

Political development & policy



Lecture 4: Why we fight and the path to peace (Part III)

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Last time we ended on psychological and behavioral explanations

1. Unchecked elites
2. **Violent preferences**
3. **Systematic mistakes**
4. Uncertainty
5. Impossible bargains (Commitment problems)

Where we ended

1. Unchecked elites
2. **Violent preferences**
3. Systematic mistakes
4. Uncertainty
5. Impossible bargains (Commitment problems)

Under what circumstances do you think individuals or groups may have intrinsic preference for violence?

We thought about vengeance: how there may be something deeply ingrained where the experience of an injustice can foster a desire for action, even if risky and costly



Many forms of political participation are hard to explain without an appeal to preferences: intrinsic motivations or emotional rewards



Vengeance is one of many explanations for conflict that involve a preference for fighting. Three others include...

1. Joy or pleasure in violence

- Mobs who demand sacrifices (Girard 1977)
- British soccer hooligans (Buford 2001)
- Camaraderie and vitality (Broyles Jr 1984)

2. Parochial altruism

- We have preferences for well being of our in-group, and take pleasure in seeing the other group do poorly or be punished (Chen and Li, 2009; Cikara et al., 2011; Glowacki et al., 2017)
- Others see an innate pleasure in social dominance of one's own group (Sidanius and Pratto, 2001)

3. Value rational violence

- Actions “determined by a conscious belief in the value for its own sake of some ethical, aesthetic, religious, or other form of behavior, independently of its prospects of success” (Weber 1978)
- e.g. The elimination or subjugation of an ethnic rival, the extermination of a heretic ideology
- Or where the idea of compromise on some ideological principle is abhorrent—liberty and self-determination in the case of the colonial U.S., the Irish Republic, or other separatist movements

A typology of five explanations

1. Unchecked elites
2. Violent preferences
3. **Systematic mistakes**
4. Uncertainty
5. Impossible bargains (Commitment problems)

So far nothing about our explanations for war have been necessarily “irrational”

- The actors are still maximizing, calculating, with stable preferences, intelligent and accurate information processors
- With violent values, we’ve simply opened up standard economic preferences (selfish, material) to social preferences and non-material payoffs
 - Even emotional reactions to injustice are rational if they are well-defined and stable, and rational actors know to expect at least some people to behave this way
- We can get awfully far with just these rational standard and rational non-standard explanations
- But a whole range of explanations for war violate the idea that we are calculating, optimizing, information processors with consistent preferences

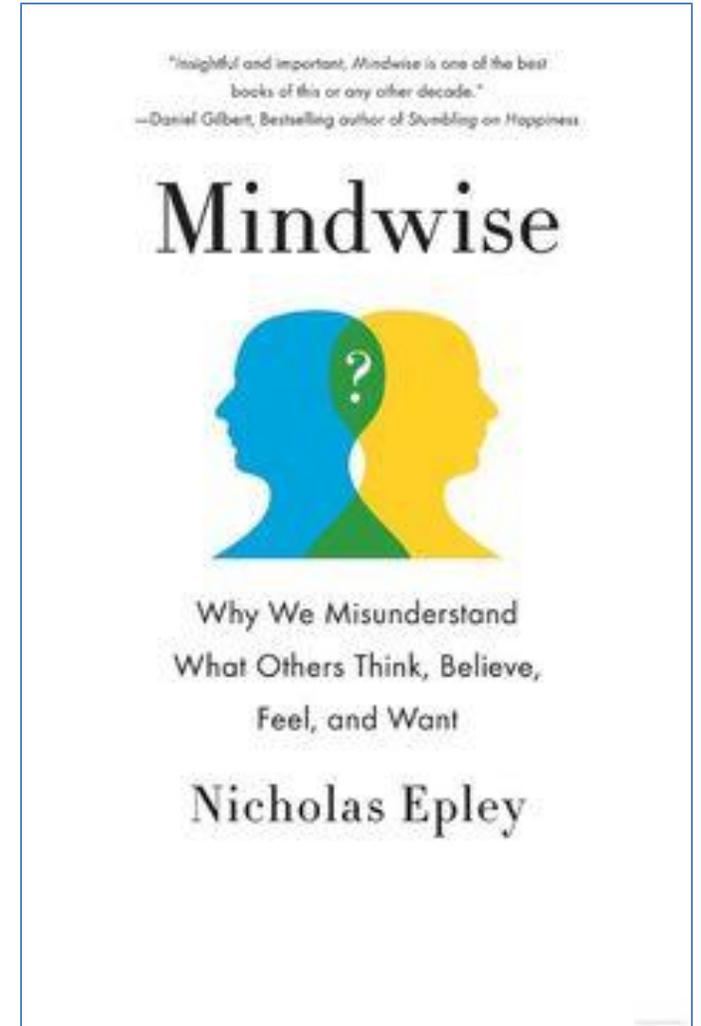
I'll emphasize three examples of “irrationality”

- A. Overconfidence
- B. Projection bias
- C. Decision-making under arousal

Arguably both are a problem of persistently inaccurate belief formation

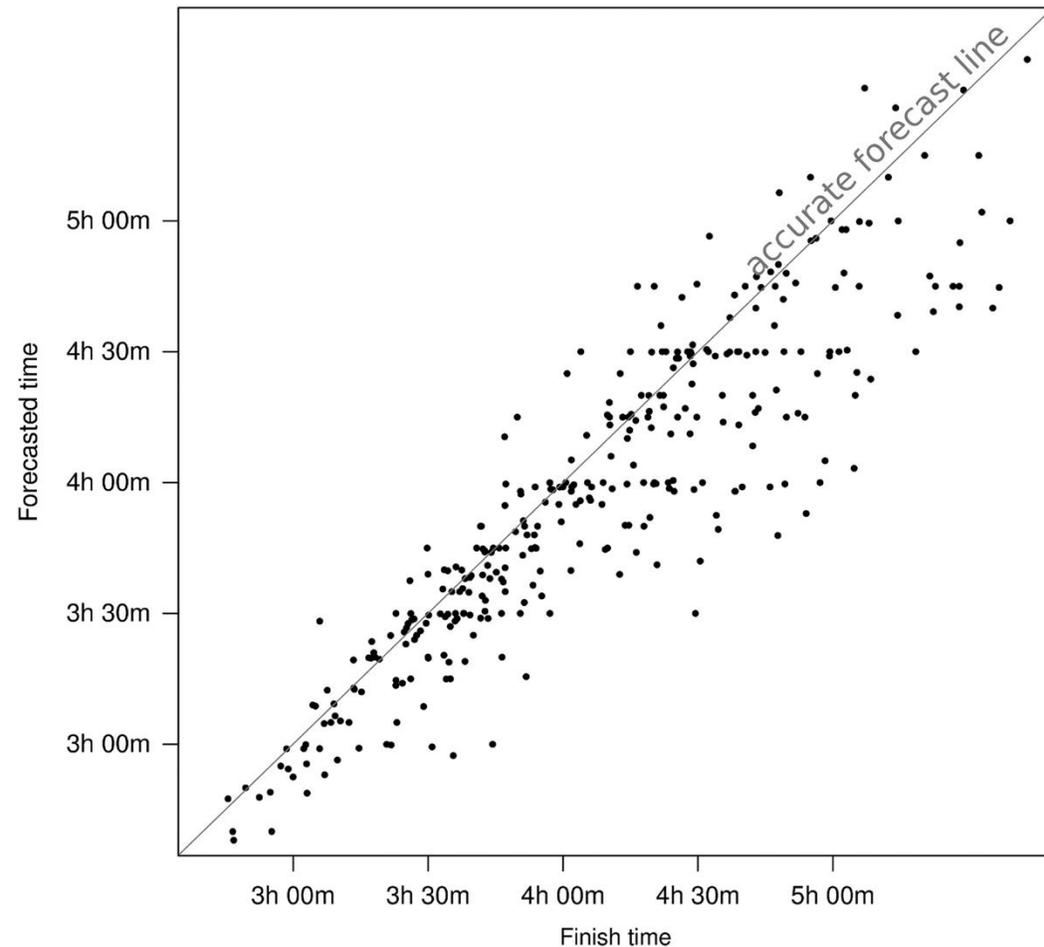
A. Overconfidence

An example from everyday life: The (not so) Newlywed game



Are humans predictably overconfident?

