Interview – Chris Blattman

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E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, JUL 27 2022

Chris Blattman is the Ramalee E. Pearson Professor of Global Conflict Studies at The University of Chicago's Pearson Institute and Harris School of Public Policy, where he co-leads the Development Economics Center and directs the Obama Foundation Scholars program. His work on violence, crime, and poverty has been widely covered by *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Financial Times*, *Forbes*, *Slate*, *Vox*, and *NPR*. He is an economist and political scientist who studies violence, crime, and underdevelopment. His most recent book is *Why We Fight: The Roots of War and the Paths to Peace* . It draws on decades of economics, political science, psychology, and real-world interventions to lay out the root causes and remedies for war, showing that violence is not the norm; that there are only five reasons why conflict wins over compromise; and how peacemakers turn the tides through tinkering, not transformation.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates in your field?

The thing that excites me about the study of conflict is that people are moving away from running the same theory-less regressions of "does climate cause conflict" or "does poverty cause conflict," but now they're trying to think deeply about what does cause conflict; why normal peaceful bargaining breaks down. They're trying to design experiments and other kinds of studies that actually test our theories and tell us whether our theories are right. The best work in Economics on conflict is the work that is merging with Political Science and vice-versa.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Ten or fifteen years ago I was asked to study a program in rural Liberia that was looking at land disputes between ethnic groups, religious groups, even just between households. 1 in 5 people had a pretty major land dispute, and something like a third of those were turning violent. Most of those were a punch on a nose or trampling crops, but sometimes the machetes came out and the village was a bloodbath. The program was just what we would call Alternative Dispute Resolution, which is a way of getting people to understand their biases when they're trying to settle their disputes and share information through mediation with better negotiation tactics. This sort of seemed like a micro-conflict story, but as I worked on this I realized that everything that was going on—all the reasons they were fighting and that this intervention might work—were the same stories that I learned in class as a Political Science and Economics student on why we fight. On the international level we would learn about information asymmetries, commitment problems, psychological and behavioral biases, and irrationality. What was so powerful to me was realizing that these things operating at the international level were dictating conflict at the local level. For me that was a very career changing and mind changing moment.

Your most recent work, *Why We Fight: The Roots of War and Paths to Peace*, starts by discussing the premise that we don't fight. How are we able to avoid conflict?

I started with the basic premise of saying that we don't fight, which sounds like a weird thing to say in the middle of another great power war. But two weeks into Russia's invasion of Ukraine, India accidentally launched a cruise missile at Pakistan, and calm ensued. War is just so ruinous that it's almost impossible for either country to contemplate. Most of the time we don't fight because war is so costly—that's true for ethnic groups, villages, civil

wars, and countries. The reason we fight is that our societies or our leaders ignored those costs of war, or were willing to pay them for some reason.

When are these high costs of conflict ignored?

In some sense, there's a reason for every war, and a war for every reason. What I try to point out in my book is that there are basically only five logics that cover most of the ground. The first one is pretty elementary, and says that an awful lot of leaders in our society are not accountable (either personalized dictators or an elite cabal), so they're not accountable to most of the costs and can safely ignore them. At the very least, these leaders are too quick to use violence. If they think that their chances of staying in power are enhanced by war, they have a private incentive. The second reason is intangibles, or ideological, incentives (i.e., we know there's a cost of violence but we're willing to pay it). Every story you hear about a leader pursuing personal glory and a place in history, that is a story about a leader who knows the costs but is willing to pay it for some intangible gain. The third is when we underestimate the costs or overestimate the benefits of war, or we overestimate our chances of victory. The great political scientist, Bob Jervis, called these misperceptions.

The last two reasons will be familiar to anyone, as people often call these the rationalist causes of war: the role of uncertainty (or asymmetric information), and commitment problems. War in this uncertain world is always a gamble, you could make an honest miscalculation. We can't always believe our opponents' signals because they might be bluffing. For anyone who's ever played poker, this is obvious. Your opponent might be bluffing, you can't see their cards. So it's never the optimal strategy to always fold or always call. The final of these five, commitment problems, helps explain an awful lot of long wars in history. It's the idea that we simply can't trust our opponents to stick to any deal that we make, that they typically have some incentive in the future to renege. We end up having what some call a preventative war. There's an old Iraqi saying that says, "If your enemy's going to eat you for dinner, you better eat them for lunch." I didn't know it to be true until I was going through the book, but every conflict we might discuss –whether it's World War II or a village in Liberia—is usually one or more of these reasons in disguise.

