

# ROOT OF CONFLICT

Root of Conflict Podcast

## Episode: Finding the Narrow Corridor

*featuring*

James A. Robinson, Institute Director, The Pearson Institute; Reverend Dr. Richard L. Pearson  
Professor of Global Conflict Studies and University Professor, Harris School of Public Policy

*interviewed by*

Manuel Bustamante, Pearson Fellow  
Sonnet Frisbie, Pearson Fellow

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Full Transcript

Manuel Bustamante: Hi, I am Manuel Bustamante.

Sonnet Frisbie: And I'm Sonnet Frisbie.

Manuel Bustamante: And you're listening to the Root of Conflict by University of Chicago Public Policy Podcasts.

Sonnet Frisbie: We are excited to have with us today, Dr. James Robinson, Director of the Pearson Institute for the Study and Resolution of Global Conflicts at the Harris School of Public Policy. He is also the Reverend Dr. Richard L. Pearson Professor of Global Conflict Studies and the coauthor of the international bestseller, *Why Nations Fail*. We're talking with him today about his new book, *The Narrow Corridor*.

Sonnet Frisbie: Dr. Robinson, thank you so much for joining us and welcome to the podcast, my pleasure to be here. So, let's jump right in. I wanted to talk a little bit about your previous work and how it then transitioned into your current work. So, in your previous book with your coauthor, Daron Acemoglu, *Why Nations Fail*, you argued that the level of economic prosperity in a country largely depends on institutions, which are themselves an outcome of political processes. How did you get interested in institutions? Why institutions?

James Robinson: I think that was because when I was an undergraduate at the London School of Economics, I read this book by North and Thomas called the Rise of the Western World, which is a famous institutionalist interpretation of the Industrial Revolution. We read a whole bunch of books like that. We read Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and all sorts of different interpretations of industrialization. And I just remember that book really stuck with me. I just found it really convincing, a lot of it is about Britain, and I'm British and it resonated with what I understood about British history. And it's a very powerful institutional and political theory of the emergence of the Industrial Revolution. I think Acemoglu also read that book as an undergraduate at the University of York. So, we were both very big fans of that book. And I think that's how we both started thinking about institutions and economic development.

Manuel Bustamante: And I think that one of the most fascinating features from the framework describing your previous book is that extractive institutions do not stem from the ignorance of policy makers, but that exists

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from design. Why do you think that is the case? What is the logic behind extractive institutions not arising from ignorance of policymakers?

James Robinson: One is just kind of empirical. It seems very difficult for us to explain the observed variation in policy and institutions by comparative ignorance. And the second is just field work or practical experience of talking to policy makers and working in the developing world. Time after time, I've been in situations where it's perfectly clear what needs to be done, and everybody understands that, but they can't do it because the politics just won't align with it. So, it's also just many, many real world experiences convinced me that this can't be the right way. This ignorance, what we call the ignorance hypothesis, and why nations fail. Even though it still dominates the economics profession – in fact, three people got the Nobel prize on Monday for promoting the ignorance hypothesis. It's always been completely baffling to me why. That's the paradigm in economics, but it never seems to explain anything I've looked at in detail.

Sonnet Frisbie: And in *The Narrow Corridor* in contrast, it seems like you're focusing more on how these institutions emerge initially and the new concept, or the concept you really focus on is the idea of needs. Can you talk a little bit about, about liberty itself and how you honed in on that concept? Yeah.

James Robinson: In some sense that's exactly right. There's two big kind of new things in *The Narrow Corridor*. One is trying to understand in a deeper way, these long run dynamics of political institutions with a framework that allows us to talk about things that we couldn't talk about and why nations fail. And the other thing is trying to shift the discussion on what's the ultimate dependent variable. What is it we're ultimately trying to understand? What is it that people value or makes for a society worth living in? Yes, that's economics, obviously people care about material things and living standards, but they care about other things. And I think we try to take the view that liberty – that's not some Western notion connected to some particular political tradition - it's actually something that humans aspire to everywhere.