Forecasted and actual finish times in the Warsaw Marathon



- Most entrepreneurs think that their startup is more likely to succeed than their peers' startups (Cooper et al 1988)
- Overconfident CEOs believe their company is undervalued and are less willing to raise capital by issuing new shares and more likely to attempt mergers (Malmendier & Tate 2005, 2008)
- Marathoners underestimate their time to completion (Krawczyk & Wilamowski 1984)
- Most drivers think they are above average (Svenson 1981)
- Economic forecasters are often far too confident in their precision (Alpert & Raiffa 1982)
- Almost all US high school students rated themselves as at least average at "getting along with others" and a quarter put themselves in the top 1% (Camerer 2003)

I am more interested in systematic and predictable mistakes that humans make, and whether they can help us understand the causes of war
e.g. Overconfidence and overprecision

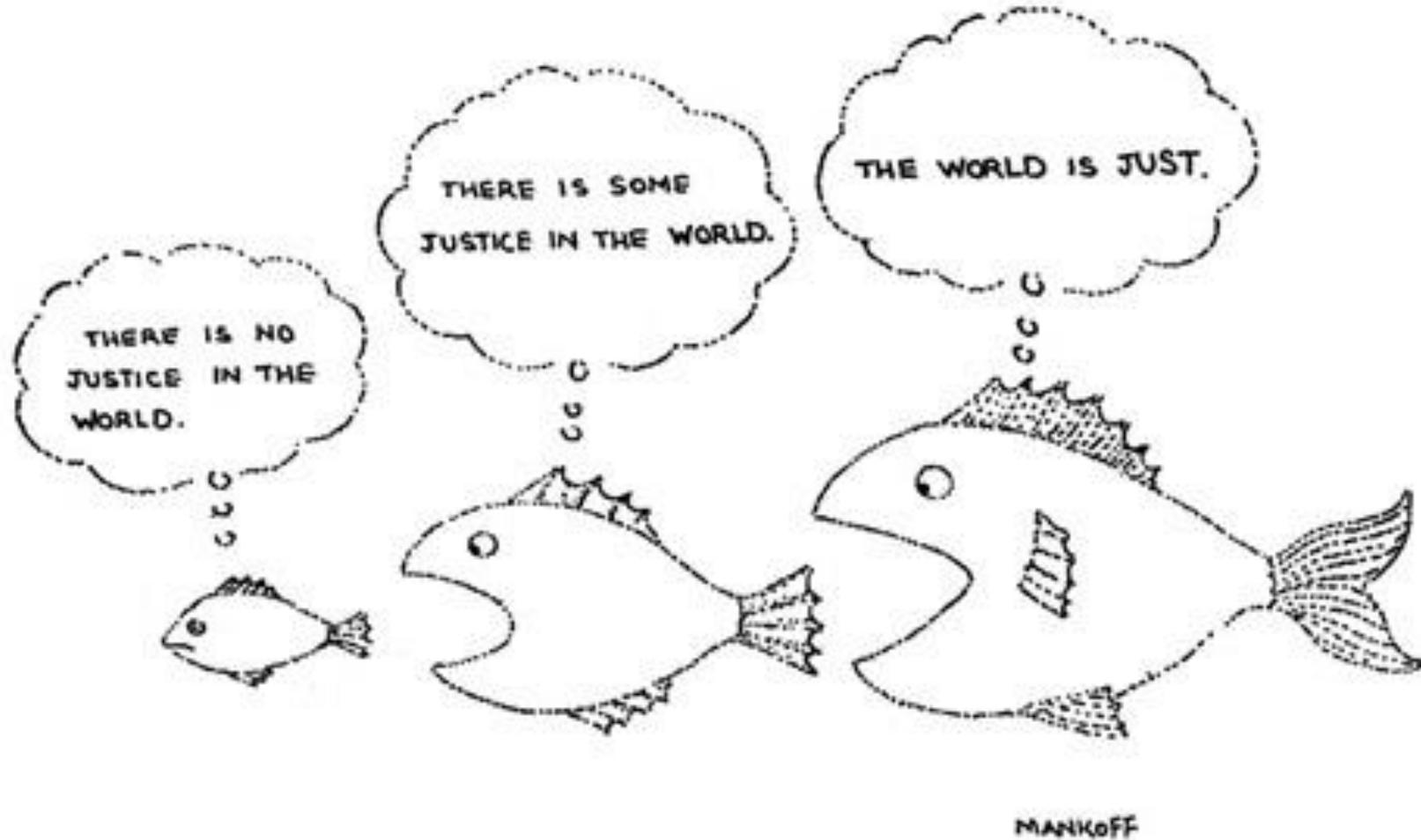
The usual pattern of warfare between Greek states was for one phalanx to march into enemy territory, where it would be met by its foe's phalanx. The two armies would clash and, within the span of a single day, the issue that precipitated the conflict would be decided.

*Since Sparta's forces would greatly outnumber those of the Athenians the Spartans had every reason for confidence if the Athenians engaged them in the typical manner, and most Spartans **had no doubt** that they would. If they chose a different course of action, the Spartans **were certain** that a year, or two, or three, of ravaging Athenian territory would bring either the decisive battle they sought or an Athenian surrender.*

*At the beginning of the war, the Spartans, as well as the rest of the Greeks, **were convinced that** this simple offensive strategy guaranteed swift and sure victory. Had they believed they would need to fight a long, difficult, costly war of uncertain outcome, as the Athenians and Achidamus tried to persuade them would be the case, they might have acted differently.*

