

Interview – Bryan Caplan

Written by E-International Relations

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Bryan Caplan is a Professor of Economics at George Mason University, and New York Times Bestselling Author. He's written *The Myth of the Rational Voter*, named "the best political book of the year" by the New York Times, *Selfish Reasons to Have More Kids*, *The Case Against Education*, and *Open Borders* (co-authored with Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal's Zach Weinersmith). He blogs for Bet On IT, and has published in the New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, TIME, Newsweek, Atlantic, American Economic Review, Economic Journal, Journal of Law and Economics, and Intelligence, and appeared on ABC, BBC, Fox News, MSNBC, and C-SPAN. An openly nerdy man who loves role-playing games and graphic novels, he lives in Oakton, Virginia, with his wife and four kids.

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

There has been a pile of great work done in immigration over the last 20 years. At this point I feel like the evidence is so strong that the additional research isn't that exciting, I think that we've got a really good handle on the enormous gains that we are foregoing by disallowing immigration. Of course, there's also the continuing conversation on economic growth. I find it's one where the topic is great, but I can't honestly say that much new stuff has been coming out that is shaking my world.

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

The main thing that changed my thinking over time is just being quantitative, or more generally, it's being numerate. There are a lot of issues that I've cared about for a long time, but when I started caring about them I'd hear some arguments, but it didn't occur to me to say, "Let's get some numbers to see how big of an issue this really is." So for example, I was very pro-immigration for about 15 years before I really saw the evidence on how big of a deal it was. When I started seeing the numbers I realized this was not one issue out of twenty, this was the number one most important issue in the world. That's probably the biggest change in the way that I think about the world—even when I'm sympathetic to something, my reaction is to ask whether it's just a story, or is this something that changes everything?

For events, I'd say that I actually make a very concerted effort to have my mind not change much by events because events are actually mostly noise. There's one thing that happens and it gets the world excited, but what does it really show? Often there are a bunch of other events that are just as important that don't make the news. For example, if something big happened in the world the day Russia invaded the Ukraine, we probably never heard about it because it was crowded out. If you're a horrible third world dictator, that's the day to go out and execute all of your political prisoners, and we're never going to find out. The event that has actually weighed heavily on my mind is the collapse of the Soviet bloc, and trying to compare that to events that people say are actually important, and comparing the two to see if that's true.

In terms of people, that's a much bigger deal. Phil Tetlock has had a huge impact on my thinking. He's got two books *Expert Political Judgement* and *Superforecasting* that got me thinking about the world quantitatively and having a sense of humility about the accuracy of one's own judgment. Another person who's had a huge impact on me is

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philosopher Michael Huemer from the University of Colorado. He really helped me to understand what an argument even is. An argument is where you start with some premises that makes sense to people that don't currently agree with your conclusion but which logically implies the conclusion.

Your 2006 paper, “Terrorism: The relevance of the rational choice model” discusses the behavior of terrorists through the lens of Rational Choice Theory. In what ways are terrorists rational actors?

The biggest one is that the vast majority of people who have a theory that says they should be a terrorist don't actually do it. The vast majority of people who believe that they'll go to Heaven as long as you die committing a terrorist attack somehow refrain from doing it, which suggests that there's either enormous hypocrisy, or they have strongly held views but when push comes to shove, they may have lots of doubts that cause them to reconsider. You will see surveys of maybe 5-10% of Muslims saying that they agree with this stuff, but then why don't we have a 100 million terrorists? It's not like they're that hard to do. People will look at a small handful of terrorists and say, “See, they really believe that stuff.” Well, who's the they? It's a very tiny number out of the people who officially believe this stuff.

What are the optimal strategies for governments to handle the threat of terrorism?

Once you realize that there are these rational beliefs that are underlying terrorism, at least you should be open to the possibility that maybe we could actually solve this problem at a very low cost. It may very well be that some ideology is very fixated on some minor issue, and maybe you could just give it to them and the problem would be solved. This goes hand in hand with a very common and I think greatly exaggerated negative view regarding appeasement. In that paper I point out that we all appease people all the time, and it normally works. Yet we have an official theory saying that appeasement never works and that it's always stupid.

Your books *Labor Econ Versus the World* and *Open Borders* advocate increasing global immigration through open border policies. What are the key benefits to open borders?

The overwhelming one is that you can take a highly unskilled third world worker, move them into the first world and within a day, he can be earning ten times as much money instantly. That's something we can see with our own eyes. Basic economics says that the reason he's making ten times as much is that he's ten times as productive. Why would that be? You very quickly get a lot of answers when you ask that question. In an area like agriculture, it's fairly obvious. In the first world we just have access to so much better technology which would allow productivity to expand. The same person grows a lot more food here than back home. Manufacturing is the same deal. You can either be doing primitive production back in your own country, or cutting edge production in the first world. For services, it's a bit puzzling why productivity increases, until you remember that the whole idea around service is to save someone else time. If you save the time of someone whose time is very valuable, you are actually contributing more to the world than when you contribute to someone like me, whose time is far less valuable. Put all of that together and you realize that immigration is a way to instantly raise human productivity, not by 10%, but by ten times. The whole idea of open borders is that if we can do this for one person, couldn't we do it for a million, ten million, a hundred million? We can get astronomical gains in the global economy.

