

Theory Talks

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THEORY TALK #18

JAMES FEARON ON CONFLICT-PRONE SOCIETIES, DEFINING ETHNICITY AND REFORMING THE UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL

Theory Talks

is an interactive forum for discussion on actual International Relations-related topics for both students and specialists. Theory Talks frequently invites cutting-edge specialists in the field to open a debate, discuss current issues or elucidate a theory.

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JAMES FEARON ON CONFLICT-PRONE SOCIETIES, DEFINING ETHNICITY AND REFORMING THE UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL



James D. Fearon is known for his research on ethnic conflict, but has published on issues varying from the external validity of concepts in IR to reforming international institutions to IR-methodology. In this Talk, Fearon explains how one can work with concepts as vague as 'ethnicity', what the chances are of the United Nations being reformed, and why he thinks the big theoretical debates don't matter that much.

What is, according to you, the biggest challenge / principal debate in current IR? What is your position or answer to this challenge / in this debate?

When talking about the principal *debates*, your question would have been easier to answer a couple of years ago. I don't know that I would say that IR is in a post-big-debate phase, but attention certainly has shifted from the grand debates between all kinds of 'isms' and methodologies to more concrete issues.

I think this is a positive development in terms of the current *challenges* in IR, because I think in general we should be less focused on international relations theory as such and more on international relations. I say this because I never saw it to be productive to compare and debate the merits of realism versus liberalism or rationalism versus constructivism, and so on. These isms debates have tended to be at best secondarily about international politics, and set up in a such a way that little empirical or theoretical progress can be made in them, almost by design. "Realism versus liberalism versus constructivism" focused too much on what some master explanatory variable in IR is supposed to be: power (according to realists), institutions or domestic preferences (for liberals), and norms (for constructivists). My feeling is that it doesn't make sense to argue what is the best all-purpose explanatory variable for international politics (if one could even pose such a project in a meaningful way). I would rather work from the things we would like to explain, and from the real-world problems we would like to identify and try to solve.

This doesn't mean I think we should stop thinking theoretically about international relations, but I think the challenge is to move IR debates and research more in the direction of focusing on normatively important problems that matter for large numbers of people.

How did you arrive at where you currently are in IR?

In college my major had us reading lots of 19th- and early 20th century sociologists and taking a dim view of more recent social science -- a view I completely absorbed. I spent a year in East Africa in time away from college, and returned to do research for an honors thesis, so I also developed an interest in African politics and questions about economic development. I never took an IR course in college.

Though I had hated the one economics course I had taken, by chance I ended up working for an economist in Washington DC on development issues the year after I graduated. This was very interesting and made me wonder if I should I give it another chance. When I started a PhD program in Political Science at Berkeley, I quickly discovered that Political Science was nothing like writing short briefs on Max Weber and the like, which I had done in college. I was kind of horrified by the social science-y-ness of it, even at Berkeley. I thought: 'all this quantitative stuff, this is clearly evil'. But in order to be able to defeat the devil, you have to know the devil – so I decided I needed to have a more informed approach to the evil, and I decided to take some economics and quantitative methodology courses. During a course on microeconomic theory, I encountered what I thought were very interesting arguments being made in that devilish field. I was also really struck by how microeconomic theory “moved,” in the sense of repeatedly figuring out new tools and arguments that could make sense of things that the prior state of microeconomic theory could not. I was also impressed not by the science-y-ness of it, but by how relentlessly normative economic theory is, in a manner largely lacking in IR and comparative politics traditions.

I moved into IR as I gradually figured out that while I was very interested in the politics of economic development, I didn't want to become an Africanist. I liked the bigger picture questions and views you could get in IR, and I started to get interested in international conflict. An early influence here was reading Bruce Bueno de Mesquita's book *The War Trap*, which made me think that there might be interesting and useful ways to use ideas from microeconomic theory to better understand international politics. I got a similar impression from Kenneth Waltz's work (who was my thesis advisor). I should also mention Bob Powell, who was just arriving at Berkeley when I was leaving, but who gave me the most detailed and direct feedback on the modeling work in my dissertation. These three were big influences on me in graduate school, along with a bunch of economists in the Economy Department at Berkeley.

What would a student need to become a specialist in IR?

I think it helps if you have a genuine interest in real-world international politics, read the newspapers every day and care about what happens. For the rest, if you work hard and manage to get into a PhD-program, you're well along the way. But make sure you get into a program that trains you well in the methodologies needed to tackle the questions you care about.

How important is game theory for a complete understanding of international relations?

Game theory has developed ways to state certain ideas clearly – concepts like coordination problems, commitment problems, signaling dilemmas, and so on can be quite useful for helping to understand a broad range of social, political, and economic situations. But the ideas have to be applied and developed in particular empirical contexts, and even then you are only getting a certain “cut” at what’s going on. You cannot just take a course on game theory and think you understand IR.

You’ve written quite a lot about ethnicity and conflict. ‘Ethnicity’ seems, however, to be a slippery concept, used by different people in completely distinct ways. How would you define ‘ethnicity’?