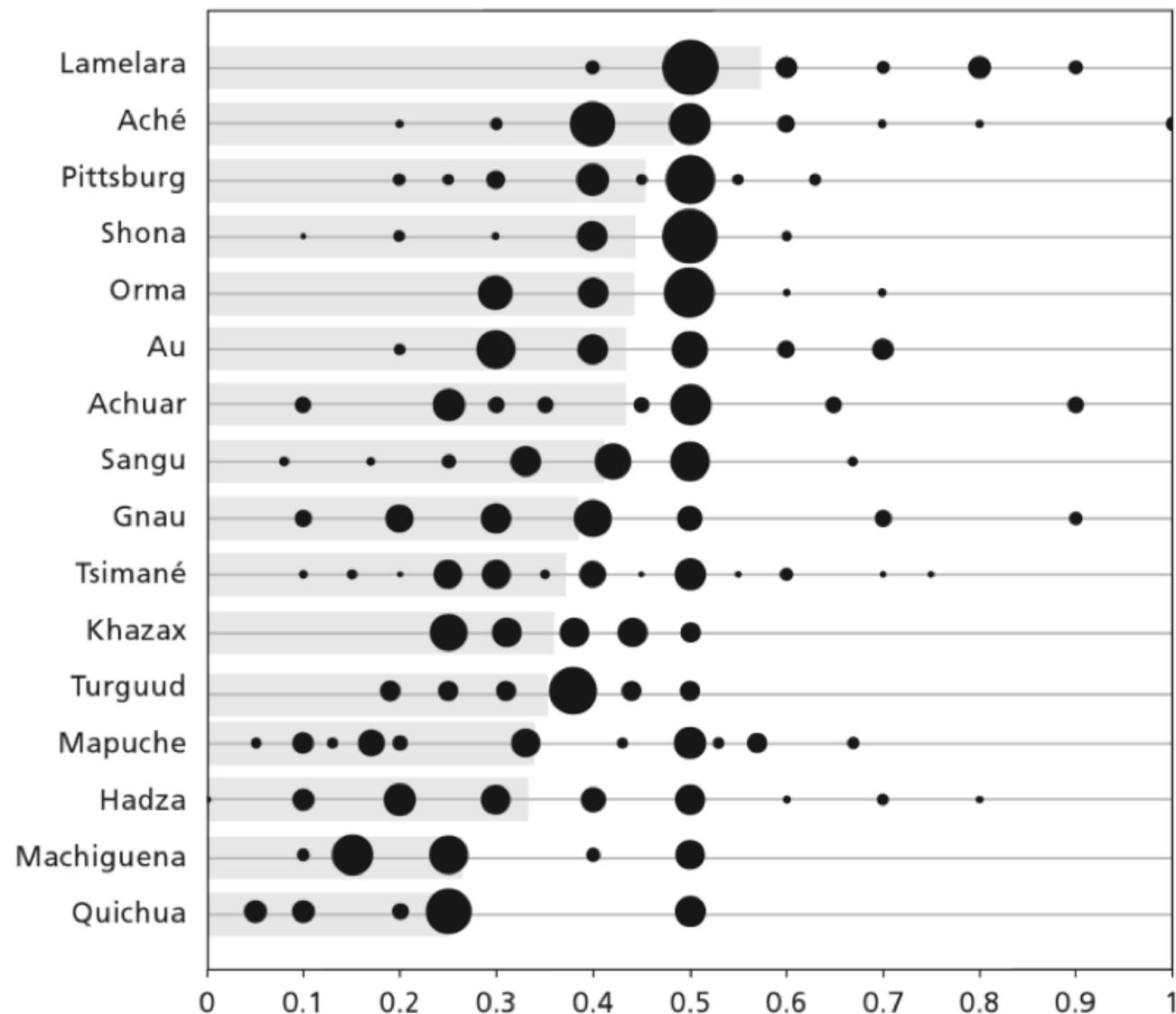
B. Projection bias

What if humans are bad at predicting others' notions of fairness and reactions to injustice? We tend to project our own views on others.



e.g. Variation in fairness norms across societies

- Norms and rules themselves vary
 - Do pedestrians have right of way?
 - Norms of redistribution
- There also seems to be variation in norms of punishment
 - E.g. Ultimatum game play
 - Possibly culturally established
- A boundedly rational person could make the mistake of:
 - Failing to pay attention to norm differences
 - Failing to predict the furiousness of the response



Source: Henrich et al. 2004.

Note: The size of the bubble at each location along each row represents the proportion of the sample that made a particular offer. The right edge of the lightly shaded horizontal gray bar gives the mean offer for that group.

A woefully underexplored behavioral theory of conflict

- Sparta knows that there are fair and selfish people in the world, where fair types react to injustice with furious punishment
- But Sparta is uncertain about whether Athens' assembly is dominated by fair or selfish types (imperfect information, making long brutal wars a risky gamble)
- Further complicated if Sparta underestimates the furiousness of the fair types' response
- Could apply to repressive dictatorships as well?

Think of this in the context of ethnic conflicts



C. Decision-making under arousal

e.g. See Pearlman 2013 reading on Arab Uprisings

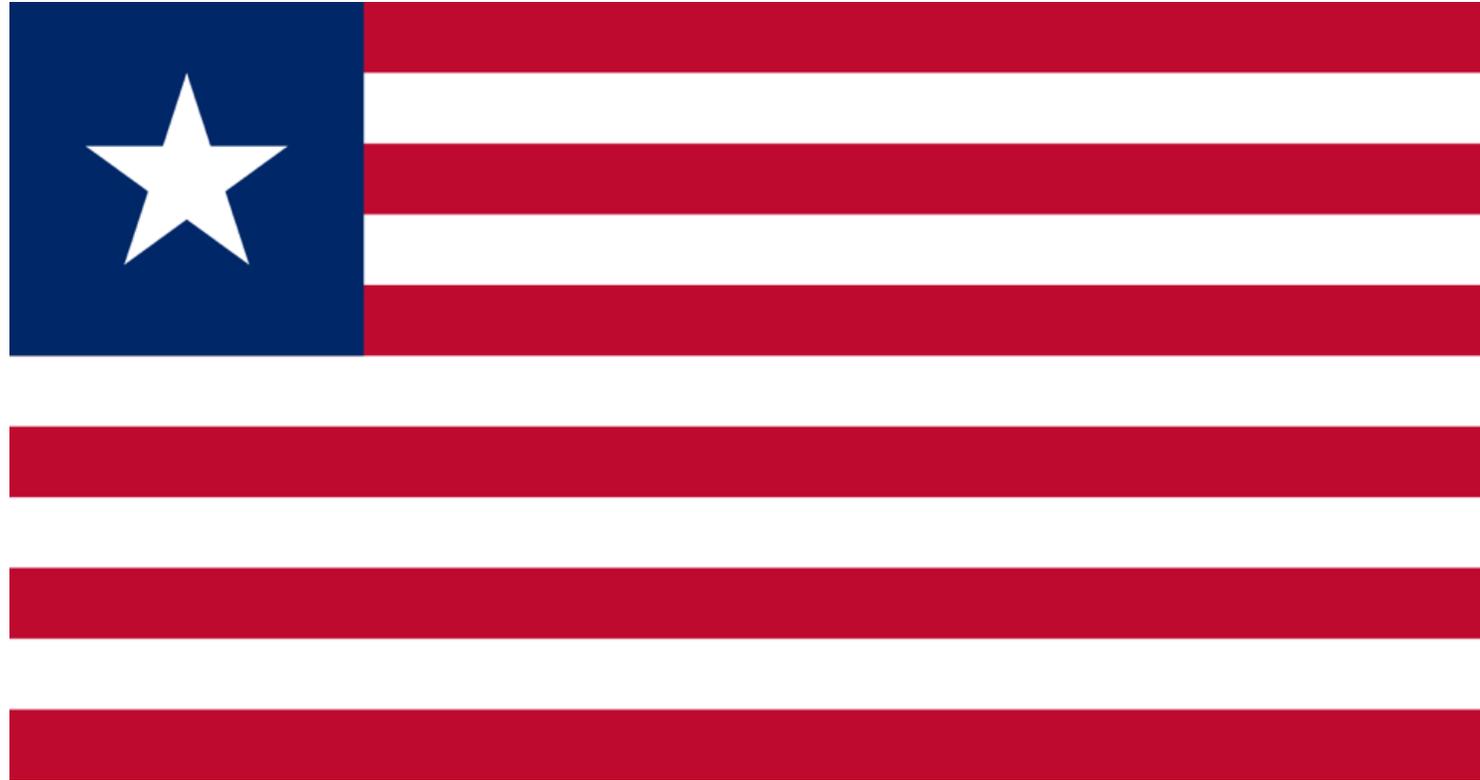
- Generally understudied: the role of affect or emotion on decision-making
- Some theory and evidence suggest that high levels of arousal can reduce the quality of decisions and provoke more rash and punitive responses
 - Specific biases may be tied to particular emotional states
 - Fearful emotional states increases risk aversion
 - Anger increases confidence, feelings of power, and reduces risk aversion (Lerner & Tiedens, 2006)
- Some evidence comes from the efficacy of interventions, such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), at changing behavior
 - We will revisit this later when we discuss remedies
- Open question: do these emotional states also affect high-stakes and deliberated decisions by groups and leaders?