***Why We Fight* opens by explaining how unlikely armed conflict is, even among enemies. Is this trend constant over time, or has it changed?**

It's debated. Steven Pinker and Ian Morris have made the claim of the world getting safer over time. For interpersonal violence, that's absolutely true. And I'm not talking about interpersonal violence in this book. Have international wars, civil wars, and ethnic conflict become fewer in number? Not necessarily. I'd say there's a slight downward trend, but the people who have done the hard statistical work have shown that it's not quite as resolute as that. Perhaps, at best, what has happened is that war has become costly enough that for the most part conflict remains common, but because they're so costly they remain relatively less deadly than before. On the international stage, with the advent of more and more powerful weapons, that's a pretty serious deterrent to conflict. What more powerful weapons mean is that war might break out less frequently, but when it does the violence is more intense. So I think that's a more complicated story than whether it's declining over time.

Does increasing the costs of conflict (through things like sanctions) decrease the chances of conflict, or will leaders ignore those costs?

On balance, they're a real deterrent. I think we should think of these like speed bumps. If you live on a busy street and cars go whizzing by, you put on a speed bump. You tell your kid to look both ways, but you're a little worried that your kid will pay a little less attention and get hit as a result. We can't treat sanctions as a surefire result, but I think they deter a lot of bad leaders from doing bad things, whether it's acquiring weapons of mass destruction or performing genocide. But the reason we don't know that for sure is because we don't really observe all the successes, we only observe the failures. We see when Saddam Hussein commits some terrible act despite the promise of sanctions, we see when Putin invades Ukraine despite the threat and implementation of sanctions. But we don't see, however, the 12 things maybe Putin decided not to do over the last 20 years because he was worried about sanctions. This makes it really hard to determine if they're effective in the ways that social scientists would like to know.

What sort of lessons do you hope readers will take from your book?

I want people to think of conflict resolution a little like medicine. Imagine if a doctor only ever saw terminally ill patients and never knew that there were patients who were healthy. They would be rotten at diagnosis and even worse at treatment. I think that's a mistake we make. They think that World War I or the U.S. invasion of Iraq was the product of misinformed leaders making a mistake. There's some truth to that, but usually there's some sort of deeper roots: unchecked leaders, ideological incentives, commitment problems, etc. that make us perceptible to these conflicts. If we get the diagnosis right, the treatment is rolling back one of the five causes of conflict.

What are some of the most common misconceptions about conflict that you have uncovered during your research?

One of the biggest misconceptions is that poverty causes conflict. It goes back to the idea that war is ruinous and we're fighting over a pie. We can either divide it up based on our chances of winning it, or we fight over it, destroy a share, and flip a coin to decide who gets it. It's almost always better to take the pie that is undamaged. Whether that pie is big because we're rich or small because we're poor, war is still costly. It's always better to divide that pie peacefully. Poverty wasn't even a first or maybe even a second order driver of why we choose to fight. It does a lot of other terrible things, but I think we can say that it doesn't make it more likely to send us to civil or international war, and I think that's one of the biggest misperceptions in the field.

Where do you see the fields of economics and political science crossing over the most? Do you feel the importance of these overlaps is changing?

I see two things. One is the intersection, and one is that political scientists are getting back to their core competencies. Political science students are far more methodologically inclined than they ever were before. I think the quality of work has just skyrocketed. Economists have moved in the same direction. You no longer have this totally false belief that students held, that you had to run a regression or have an experiment to get a job. It wasn't true, it was never true, and I'm happy to say it's still not true. So you have students going back and pursuing political science in the way that many political scientists have changed our minds—with great books. I think this has been a terrific advance in both fields.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

You want to decide what kind of scholar you want to be. Do you want to be at the forefront of quantitative social science? Do you want to be at the forefront of theory? Choose that, but make sure you get a degree of mastery in other areas through your graduate training and people on your committee, because you are going to need to be able to understand and critically evaluate and collaborate with the people who are doing this other kind of work. Specialize, but don't specialize too much.