But it's obvious when you look around the world, just as with economic development, there's enormous variation in the extent to which people in different societies experience liberty. So again, why did we focus on that? Well, I think it's trying to broaden that discussion. You could say Amartya Sen tried to do that in his work on development as freedom, so it's related to Sen's agenda of trying to put – Sen himself was much more of a philosophy. He never really proposed a positive theory of when development is freedom arises or doesn't arrive, it's a much more kind of, “This is what we aspire to” and it's a much more kind of normative point of view. So, I think that's just something that we've always thought is important and I work a lot in Africa and I think Africans value liberty just as much as anybody else, wo it's not something peculiarly Western, and it's nice to have a non-Western theory of the emergence of that. Look at people in Hong Kong, what is it they're fighting for? It's not about economics, and Hong Kong is an extremely prosperous and dynamic place economically, but people are extremely concerned about basic rights, it seems to me.

Manuel Bustamante: Like reading your book, we found that it presents an alternative vision to that of political liberty being this durable construct that is arrived at by a process of enlightenment. So according to your book, liberty is kind of an outcome of a process, which is a constant struggle between the state and the society. And you use an allegory to the Red Queen, which is a character in Lewis Carl's *Through the Looking Glass*. I don't know, if you can please explain what is the Red Queen effect, how does it work and what does it have to do with labor?

James Robinson: I mean, that's one of the key ideas in the book is that, whether or not you get liberty depends on this balance between the power of the state and the power of society, that if the state dominates society, that's what we call a despotic situation. Then it's very unlikely that you're going to have liberty. Think about

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China today. But it's also true, you can have the polar opposite situation, think of Yemen where the society, in some sense dominates the state, and that's very common in world history. There's many parts of the world today in the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa in South Asia, which are like that, but that's radically different from China, but it also doesn't create much liberty. It's when you get this balance between the state and society. But what we emphasize, and this is coming to this Red Queen effect you mentioned, is that the balance between the states and the society is not just kind of some one-off moment of constitutional equilibrium or something.

It's actually a race. It's a kind of race and the balance has to be maintained. And it's a struggle in some sense. And the metaphor of the Red Queen from *Through the Looking Glass* is where Alison, the Red Queen are engaged in this race, but they don't go anywhere. They just stay in the same place. And the idea with the Red Queen effect is that if you want to stay in the same place, if you want to maintain this balance between the state and society, there's a lot of work. And there's a lot of struggles in that. It's a process, but here's where the metaphor doesn't work completely. We emphasize that in that struggle and in that process, actually the state and society both get stronger, their metaphor doesn't completely work.

The idea is to put something that sticks in your mind, that kind of emphasizes the importance of this mechanism. This is not about enlightenment, like at the start of Chapter 2, we talk about the history of political institutions and liberty in classical Athens. And to me, there's a struggle to build state institutions, to control them. And that goes backwards and forwards. And people are fighting for liberty to create institutions, to figure out how to write constitutions or use social norms. So, I think that's a brilliant example of what we're talking about.

Sonnet Frisbie: I'm glad that you mentioned China and Hong Kong, that's a really interesting topic. And I'm curious to know how you view the role of technology in this dynamic tension between society and the state. Because on the one hand, you have China exhibiting qualities of what you call in your book, digital dictatorship. While on the other hand, you often have protesters using technology to organize in North Africa and elsewhere. On net, do you think technology is more likely to shore up government or societies in this dynamic tension?

James Robinson: Our view is that there's no one implication of technology, it all depends on the institutional environment in which it's being used. So, technology can be good or be bad, just like natural resources can be good for economic growth, or they can be bad for economic growth. It depends on the institutional context in which they arise. So, I think technology can have either of those effects, but how it's used is just going to depend on the initial institutional equilibrium. That's our view. So, if you're in China, the state can co-opt all of this and it gives the state more effective tools for monitoring and controlling society. But if you're in the United States, hopefully, something different happens, can empower people and there isn't censorship or control. But the point of the Red Queen effect is that it's somehow in the DNA of the state to try to use these tools, to monitor and control, as we learned from all of Snowden's revelations. So then, people have to be very watchful in this context of technological revolutions, where somehow, suddenly, the state can do all sorts of things that previously it couldn't do. That's a moment of enormous risk in some sense for society.