Some common objections to “irrationality” as an explanation for war (and to behavioral game theory in general)

1. Hard for game theory to handle
2. A worry that it over-fits cases
 - Rather than having a small number of tractable models and assumptions
3. Too little falsifiability
 - Worries that opening up the utility function and talking about preferences, or a grab bag of irrational explanations, allows us to explain anything
4. When stakes are high, people should become more like rational calculators
5. Individuals are prone to biases, but nations and governments should not
 - Especially in more decentralized, inclusive organizations?

We will grapple with 4 and 5 especially over the coming weeks, and note how they may be explained by the nature, breadth and inclusiveness of political institutions

Let's look at the example of Liberia at two levels:
The micro (village conflicts) and the macro (the civil wars)

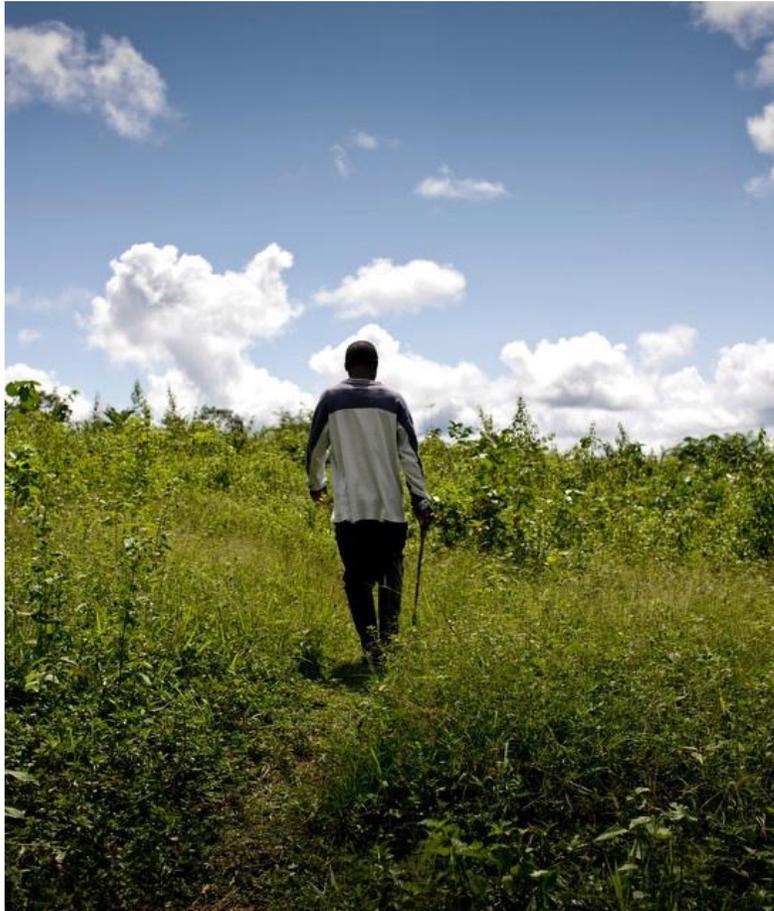


Example 4: Land disputes in rural Liberia



What kinds of disputes are these?

Land boundaries, usage rights, inheritance



Market plot ownership, evictions, debt collection



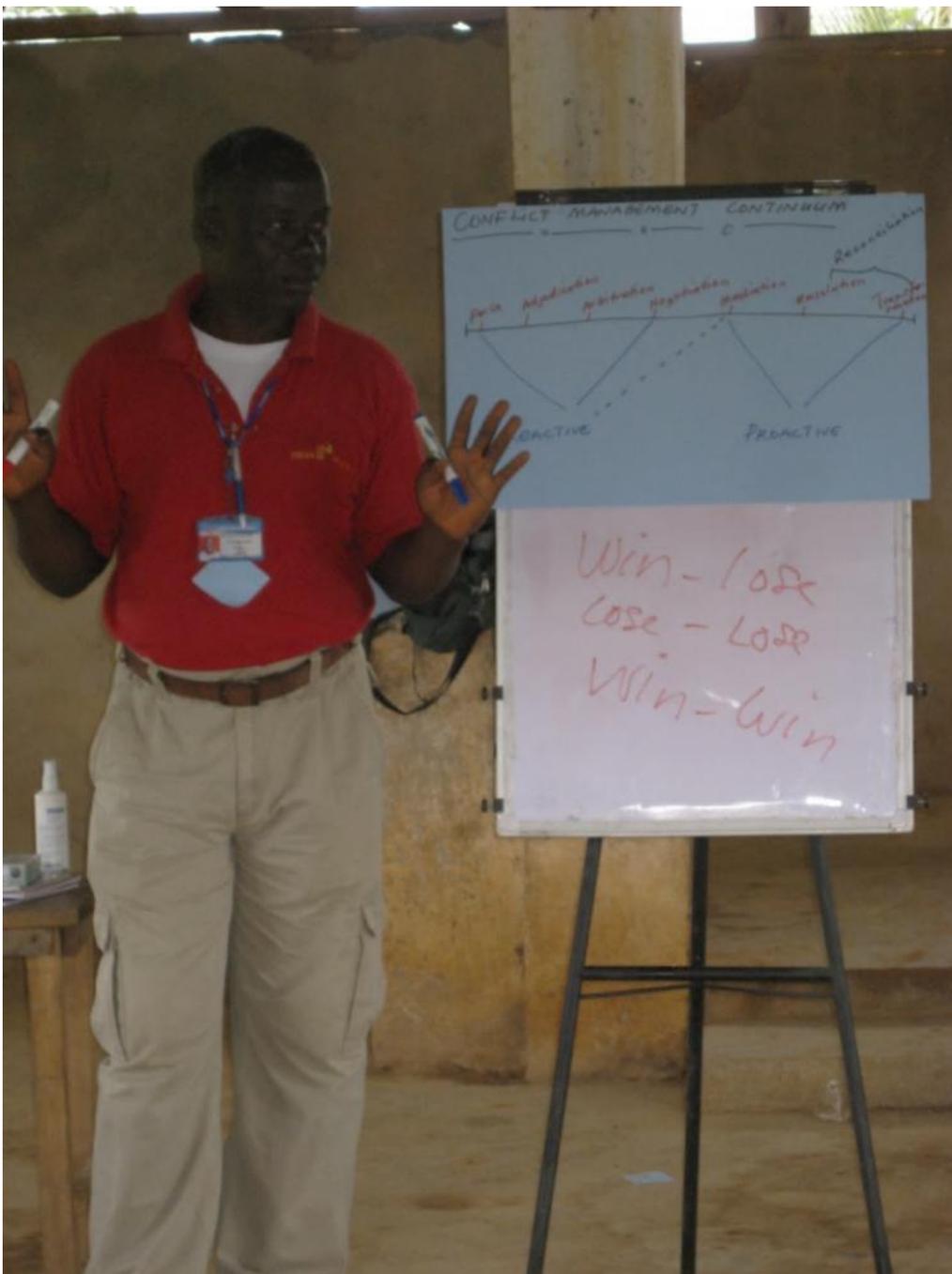
How do the causes of violence apply to this situation?