I think the question should be: what is an ethnic group? For social science concepts that have a strong base in ordinary language, like this one, I think it makes the most sense to start not by trying to stipulate a definition, but to ask about what we must already think it means based on how we use it. For example, what is the implicit rule that tells us that a baseball team, or “Southerners”, is not an ethnic group? After working through a lot of questions like these, I ended up with the following: as it is typically used, “ethnic group” is applied to groups larger than a family, membership in which is primarily reckoned by a descent rule. This doesn’t cover all cases where ordinary language may designate a group “ethnic” or not “ethnic” (e.g., British classes, or Indian castes in some views), but it is a pretty good start.

This isn’t a wholly original view – most efforts to define “ethnic group” have focused on the idea of an analogy to kinship, or a “myth of common ancestry” as Weber put it. What’s slightly different is the formulation in terms of what are the implicit group membership rules for individuals, which I think makes better sense of the meaning of the concept (as we already have it in our heads) than these other formulations. Also, it makes it clear that a lot of things that we associate with prototypical “ethnic groups,” like a common language or religion, are nonetheless contingent features. There are plenty of groups referred to as “ethnic” that don’t have these, but are nonetheless so called because membership in the group is typically reckoned by a descent rule.

What kind of societies (or situations) are prone to ethnic conflict? And does conflict ‘change’ ethnicity, that is, is the ‘ethnicity’ in ethnic conflict endogenous or are ‘ethnic’ identities stable?

My colleague David Laitin and I have worked on your first question a lot. In terms of empirical regularities, we find that for the period after 1945 ethnic conflict (and in fact civil war in general) is more likely when a country has a low per-capita income, a large population, lots of mountainous terrain (though this is a bit marginal), and is a big oil producer. It is more likely to erupt after independence, elections or other blows to the capabilities of the central state; when

there have been recent changes in the degree of democracy of the regime; and when a state is partly autocratic and partly democratic.

Ethnicity is definitely socially constructed and it is definitely endogenous to violent conflict. For instance, there are numerous examples of conflicts in which people redefine the content of their ethnicity during a conflict. Would-be leaders try to polarize a conflict along ethnic lines, because they want to redraw a map, like, for example, in the Balkans, and because they want to develop a political following. And frequently, ethnic violence hardens the self-conception of conflicting ethnic groups. Once such conflicts get going and become violent, as in Iraq, a common misperception of outsiders is that the intensity of the ethnic animosities observed during the fighting must have been fully present before and must explain why they are fighting.

The United Nations (UN) is going through a legitimacy crisis, starting with the former Yugoslavia and now again it can do little with countries so divided. Furthermore, according to some (see [this article](#) or [this one](#)) the Security Council reflects an outdated balance of power: Japan and Germany want in, as do the BRICs. (How) should the Security Council be reformed?

I'm not sure the UN is really going through a legitimacy crisis. There's a really good article by Erik Voeten in *International Organization* (read abstract [here](#)) arguing that the UN and the Security Council (UNSC) are actually more legitimate than ever – simply because there's a greater expectation by a large number of countries that states will take their disputes to the Security Council or that countries should ask the UN for permission before military intervention. Furthermore, many countries would like to use the UN as a constraint on the U.S., and the U.S. nonetheless finds the UNSC useful fairly often, even during the Bush administration. In terms of output, and especially peacekeeping operations, the UNSC has been far more productive than it ever was during the Cold War.

Ideally, it would be good if the veto could be replaced by weighted majority voting, and if permanent membership for the five permanent members could be replaced by some set of rules that would ensure representation of the strongest states and those that contribute most to the organization, but that would accommodate changes in the international distribution of power and influence. This isn't going to happen anytime soon though. It would take a real shock to the system or a major U.S. effort, and the latter might not even be enough given the effects of U.S. policy in the last eight years.

Last question. Where does the responsibility of the UN to intervene in humanitarian crises end and where do regional organizations have to pick up and clean their own 'mess'?

This is a difficult issue. There are voices saying that the UN, for example, should go into Sudan full force. But look at similar missions to Iraq, Afghanistan, or a good number of UN PKOs, it is

very likely that any such intervention would not be swift and clean, but rather turn into yet another permanent police force that you couldn't figure out how to bring to a close. The international system is accumulating a set of places that look like a sort of new model protectorate where third party forces can't leave without a probable return to civil war. I think that an intervention in Sudan would likely mean another one of these long-term, new model protectorates. Whether this would still be warranted, or is the best approach in this case, I don't know.

James Fearon has obtained his Ph.D degree at the University of California, Berkeley, and is currently the Theodore and Frances Geballe Professor in the School of Humanities and Sciences, and Chair of the Department of Political Science at Stanford University. He has published on issues varying from civil war to humanitarian aid and from weak states to methodology.

Related links

- [Fearon's faculty profile at Stanford University](#)
- Read Fearon's ***Economic Development, Insurgency, and Civil War*** (forthcoming) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Kasara, Laitin and Fearon's ***Ethnic Minority Rule and Civil War Onset*** (American Political Science Review, 2007) [here](#) (Word)
- Read Fearon's ***Separatist Wars, Partition, and World Order*** (Security Studies, 2004) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Laitin and Fearon's ***Ordinary Language and External Validity: Specifying Concepts in the Study of Ethnicity*** (American Political Science Association, 2000) [here](#) (Word)
- Read Bruce Bueno de Mesquita's The War Trap (1983) by Google Books [here](#)
- Read Bruno Bueno de Mesquita's 2006 article ***Game Theory, Political Economy, and the Evolving Study of War*** (American Political Science Review, 2006) [here](#) (pdf)