Sonnet Frisbie: Is it in the DNA of people to push back?

James Robinson: I think society has established norms and they established precedents and expectations. And I think what you see in the corridor, when the Red Queen works, is that people do understand that their liberty is threatened and they're willing to protest and organized collectively and fight to protect their liberties. But sometimes it's difficult. It's more difficult for society to act collectively, I'd say, because you have to recognize it and you have to have a common interpretation.

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Manuel Bustamante: Yeah. And I think that, your book, you may be using concepts on social norms to explain this. So, you use the cage of norms, which maybe prevents some societies from pushing back and constrain them. So, can you please explain how these social norms can limit liberty and at the same time constrain the emergence of this?

James Robinson: You put your finger on a very important part of the book. I think that there's a cardboard cutout critique of institutionalism quite a few economists have rolled out, which is that, "Oh if you look at the constitution and the electoral rules and the law, Colombia doesn't have such bad institutions." So, it can't be institutions that explain why Colombia has GDP per capita, 20% of the U.S. level. But institutions, it's not about that. There's a much broader set of institutions as irrelevant for the way societies function. There's what Douglas and North called informal institutions. And anyone who's ever lived or done research in a developing country knows that there's all sorts of norms and practices, which have massive consequences for economics and politics, but which are not in the constitution, written down as laws. And so, I think perhaps in the past, these things are much harder to research and they much harder to measure as a social scientist.

And perhaps that's one of the reasons why in the past, we've shied away from that a little bit. But I think one of the advantages of this current framework is it allows us to talk much more about that. And we know that's a big topic of research for us. And I think we'd like to push that agenda. So the way it comes up in the book at the moment is the way we start talking about it, is to say, if you have a despotic leviathan, as we call it, following Hobbes' terminology where the state dominates society, that doesn't create much liberty. And the opposite situation, like I mentioned, Yemen earlier, where you could say the society dominates, the state doesn't create much liberty either. And in some sense, there's two reasons for that.

One is a very traditional Hobbesian reason, which is that there's no state, there's no neutral arbiter. So, there's a lot of feuding and violence in a society like Yemen, every man has a dagger and a gun. And so, that's a Hobbesian war. So, that's the first reason there's not much liberty in Yemen. But there's another reason which is, you see in all these societies without strong central authority, this is very evident in Africa. Social norms, proliferate to mitigate the risk of conflict or violence or disputes breaking out. This is extremely well documented by anthropologists. So, there's actually much less violence in these societies. And Hobbes would have imagined, because societies create ways of avoiding situations that would be conflict prone. How do they do that? They do it by restricting people's opportunities. Yemen has the lowest participation of women in the labor force, in any country in the world, and why is it that women are shuttered away and kept in home?

And that's just part of this, trying to kind of create a society where disputes don't arise, where conflicts don't arise and that manifests itself in the economy and every aspect of life. So, we call this the cage of norms. So, the cage of norms is a fundamental obstacle to creating a more inclusive society. And part of what the Red Queen does is to erode that cage of norms. And we tried to give some examples from European history in that chapter where, as this race between the states and society takes place, the state gains capacity or whatever, but society changes also. And that's a very crucial part of creating liberty, it seems to us.

Manuel Bustamante: And you also mentioned the role of like political entrepreneurs in breaking the schedule of norms sometimes. So, the case of Solon, you mentioned the case of Shaka Zulu and others. So, how important do you think these political entrepreneur, or the kind of individuals, are in breaking the cage of norms? It seems to be something that will take much more time, but at the same time, there are some particular times where things change really roughly.

James Robinson: Yeah. I mean, I think as an economist, economists are very happy to talk about innovation, technological innovation. Thomas Edison invented the light bulb, why did he do that? Well, he was just a

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creative chap and he had this idea. Economists are happy to write down models of technological innovation and how technological innovation is critical for economic development and raising productivity and living standards. But, for some reason they're much more reluctant to write down models of institutional innovation. People do innovate. If you look at the U.S. constitution, first day of the U.S. constitution, James Madison showed up with his Virginia plan, what was that? Here's a blueprint for how we do things. It was an institutional innovation, and that's a very interesting moment.