1. Unchecked leaders (decision-makers)
2. Violent preferences
3. Systematic mistakes
 - People have trouble seeing the justness of the other party's claim
 - A tendency to dehumanize or stereotype members of other ethnic/religious groups
 - Angry responses to real or perceived injustices, escalating smaller disputes into violent ones
4. Uncertainty
 - People have private information about the value of the land to them, the costliness of conflict
 - Violence, threats and property destruction can be costly signals of resolve
5. Commitment problems
 - Commitment is difficult: Possible to “forum shop” to get the outcome that favors your claim
 - At the same time, not clear that there is are “irresistible incentives” to fight



Civil society organizations set out to design a cooperative solution to these problems

- Program by the UN, Government of Liberia, & local NGO in 86 small towns
- Intensive training in “alternative dispute resolution” (ADR) techniques and norms



An effort to change informal institutions (skills and norms)

- Aimed to get 15% of each town's adults into eight days of classes spread over several months
- This is partly because they wanted to instill ADR skills widely
- But also because they were explicitly thinking about what coverage was needed to change social norms
 - Generally accepted understanding of how people will and ought to behave
 - And social sanctions/pressure to enforce

ADR through the lens of our conflict theory

1. Reduce info asymmetries

- Mediators taught to actively elicit and share information between parties
- In negotiation, taught skills and practices of:
 - Keeping communication open
 - Signaling trust
- Sought to instill norms of active information sharing and communication

2. Improve ease of commitment

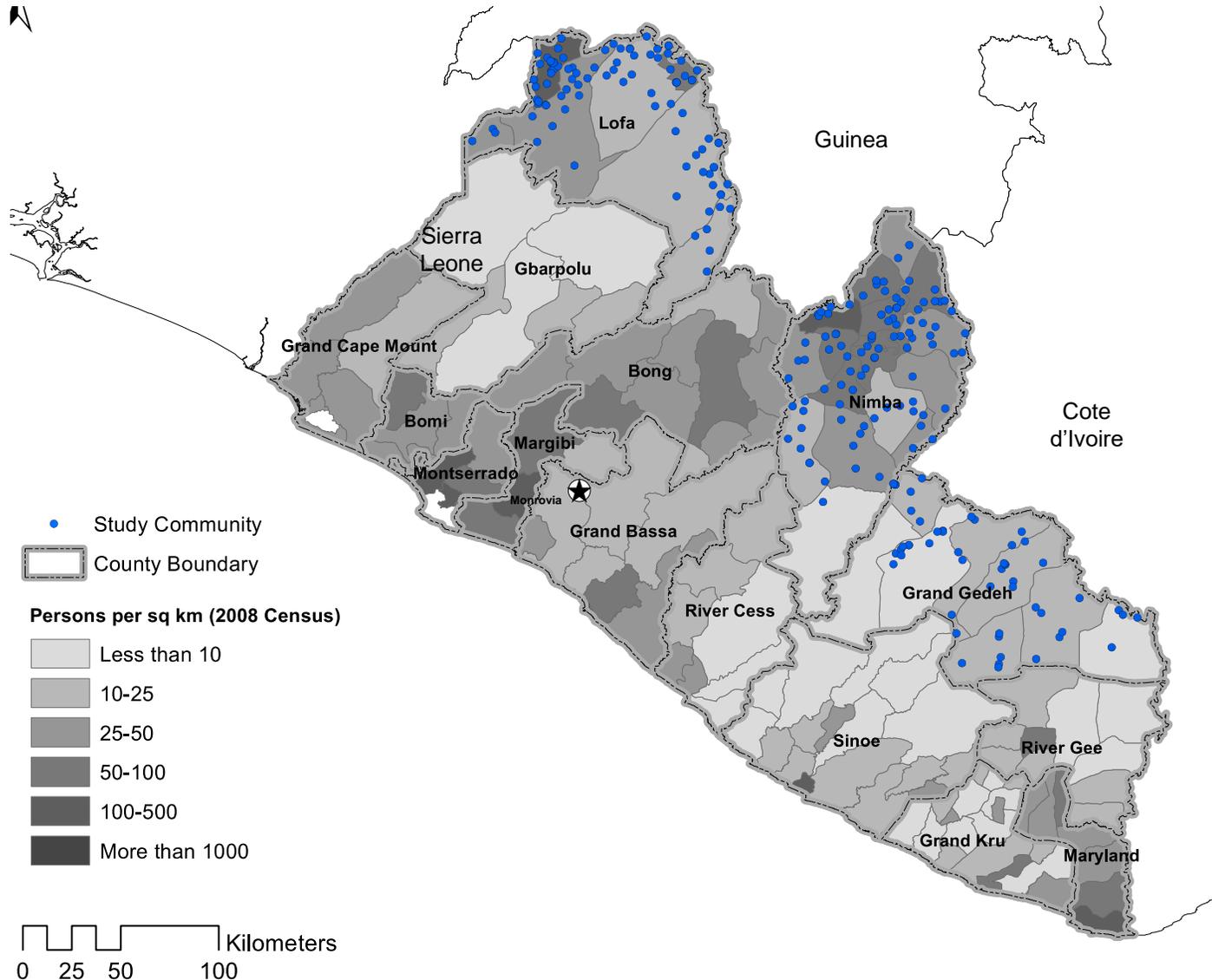
- Legitimize informal negotiation
- Legitimize participation of unofficial mediators (neighbors, etc)
- Instill village-wide norms to discourage
 - Defection from an agreement
 - Forum shopping
- Raise costs of non-cooperation/defection
 - Social sanctioning
 - Social esteem

ADR through the lens of non-cooperative bargaining

3. Manage emotions, errors

- Taught techniques for managing emotion:
 - Managing anger (counting to 10, walking away)
 - Use your “I” statements
- Raised awareness of natural biases
 - Recognizing biases
 - Formal exercises where people had to walk through situation from other side’s shoes
- Fostered norms around using these techniques
- Fostered norms of
 - Engaging directly in disputes
 - Keeping people at the bargaining table
 - More symmetric (fair) bargains

We conducted a randomized control trial



- Randomize intervention at community level
- 246 communities nominated
 - 116 assigned to treatment
- Roll out over 20 months
 - Mar 2009 - Nov 2010
- Randomize order (5 phases)
- Program halts after phase 4
 - These 86 a random subset of 116
 - 160 controls

The results suggest that skills and norms can be fostered, at least temporarily

Intended consequences

- No decrease in the number of disputes
- But Increased the rate of land conflict resolution
 - Especially longstanding disputes
- Reduced violence (especially property destruction)
- Contagious beyond directly treated
- Persistent over three years
- Faded after three years somewhat, in part because disputes lessen

Unintended consequences

- No increase in resolution of other disputes
- More disputes, with more gusto
 - But generally peaceful
- Increased extrajudicial punishment

Over time, what role might the state and other more formal institutions play in Liberia? Can this increase or decrease conflict and why?

