

Fearon's Rationalist Explanations for War Applied to Primitive Hunter-Gatherer Societies

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Critical Response 1

In his paper *Rationalist Explanations for War*, James Fearon provides a theory as to why states would ever choose war over negotiation when doing so is costly. Fearon authors a model that accounts for contemporary states arguing over modern issues. His assertions are surprisingly easy to grasp despite answering a question that cannot be described as such, and his work has been subsequently praised and studied by many. However, working to demonstrate the pertinence of Fearon's theories to present-day conflicts has little academic purpose given that his ideas have already shown to be applicable time and time again. Fearon's main points may have even more value than only being rationalist explanations for war between state actors in the modern era. By attempting to link his model to circumstances and situations with characteristics other than those he may have originally intended, the limits of the theories can be tested and new, improved ones can potentially be developed. In this case, the objective is to see whether or not Fearon's explanations for war can be applied to primitive human societies and violent conflict between them, which in turn lets us see whether or not they may be more versatile than expected.

It is first necessary to briefly cover Fearon's model and how his theory is structured. The argument is centered around the proposition that for every conflict, there exists an agreement that two states can reach that is ultimately less expensive for each when compared to resorting to war. In other words, since a single, less expensive resolution exists, war should never be the outcome chosen by two rational state actors. Subsequently, Fearon aims to identify the reasons why states do choose war when it is inefficient to do so, and presents three main points. The first reason is incomplete information, which typically refers to one side believing that it is more powerful than the other, or believing that the other side is weaker than it actually is. The second reason is

commitment problems, wherein a state refuses to come to an agreement as a result of believing that they could bargain for a better deal in the future. The final reason is issue indivisibility, which is where the issue at stake cannot be divided in a reasonable way between the opposing parties.

It is also necessary to identify what types of primitive human societies will be examined using Fearon's three explanations for war. Early civilization began with what are now called hunter-gatherers (HGs), which were humans that formed small, nomadic tribes and relied heavily on the natural state of the environment for survival. Over time, humans learned to cultivate land and domesticate animals to better sustain themselves in larger and more stationary groups, and thus became farmers and herders. The former type of early human civilization is what will be examined, and for good reason. Primitive societies of farmers and herders are quite similar to the state actors in Fearon's model, so it would be reasonable to expect his concepts to apply. Primitive HG societies are inherently different from the traditional idea of a state that Fearon uses, so seeing if his explanations for war apply to these groups means that the limits of Fearon's theories will be tested.

While trade is seen among early humans, it was rare for two distinctly separate groups to exhibit generally cooperative behavior. This means that, for the most part, interactions between two groups of early HGs was more likely to be violent than an interaction between modern states is today. Based on Fearon's model, the issues at stake for two groups of primitive humans in such wars are private goods such as food, mates and power. Both groups want more of these things, which makes sense given that they are necessary to ensure the prolonged survival of the group. The cost of war in this instance is human life, which is relevant because the ability of

these groups to produce such goods for themselves is contingent on the size of the group. Given that relative to their total number of interactions with other groups, primitive HG societies chose war more often than states do today, the conditions of early human civilization must have generated an environment where Fearon's three reasons for war were more common. If it can be demonstrated how these circumstances could have been more common, it is reasonable to predict that Fearon's model applies to more than modern state actors.

It is easy to see how incomplete information could have been a cause of violent conflict between early HG societies. As Fearon describes it, incomplete information stems directly from the improper evaluation of a state's power by another. However, the only reason it is possible to procure information regarding the power of an opposing state is due to some level of communication between the two existing. Communication between warring groups of HGs prior to the onset of the conflict simply did not exist in any notable capacity, meaning that incomplete information was omnipresent during this period of human civilization. A weaker group of HGs would wage war against a definitively stronger one because it never had any way of knowing that it was outmatched by its opponent, which is something that seldom happens between modern states.

Commitment problems is the second explanation for war which can also be applied to HG societies. Fearon notes that states can prefer fighting under situations where power is shifting. An example that is frequently used is the advantage associated with striking first, which is also something that HGs are theorized to have made use of. In fact, the advantage of striking first in the context of primitive war often meant the difference between life and death. For example, it was extremely easy and effective for one group of HGs to launch a surprise attack on

another group late at night while visibility was reduced and many of the members of the defending group were asleep; often resulting in a swift victory, the elimination of the target, and no ensuing conflict. Even if the defending group had overwhelming strength in numbers, such an attack often caused enough disarray to render said advantage inconsequential. Additionally, it is more difficult for states to get value out of striking first in modern context, given that even if the first strike is particularly devastating, war typically still follows.

Finally, it can be demonstrated that HG societies could have fought over issues that were impossible to divide. The modern example of an indivisible issue is the fight over Jerusalem, a holy city in the belief systems of multiple world religions, all of which would prefer to have control over the city. Similarly, the idea that primitive humans fought over valuable territory can be easily entertained. HGs were particularly dependent on the land they inhabited since they did not yet have the ability to produce their own food. Living on fruitful land allowed for a group to maintain a higher population, which in turn increased the power of the group. Since two different groups would not willingly share a plot of land that both deemed valuable, war would be waged for territorial control.

The fantastical concept that primitive humans were peaceful creatures has been largely abandoned since credible theory and archaeological evidence alike has suggested that hunter-gatherers waged war much more often than previously believed. It has not only been shown that the reasons for this conflict can be linked to Fearon's explanations for war, but that early humans most likely found themselves in situations where these factors were at play more often than the states of today. It is therefore more than reasonable to propose that Fearon's

rationalist causes for war do not only apply to unitary state actors, and that these causes can be applied to situations outside of contemporary warfare.

Works Cited

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