If you've ever read the oral history of African societies, every oral history of African societies involves things like that, involves a - Sundiata eats all the clans' totems in Africa, clans have these totems, which is usually an animal that you're not allowed to eat. So, Sundiata eats all the clans' totems, but he's rejecting the kinship, the clan system, he's breaking with the clan system because he's in the middle of building institutions. That example is not in the book, but like at some point you just want to get finished and there's too many examples.

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Sonnet Frisbie: You mentioned the U.S. Constitution. And so, there are sometimes implicit norms, but there can also be implicit compromises. And you talk about how, in some ways, the U.S.'s entry into the corridor was a deal with the devil. I think you called it a Faustian bargain. Can you explain the implications of this compromise, maybe presently?

James Robinson: Yeah, it's uncomfortable talking about things like that. We talk about this deal and how liberty, or at least liberty for white men was created in the U.S. at the time of the constitution. And women even lost some political rights. Under the colonial institutions, women who had enough wealth were actually labeled to vote in some states like in Philadelphia, if I remember correctly. So, they lost rights. And obviously, there was then this racial aspect of it. That is a dirty deal, because it was powerful. The powerful people were Northern mercantile interests, nascent industrialists, what Southern slave owners like Madison and Washington and Jefferson. You had to somehow create a system of rules that respected their interests, and that went on for a long time. the Missouri Compromise in the 1820s, but nothing is perfect.

I think the big picture of the U.S., if you compare it to Latin American countries like we do in Chapter 18, is that they all had very similar problems to solve. On balance, the U.S., maybe the word dirty deals, but they solved it much more effectively than any Latin American country did. So, I guess from that perspective, the U.S. has been a success story, but obviously you see the legacy of that dirty deal. If you go out of the Harris School and turn left and go two blocks, there's still an enormous amount of exclusion and marginalization in U.S. society. And things like the Bill of Rights – it was implicitly recognized that this did not apply to black people, essentially until the war on the court in the 1950s and 1960s basically forced dates to apply Bill of Rights, to protect black people's rights.

So, that legacy of exclusion of Afro-Americans is still with us today. And it's just outrage in some sense that we tell the story of how that propagated itself over time, up to redlining and the creation of these urban ghettos. I still just have never understood. I've been in the United States a long time, and I've never understood how that can persist without outrage, = people should be outraged about that in this society, in this country. But they're also used to the way things are that nothing happens.

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Manuel Bustamante: So in this podcast, we also try to understand the Roots of Conflict and what can be done about it. So, it seems that the issue of populism has been linked to conflict in the past. So, with some Harris students, we just returned from the Pearson Global Forum in Berlin. And I think that what I find striking is that the fact that Hitler was initially appointed under a democratic regime under the Weimar Republic, which seems very paradoxical. So, I was wondering how does your theory help us explain the rise of populist leaders and why do you think that voters sometimes dismantle the checks and balances that can help constrain their leaders?

James Robinson: Yeah, I mean that's an interesting example of a phenomenon that we would have had a hard time dealing with in *Why Nations Fail*, but actually, coincidentally, not by design, the framework in *The Narrow Corridor* actually can help you think about that. Because why nations fail, in some sense, citizens are always in favor of inclusive institutions, and it's hard to imagine citizens overthrowing. The emphasis is very much on examples where inclusive institutions collapse, because of almost an elite fermented coup like in Venice. But I think the Nazi example is a case where, in some sense, like popular discontent, people, ordinary people get so discontented and alienated from the institutions that they they lose all faith in them and they're willing to overthrow them. So, we tried to talk about that in the book, in this chapter, *The Devil in The Details*.