Examples:

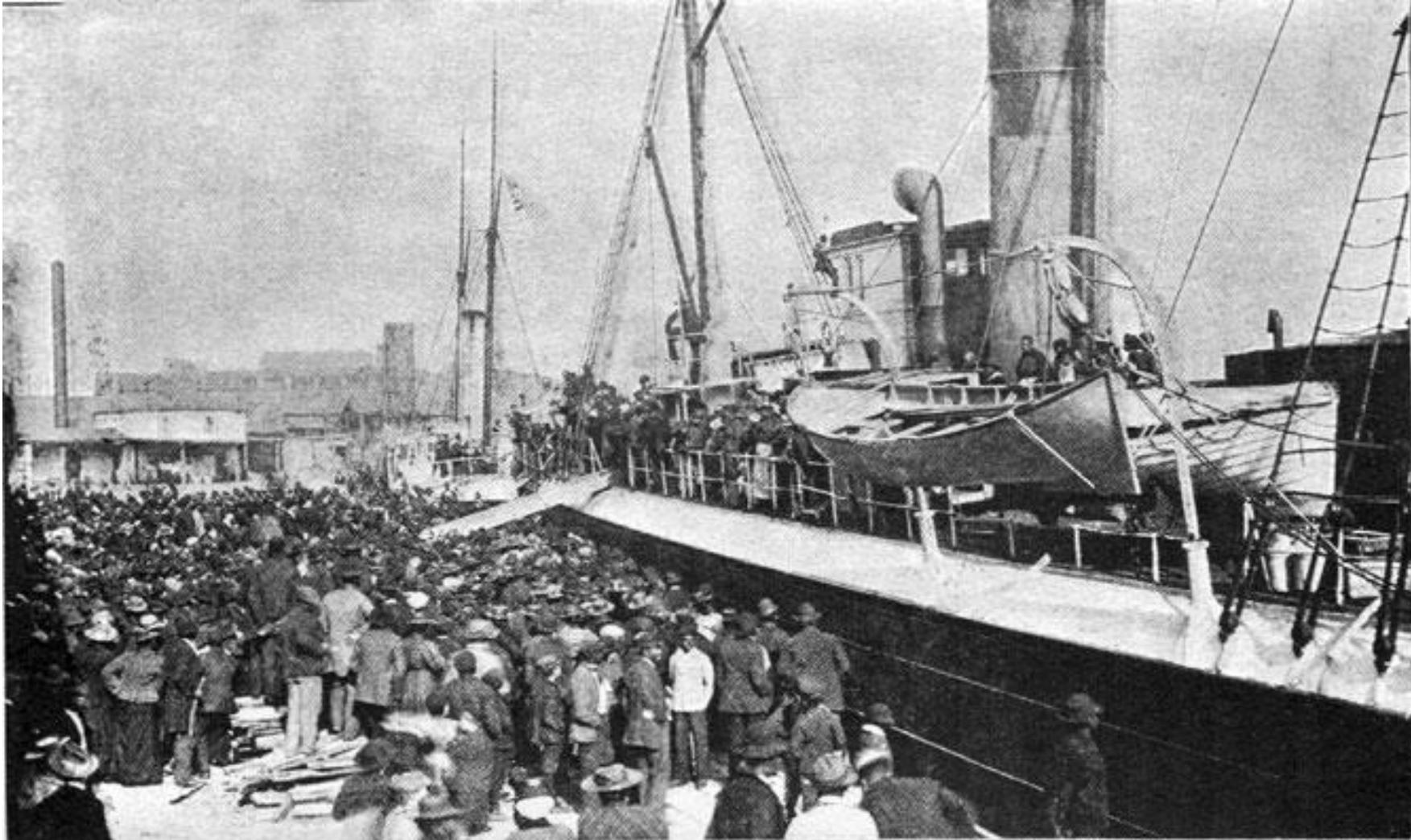
- Legislature
- Police
- Civil and criminal courts
- National social norms, informal institutions
- National civil society organizations



Example 5: Outbreak of civil war in Liberia, 1989



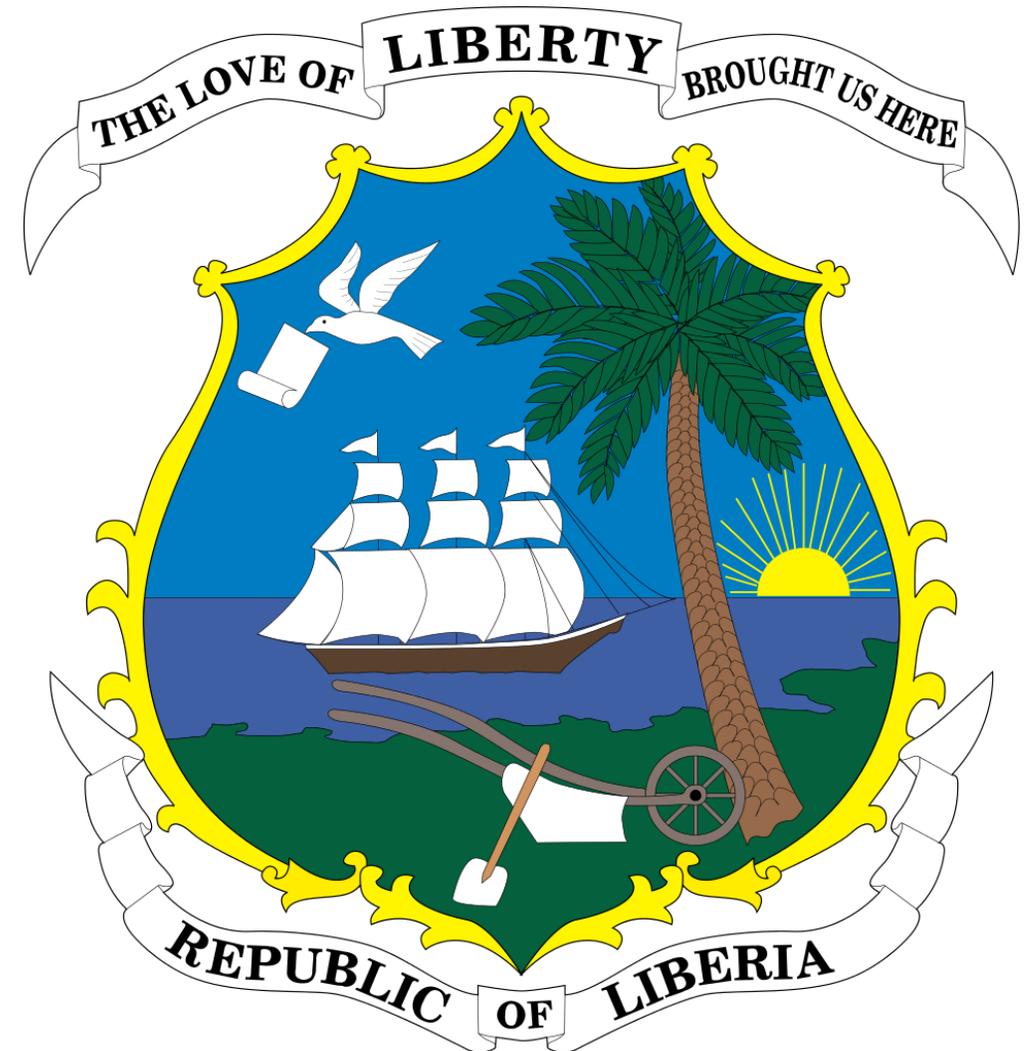
The 19th century Back-to-Africa movement



Departure of the Back-to-Africa Movement ship Laurada bound for Liberia with approximately 300 passengers, half of them from Arkansas; [March 1896](#).