What are the main challenges to open border policies being implemented?

I think the answer is incredibly clear: it's extremely unpopular, and not just in the United States. I don't know of any country where these ideas are popular. These ideas immediately provoke a strong revulsion and paranoia among people everywhere. The sheer volume of the fears that they voice, you could spend all day listening to people come up with terrifying scenarios. You can look at them and say, “Well, that terrifying scenario has been checked, that one doesn't look like it's very important, etc.” and at the end, people will always talk about how there's still a chance. If that's your attitude, you'll never achieve progress. If open borders was a popular idea, politicians would be adopting it immediately.

In terms of what can be done to change people's minds, it's super tough. My book *Open Borders* is really my best

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personal effort to change people's minds. It is the most persuasive book I've written, and has changed a lot of people's minds. It is a non-fiction graphic novel, but it's written with extremely high standards of evidence and documentation, so really I'm just trying to change the format rather than the intellectual quality and evidence. But my very best isn't good enough. I think that the answer is that human beings have evolved to become highly xenophobic. The only hope that I have is that while people are often xenophobic, it isn't that hard to get people to rethink their definition of what their group is. For example, 200 years ago most people in France didn't speak French and didn't consider themselves French, and then that changed. 200 years ago most Americans identified with their state rather than the country.

What effect would open borders have on international power structures (EU, NATO, etc.) and international conflict?

Well I was just doing some Twitter polls, which actually confirmed something that I sort of suspected. Obviously most of the movement across borders would occur with people moving from the third world to the first world. But there are many others who would instead like to move to other first world countries as well, and the U.S. seems, by far, to be the destination of choice. With Open Borders, the United States wouldn't just be getting a lot of third world migration, it would be scooping up a large share of the talent of the European Union, Canada, etc.

This is the one way that we could plausibly see the United States becoming the world's most populous country this century. It doesn't take too much insight to see that the power of your country has a lot to do with total Gross Domestic Product (GDP), not GDP per capita. This would likely mean a major shift in global power to the United States.

For international conflict, this would mean an easy way out of a country for any refugees. It would mean that people could get out before becoming refugees. I find that in whenever we have an environmental disaster, we encourage everyone to evacuate before the issue arises, but with international conflict we wait until the country collapses into civil war, etc. before we figure out people might want to leave. I would be happy to speculate that this would likely reduce the number of civil wars, as people could simply leave the country. I think it would successfully pacify many troubled areas in the world.

In *Labor Econ Versus the World* you tend to be quite pessimistic about the role of education in turning students into high quality workers. Why is this the case? What are the best alternatives?

The main thing is that if you look at what students study versus what they do after graduation, you typically see a major disconnect. What you might have learned in class has little or nothing to do with what you do at work. The only real appeal to this idea is that education teaches students how to learn, but there's a lot of research that says this is mostly wishful thinking, and that at best it teaches you to do exactly what it teaches you. Learning by doing is the way that people really do stuff, so given that, why does education pay so much? What I do in my book *The Case Against Education* is I try to strongly defend what I believe is the best answer. I will say that I'm the number one champion of this theory, even though other people got a Nobel Prize for it. A lot of other people talk about this theory as a toy or game, and I say that this is the actual answer. The answer is called signaling. It says that the reason education pays isn't because of what you learn, it's because you get a stamp on your forehead that certifies you as a high-quality worker. This is why education pays, it convinces employers of your ability. I often say a slogan, that education is a passport to the real training that occurs on the job. The best alternative is working earlier, to have a system where people start adult life at an earlier age and learn what they're going to do by going out and doing it.

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

I would say the most important advice is this: There's a key concept in Psychology that all researchers should know. That concept is called Social Desirability Bias. What it means is that when the truth sounds bad, people lie. And often the lies become so ubiquitous that they start becoming absurd views with great self-righteousness. So, what does that have to do with International Relations? Well, I love you guys, but when I read International Relations work it seems that it is so infused with Social Desirability Bias that it is hard to see where truth gets its voice. Any time

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someone says that something is an incredibly important issue, just look at the number of times in International Relations that someone says that something is a middling or tertiary issue. Everyone wants to claim their issue is really important. When someone says, “There’s a possibility this could lead to World War III,” you have to ask who cares? There’s a possibility it could? Could you be any more evasive? Give me a probability. Give me a number you’re willing to bet on. People don’t want to do that, they want to keep their language vague so they can keep pretending like they know everything, but giving a specific number is a great way to eliminate is Social Desirability Bias in your work.