narrative that puts great stress on a history of conflict with other, presumed-to-be inferior groups.

A common criticism from constructivists of the rationalist approach to ethnic conflict is that it overlooks the significance of cultural factors, particularly the propagation of ethnic myths justifying hostility and dominance by political elites, in explaining the outbreak of violence. Do you feel that this criticism is fair?

I have no interest in defending or advocating for a "rationalist approach" to ethnic conflict, or international relations, or any broad domain of politics. The field of IR seems almost absurdly prone to meta-level arguments over this or that approach, and I don't want to contribute to that.

But so as not to seem like I'm completely avoiding the question: I have a hard time making sense of an opposition between "rationality" and "culture." The opposition between "rational" and "irrational" can make more sense, where the former is a normative standard that defines what "irrational" action would be in some context.

As I mentioned in some responses above, I think that ethnic myths that justify hostility and dominance by political elites can certainly be an important factor in explaining ethnic violence in some cases. When the argument is that elites are deliberately using these myths for their own political advantage, this often gets classed as a "rationalist" story, for whatever little that's worth.

In some cases where civil wars have broken out they have been characterized by civilian targeting, atrocities and, in some instances, genocide. Do you think that rational actor models are sufficient in explaining occurrences like genocide in civil wars?

Again, I couldn't care less whether rational actor models are sufficient for this purpose (I'm also not sure what "sufficient" can mean for explananda like this one). I think that explaining civilian targeting in civil war is an important research objective, and am happy to get insights from whatever approaches produce them.

The study of 'ethnic conflict' has grown significantly in the past two decades. Which new studies on this subject have you found the most interesting?

I actually haven't been working on ethnic conflict and ethnic violence much recently, so I don't feel well qualified to answer. I've been reading James Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed*, which is not exactly new and not exactly on "ethnic conflict," but nonetheless extremely interesting on how to think about the formation of ethnicities and conflictual relationships among them in Asia.

There is a wave of interesting research in political economy going on, mainly by economists like Nathan Nunn, Hans-Joachim Voth, Daron Acemoglu, James Robinson, Melissa Dell, and others, including a lot of new PhDs. This research agenda takes a long view and tends to find striking and sometimes surprising continuities of political and economic institutions, or long-lasting impacts of particular historical events. Some of the work has looked at historical persistence of armed conflict (not typically "ethnic conflict" per se), but not much of it. As I mentioned, this is an area where Laitin and I are doing some data collection.

What key advice would you give to scholars who are just starting their careers and want to focus their research on civil wars?

If a grad student were to come to my office and ask this question, in so many words, I would ask him or her what it is about civil wars that interests them, and if there is some particular conflict or set of conflicts that has inspired the interest. Then we would have a conversation the point of which would be to draw out this interest and develop ideas about how to pursue it in light of the questions posed and answers found by the most relevant existing literatures. So, basically, I don't have a good generic answer to the question "how to focus in new research on civil war?" It's a big topic and there are a lot of interesting angles worth pursuing.

I have vague impressions that, first, empirical work in this area has outpaced the development of coherent theory to make sense of the empirical patterns, and, second, the returns to additional work on civil war, in terms of major developments, may be declining. The second impression is probably just a product of my getting older and crankier. But for myself, though I'm continuing to work on civil war in various ways, I find I'm getting interested again in some more classical IR topics, such as the impact of nuclear weapons on international politics. There is also a range of very interesting and underexplored problems that are related to civil war, but not specifically on the questions of why they start, continue, and end. For example, the interplay between civil war, state building, and how this works or doesn't work, or could work, in the present international system is really important, but we don't seem to have much of a clue about it.

—

*This interview was conducted by **Al McKay**. Al is an Editor-at-large of e-IR.*