Liberia: Longstanding fragilities and cleavages

- Relatively stateless, diverse region before settlement
- Americo-Liberian colonization (1821-1847) and dominance of politics
 - Oligarchy dominated country through patron-client relations and military control
 - Relative exclusion of indigenous tribes
- Tensions between indigenous tribes
 - Between neighboring ethnic groups
 - Between Christian/traditional “citizens” and Muslim “newcomers”
- Strong US support during Cold War
 - Regional base of military/intelligence operations



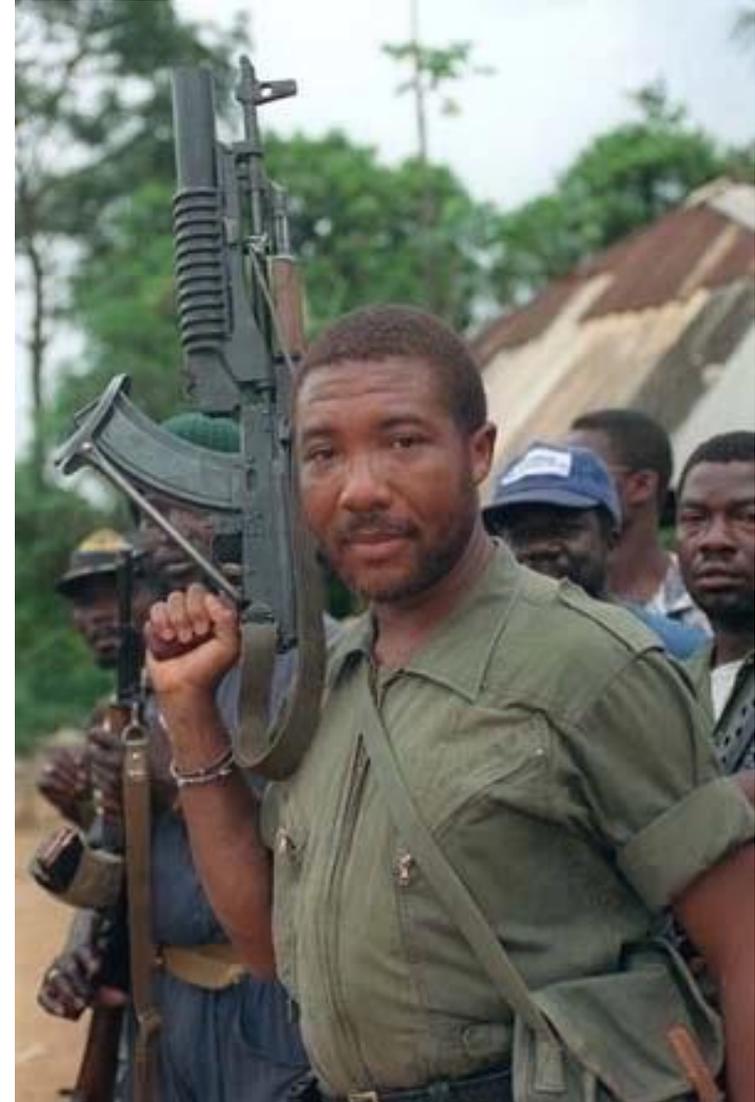
1980-89: Junior officer coup followed by decade of military rule



- Like much of Africa, a highly centralized regime
- (Indigenous) Samuel Doe overthrows government in a coup
- Has US support and aid
- Increasingly brutal and repressive rule
- Tribes aligned with Doe's Krahn group favored, rivals are disfavored, intimidated, increasingly persecuted
- Doe loses aid and military support with end of Cold War

Charles Taylor and the invasion of Liberia, 1989

- US intelligence agents reportedly help Charles Taylor escape from a maximum security prison in Boston in 1985
- Received guerrilla training and funding from Libya and Cote d'Ivoire
- Leads 100 soldiers over Cote d'Ivoire border, igniting a civil war
- Fails to capture the capital



Nigerian “peacekeeping” force occupies capital, civil society installs a civic leader/activist/academic as President (of Monrovia)



1990-1994

“World War I” and “World War II”
Become iconic examples of civil wars in Africa



International intervention helps to end the war



2003-2009

- Closely follows armed intervention by UK in Sierra Leone, successfully ending that war in 2001
- Peace talks brokered by neighboring nations
- US signals its intention to send troops in 2003, and privately works to end the fighting
- An initial force of Nigerian ECOWAS peacekeepers supplanted by a major multicountry UN-led peacekeeping mission and international trusteeship

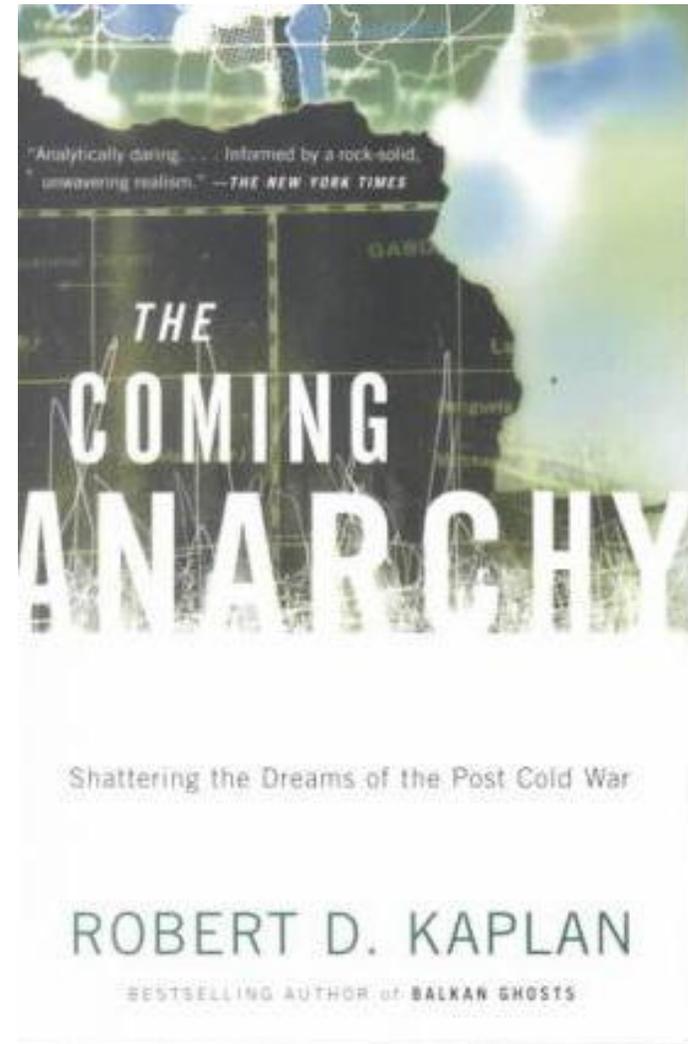
What roots of conflict do you see in Sawyer's account of the war?
What reasons for war are implicit in his proposed solutions?