I would say the framework is flexible enough to talk about that. I'm not sure I completely understand it. I think I think if you look at the German case, it's a moment that's difficult to understand, nowadays, in the sense that if you look at the way the Weimar Republic functions, there were a third of the Congress that were communists, who wanted to have a Soviet style revolution and thought that democracy was like a bourgeois institution. And then there was the Nazis who didn't like it. And then there were all of these traditional Prussians and conservatives who wanted to restore the monarchy. And so, there was this very heavy hand of history of the moment of the Bolshevik revolution, the 1917 revolution.

But the big fact was until the depression hit, the Nazis still only had 2 or 3% of the vote, and then the depression hit and the Weimar institutions were completely incapable of dealing with the economic crisis. And then the Nazis surged. So the way we try to talk about this is that sometimes challenges or shocks can just run massively ahead of the ability of the institutions to cope with them. But it was really a kind of, I don't know, it was a double whammy, it was a triple or quadruple whammy that sunk the Weimar Republic. So the good news is that it's hard to imagine that happening again. And the bad news of course, is that if it does happen, it has calamitous effects for human beings and human society. We try to talk about how challenges, and maybe that is happening a bit now, there's this massive increase in inequality, a lot of social and economic dislocation, which has been created by globalization, that institutions in the United States and Britain and elsewhere have singularly failed to address. And people don't know what the problem is. People blame it on migration and that problem is not going to go away and people are scared. So, there are a lot of shocks and crises. And I think what you do see is this disillusionment with institutions and then people can reach for radical solutions. Yeah.

Manuel Bustamante: But I think the response was very different in the U.S. with the FDR and the crisis. And like in Sweden, as you mentioned in the book, so the response to the same shock can be very different in different places.

James Robinson: It could be but it's good to remember when we're talking about migration, that the U.S. severely restricted immigration in the 1920s. Before the 1920s, you could basically show up at Ellis Island, and if you didn't have tuberculosis, they let you in. But enormous restrictions were put on. And one thing we do try to point out is that people are very selective in their memory. I think populism, the progressives. So, for example, in the 1890s, William Jennings, Bryan, and people remember good things about that, the support for antitrust and fighting big business and making the Senate directly elected, getting women votes. But there were

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also lots of really awful ugly things associated with populism. Antisemitism. Anti-immigrants. Blaming Chinese people. Roosevelt. What about Roosevelt? Well, Roosevelt tried to pack the Supreme Court, Roosevelt flagrantly and sneakily violated term limits, two things that Trump hasn't even – I was going to say he hasn't dreamed of, he's probably dreamed of them, but he hasn't tweeted about them.

I think our memories a little bit selective about lots of these social movements. Often there's a package, and it's two steps forward, and one step back and we tend to remember the two steps forward. So, like the optimistic view of what's going on now is that actually there were all of these discontents and grievances in society, which are perfectly legitimate and they need to be addressed. And I personally think that there are some issues, which you can't make compromises over. I don't think you make compromises over discrimination against women or against minorities or black people, or anti-Semitism, there's no trade-off there. But I think discussing migration is a legitimate issue in a nation state. What rules do we want to have? I think that's a legitimate discussion. That's a discussion that every country in the world has had in the past and the fact that that's coming up now, that's because people are unhappy about the current situation and that's perfectly legitimate in a democracy.

Sonnet Frisbie: It is. It reminds me of the term that was coined by Viktor Orbán in 2014, illiberal democracy, and he's a leader who's talked a lot about migration. But it seems that based on your theories, illiberal democracy would be a conflict in terms.

James Robinson: The way I would think about it is in terms of the cage of norms. Think of the example that I was just giving a Weimar Republic, where there were huge legacies from the monarchical regime about how things should be done in the 1920s in Germany. And I would say, in Hungary, there's all sorts of legacies from the past. Legacies of antisemitism and conservative with a small c, views. This is how I'd think about it. And I think if you look at Europe, what historians point out is that there's this very steep gradient from west to east. There was mass serfdom and feudalism in Hungary until the 1848 revolution when the serfs were freed, that Eastern Europe never modernized in the same way Western Europe did until very recently. So, there's a long shadow of the past in Eastern Europe.