1. Unchecked elites
2. Violent preferences
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The temptation of irrationality:

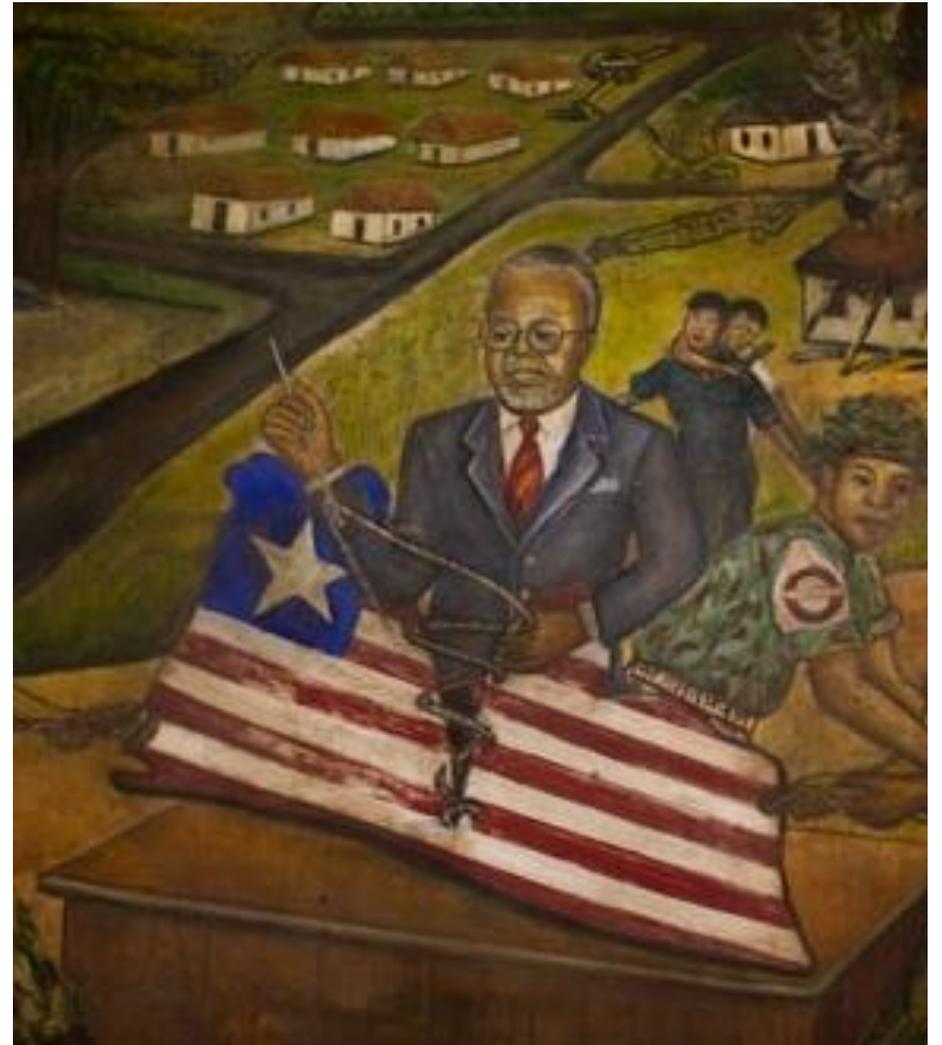
Irrationality, barbarism, emotions were a common narrative, rather than the underlying incentives and politics

- A common journalistic response to the wars in the Mano River region:
Irrational barbarism
 - Crime and lawlessness spreading
 - State control and communal norms weakening
 - An underlying barbaric nature unleashed
 - Compounded by younger, more urban, rootless populations
 - Compounded by environmental degradation and disease
- We have to be wary of the irrational explanation because it is too easy to explain the “other’s” behavior this way



Amos Sawyer, political scientist and former President, emphasizes over-centralization of power in the executive

- Like many African countries, almost no formal checks on Presidential power
 - No local fiscal or decision-making governments
 - Weak parliamentary bodies with little power
 - All revenues, aid travel through the President's cronies in national ministries
- Rule is largely personalized
 - No party system or professional bureaucracy to check the power of the President
 - Only a narrow relatively ethnically-focused set of elite actors
- The Presidency, which has near absolute power, becomes a prize to be captured through coups or invasion



How does overcentralization of power aggravate some of the 5 kinds of bargaining breakdown?

1. Unchecked elites
2. Violent preferences
3. Systematic mistakes
4. Uncertainty
5. Impossible bargains (Commitment problems)

Unchecked leaders: Private benefits to war magnified by the presence of “lootable resources”



Our model so far treats a civil war as an internal affair. But almost no civil war is an internal affair. Outside powers can also give actors private incentives to fight, and impede bargains.



We also have several ingredients for a commitment problem

- Late 1980s/early 1990s sees sudden decrease in power of the Doe regime
 - Like most African governments, under great fiscal strain (Week 6)
 - With end of Cold War, US decreases military support for its more thuggish client states
 - Foreign aid plummets as well
 - A growing push to democratization in Africa reduces legitimacy of thuggish coup leaders
- Power so centralized that commitments are not credible
 - Old regime cannot credibly commit to giving upstarts a share of the spoils
 - Insurgents can't credibly commit to giving regime elites a continued share of the spoils
 - A “winner-take-all” scenario
- What would it take to make power more divisible, shared?
 - Fundamental Constitutional change
 - Complete restructuring of government and bureaucracy
 - Could take decades

Sawyer: Argues for a set of constraining institutions

- Government must be accountable at multiple levels (polycentric)
 - Empower local government jurisdictions (elections, budgetary power)
 - Independent, task-specific bureaucracies crossing space
 - Regional security and economic apparatus
- Echoes elements of European and American constitutional principles:
 - E pluribus unum, Checks and balances
- We will come back to this again in institutions and state-building discussions

How political and legal institutions prevent the repeated outbreak of violence (to be revisited in Weeks 7-9)

- Civil wars are more likely to repeat in countries where:
 - Government elites are unaccountable to the public
 - The public does not participate in political life
 - Information is not transparent.
- Greater institutionalization serves four purposes.
 1. Check executive power, creating governments that serve the interests of a wider population, internalizing costs of war
 2. Restrict ability to privatize benefits from war, e.g. lootable resources
 3. Create multiple nonviolent avenues to influence government policy, making renewed violence less essential for change
 4. Strong institutions help incumbent elites credibly commit to the political terms of a peace settlement, making bargains more likely
 5. Credible checks on executive power mean rebels need not maintain militias and the threat of violence to hold political elites in line

So why did peacekeepers help? (Also second half of course)