And I think what we've seen with the European Union is that people massively overestimated the rapidity of social and institutional change, and they didn't have a realistic view. They somehow thought that this could all be wished, that Hungarian or Romanian and Bulgarian society could be completely reformed in a decade by the European Union. I think what we've seen is that that's not true, and the adjustment is slower and we just have to live with that, I think. I think if you look at the history of Western Europe, you look at the nature of Western European society. That's very different from what you see in Eastern Europe. And you just have to accept that, you have to work with that. That's what Solon had to do.

Sonnet Frisbie: I wanted to pivot a little bit. You were talking in the book refuting Francis Fukuyama's famous claim about the end of history in 1989 with the fall of the Soviet Union, and that it would usher in a period of increasing peace and prosperity. Instead, you warned us to expect diversity, which is a bit unsatisfactory. Do you see any trends within this diversity that you can point to, more countries entering the corridor or fewer?

James Robinson: The pattern in history is divergence, not convergence. And the convergence of all of these countries to liberal democracy was a very unlikely outcome. And Professor Fukuyama makes a more subtle claim. So, in some sense, he doesn't really push the positive claim. He wanted to push, I think more a normative claim, which is perhaps more interesting. And I'm not sure I have much to say about that. I think he's probably completely wrong about that too, because the Chinese, this idea that somehow liberal democracy established itself as the only legitimate system of authority in the world, I don't think that's what the Taliban think. That's not what the Chinese think. I think there's very different political philosophies in the world, in my experience.

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There's very different ideas about what constitutes legitimate political authority. And it doesn't look like liberal democracy.

I'd like to write that book next. I think Acemoglu maybe disagrees with me, but in his defense, Professor Fukuyama is a very interesting, clever man. I think he was more advancing the normative claim. He understood it was difficult, positively. But I think both the positive and the normative claim are wrong. The book is about the positive claim in some sense. I think what we tried to say towards the end of the book is of course, the modern world is different. Talking about serfdom and the 1848 revolution, labor oppression has disappeared throughout the world. Discrimination against women, non-heterosexual people is falling in large parts of the world. You see many things. Why is that? Well partly, that's to do with power.

It's partly to do with women mobilizing and getting organized. But it's also this language of rights, which we talk a little bit about, which I find interesting. We're trying to do some research on this in Colombia and what was the impact of the 1991 constitution that introduced these notions of rights? What was the effect of that on mobilization? And did it influence people's ability to engage in collective action or did it lead them to demand different things? My sense is that that's been very important in making the corridor wider. It's much more difficult to have a despotic society with this language of, "You could do it if you were powerful like China or North Korea, or you can really repress people," but it's more difficult. And so it gives people a language to kind of interpret what the problem is.

And so, I see that all over the world, you see that in rural Sierra Leone, people demanding their rights. That's an interesting thing. I'm not sure that globalization or technology has these unambiguous effects, but I do think you see some things about the world that make the corridor wider and easier to get into. But the big picture for us is always this persistence. If you went back to North and Thomas' book, I mentioned earlier, *The Rise of The Western World*, they trace this emergence of political and economic institutions in Britain, which formed the basis for the Industrial Revolution back to these changes and conflicts in the 17th century. But I guess our view has gotten deeper and deeper on that.

When we talk about that, when is it that Western Europe really starts to diverge, it's actually in the Early Middle Ages for us. It's not that it's very late in the day. And that's how I see the world. And Manuel was mentioning earlier entrepreneurship. And you do see that, societies do change, but they do it in a remarkably context-dependent way. I think if you thought about these examples in Colombia of political entrepreneurs, trying to change things and trying to harness the Red Queen effect, actually the big picture is the improvements are small. The enduring improvements are small.

Manuel Bustamante: Now that you mentioned Colombia, I can't leave without asking you to comment on the peace agreement that was signed in 2016 between the FARC guerrillas and the Colombian government after more than years of 50 years of civil conflict. So, do you think that the peace agreement can help Colombia move closer into the corridor, or what I personally wonder is, what conditions can contribute to a broader coalition in favor of - depending the diplomacy, because I've seen, as you, some responses as you discuss in your book? So kind of what kind of conditions are necessary for these changes?

James Robinson: I think the peace process was a fabulous thing, and it was just an extraordinary achievement of Sergio Jaramillo and Humberto de la Calle to get the FARC to re-imagine their relationship to Colombia differently. And it's great that 10,000 of those people demobilized, but has that changed Colombia? No. First of all, the government is incapable of implementing the policy. So, the FARC are more serious than the government, as far as I can tell. And there's a recent report in the summer about the staggering failure to implement large parts of the peace agreement. And luckily, most FARC people have reconciled themselves to

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that being the case and decided that they want to reintegrate themselves back into Colombian society anyway, and a couple of thousands have gone back to fighting. But that's still a good thing to me, that there's very interesting aspects of the peace agreement, this whole truth and reconciliation process, and getting people to talk about their crimes.

A few years ago I attended some of these sessions where paramilitary leaders were confronted by their victims. People were very skeptical, but actually I found it extremely real. Like it was real. This guy Ramón Isaza, he was almost in tears. Lots of terrible things happened that nobody ever intended. There was real reconciliation, it was actually extraordinary. That on a large scale could be something fabulous for Colombia. Somehow they have to change the way they think about things. But of course, the government is busy gutting that process already, and they have no commitment to that. President Uribe gains political capital out of these conflicts, he has a need for enemies, you could say. So I think it's been a good thing and it's a great thing and the FARC will never come back like they did before. And that's a great thing for Colombia, but has it turned Colombia into something different? I think the answer to that is clearly, no.

Manuel Bustamante: Just to end the podcast, since you are a professor at the Harris School here at the University of Chicago, we've felt that some of your theories may leave some policymakers feeling somewhat hopeless. So, first, I wanted to ask you if the, if you think that there is something that are best practices in policy, and what do you think are the main takeaways from your book for policymakers and students so that they can design better policies?

James Robinson: I think there's always best practices in different domains. I think that if you want to improve the capacity of the state, we understand lots of things about how you have to introduce meritocratic recruitment and promotion, and we know a lot about incentives, and the difficult thing is making any of that work. When President Macri came to power in Argentina, he had to fire 20,000 noquis in Argentina who are basically ghost people working in the civil service who are members of the Peronist party. But then a few months later he had to fire a bunch of relatives of his own ministers because that's just how things are in Argentina. There's all these pressures which create enormous dysfunctionality in state institutions.

And I think everyone understands that, they understand the political and social pressures and the difficult thing is not the policy, but the politics and in fact, the story of the Macri government, which is fascinating, is actually they couldn't figure out feasibly a politics which would get them out of this Peronist situation. And the Peronists will be back. That's not a problem of policy. It's a problem of politics. And so, I think that one thing about the Harris School, which distinguishes it from any other public policy school is there's a very deep commitment to trying to teach students politics and help them think about politics. And I don't think there's a magic wand for solving political problems, because all the details of interests and organization and power and parties suddenly become very important in figuring out what a feasible politics is. But also innovation.

There's a lot of very clever innovation to get around political problems. Here's a generalization. If you look in detail at what Mockus and Fajardo did, one mayor is very successful in Bogota and Medellín in mundane and trying to move the societies towards much more peace, public good provision. One thing they both did was let kind of very venal, clientelistic politicians take credit for things that they didn't do. Your impulse is always to take credit for everything yourself, but they didn't do that. Like they were bigger than that. There's a famous scene where Mockus is doing something. I don't remember what it is now. And he's on stage with this extremely traditional conservative clientelistic politician. And then he gives the guy the credit for it. The guy looks like his false teeth are about to jump out. But what can he say? "No, I didn't do it." You know? You have to create ownership in it. And that's a hard thing to do. You have to be very non-egotistical, and Fajardo did the same thing, you know? So, I think there are political strategies. And I think we don't think enough. Daron and I don't

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think enough and maybe collectively public policy schools, we don't think enough about how to draw robust conclusions like that. Perhaps that should be on the next book instead.

Sonnet Frisbie: Great. Well, professor, it has been wonderful talking to you today and reading *The Narrow Corridor*. Thank you so much for your time.

James Robinson: My pleasure.

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