

The Growing Role of Ecoviolence in Civil Wars and Regional Wars

Homer-Dixon, Thomas, and Jessica Blitt, eds. *Ecoviolence: Links Among Environment, Population, and Security*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998.

Suliman, Mohamed, ed. *Ecology, Politics, and Violent Conflict*. London and New York: Zed Books, 1999.

Traditional conflict studies have typically focused on traditional categories, such as religion, ethnicity, economics and political ideology. These two books both propose adding the environment as a crucial category for understanding how low-intensity warfare begins, especially in Third World countries. This viewpoint represents a paradigm shift in evaluating the underlying causes of post-World War II conflicts. Instead of calculating the ideology and strategic interest of superpowers such as the USSR and the USA as a central methodology of international relations, these works assert that ecological concerns should begin to take center stage. According to Michael Klare in *Current History*, "with the cold war over and a new era beginning, resource competition will again play a crucial role in world affairs."¹ Naturally, this resource competition is being conducted in a much different situation than what occurred during nineteenth-century European colonialism. Throughout the twentieth century, renewable and non-renewable resources were increasingly exploited, a process with still no end in sight. Thus, as developing nations rush to catch up economically with First World countries, the seeds of environmental conflict are planted on national and regional levels. Both books emphasize the view that Western political officials and military officers need to account for environmental factors before reaching decisions on what role to play in emerging conflicts that have the potential to severely weaken international security.

Of the two books, *Ecoviolence* has the more useful format concerning the environment as a source of international tension. After an initial chapter on theory, the book then gives an in-depth analysis on five case studies in the succeeding chapters. These five sections focus on Chiapas, Mexico; Gaza, Israel; KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa; Pakistan and Rwanda. Much of the environmental tension comes from the ever growing population pressure, as the world is projected to have 8 billion people by 2025, with 90 percent of this increase coming in developing nations. (p.1) When this huge population consumes renewable resources such as water, cropland, forests and fisheries, competition over remaining resources becomes more fierce and potentially deadly.

Of *Ecoviolence's* five case studies, the best researched is on the Chiapas region of Mexico. In this chapter, Philip Howard and Thomas Homer-Dixon give a fascinating picture of the Zapatistas' rebellion that exploded on New Year's Day in 1994 when the rebels captured several cities, including San Cristobal. Although this particular revolt was crushed, the Zapatistas continue to be a menacing insurgent group that has current Mexican President Vicente Fox proposing negotiations. Most of the Zapatistas' popular support comes from the Indigenas, native people still speaking Mayan languages. The

insurgents are angered over their displacement from fertile agricultural land by wealthy landowners, and are frustrated by their bitter struggle to maintain a subsistence level of existence. Although the Mexican government tried to protect the environment in 1978 with the creation of the Montes Azules Bioserve, the policy has mostly failed since peasants have increasingly occupied the area in order to obtain their own personal land. Given the rapid population growth of the rural Chiapan poor, the takeover of 30 percent of Chiapan territory by the cattle industry and the immense size of coffee farms, the environmental pressures will only get worse. For example, soil erosion has been exacerbated by slash-and-burn farming and then by intensive livestock agriculture. Even worse is the destruction of the Lacandon rain forest, two-thirds of which is now destroyed, mostly in the past 25 years. Because of all these factors, it seems likely that the Zapatistas will remain the most threatening rebel group in North America.

The second best *Ecoviolence* case study is on the Gaza Strip, written by Kimberley Kelly and Thomas Homer-Dixon. Although Israel has ceded partial self-rule to the Palestinian Authority (PA), it still maintains ultimate military control. In the Gaza Strip, water has been perhaps the most important issue in the perpetual conflict. While Palestinians lived under substantial water restrictions following the 1967 Six-Day War, Israeli settlers did not and in turn consumed 8-10 times as much water per capita. Thus, Palestinian resentments in Gaza were caused not only by a great disparity in political power and economic success, but also in access to renewable natural resources. Comparatively, the Gazan situation is far more desperate than that of the West Bank because Gaza's aquifer is quite shallow, a few feet from the surface, very polluted and heavily depleted. Basically, the Gaza Strip needs an alternate source of water in a contentious and arid region. The lack of decent water has caused a litany of health problems and has crippled the agricultural industry, formerly a Gazan mainstay. Even the option of working in Israel is now considerably diminished since the percentage of Gazan workers employed in Israel dropped from a pre-Intifada level of 70 percent (before 1987) to a mere 11 percent in 1994. Unemployment in the Gaza Strip grew to a dangerous 60 percent, an ominous figure given the continual civil war with Israel. Ardent Palestinians who reject the PA/PLO patronage based rule now often join more militant groups, like Hamas and the Islamic Jihad. All in all, the Gaza Strip could become an unmanageable terrorist threat to Israel since a root cause, water, is becoming a more severe problem every day.

As for South Africa, Valerie Percival and Thomas Homer-Dixon offer compelling evidence that ecological factors have contributed to massive outbreaks of violence. Specifically, the Kwa Zulu-Natal black homeland has been devastated by a lack of electricity, tremendous soil erosion, significant deforestation and widespread water scarcity. Group loyalties were reinforced by the harsh struggle for survival, and the Natal region was largely abandoned by the ruling National Party in 1990. Between 1990 and 1994, the battle between the African National Congress (ANC) and the Inkatha produced South Africa's worst violence levels in history. Currently, warlords who specialize in capturing scarce resources rule many informal, poor settlements. It remains an open question whether the current ruling ANC party can develop a more effective ecological policy and decrease the omnipresent violence in former homelands like Natal.

Whereas the case studies on specific regions are tightly focused, *Ecoviolence* loses some contextual insight in the broadly based chapters on Pakistan and Rwanda. Most of the Pakistan information is a recital of ecological issues in developing nations: rapid population growth, massive urbanization, soil erosion, pollution, deforestation, crime syndicates, an export driven economy and burdensome foreign debt. As for Rwanda, some of the same issues are detailed. However, the book achieves a sense of balance by concluding that environmental issues were only limited factors in the recent Tutsi vs. Hutu warfare. This mid-1990s battle, which ended in genocide, was largely based on more traditional social divisions. Throughout *Ecoviolence*, the various authors usually give carefully constructed accounts that avoid overstating the environmental case.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of the authors of *Ecology, Politics, and Violent Conflict*. While *Ecoviolence* gives deep insight into a handful of regional conflicts, *Ecology* attempts to give knowledge of the entire globe and thereby casts its net far too widely. For example, in order to debunk the myth that ethnicity is natural and therefore an inherent cause of conflict, Nicholas Hildyard breezily flies through more than a dozen examples in the space of a few pages. (pp. 8-12) Nearly the entire book is a bird's eye view of ecologically based conflicts, which is not very useful in achieving a solid understanding of any particular situation. The first five chapters are largely devoted to theoretical considerations to the neglect of current, realistic examples. Even the case study chapters (chapters 6-11) usually march through seemingly countless cases with little or no regard for the actual local context. Only chapter 10, on the mining situation on Bougainville, Papua New Guinea, takes the time to explain the complex historical and cultural background behind the story. Volker Boge paints a stark picture of the Australian exploitation of copper beginning in 1967, complete with open-pit mining, enormous profits, devastating pollution, loss of fish, contaminated water, decreased farmland and increased malaria rates. Although chapter 11 is solely on Sudan's tragic food situation, it is not nearly as informative as the previous chapter on Bougainville and mining. Finally, the last three chapters on conflict resolution are not very informative since they mostly regress back into overly theoretical models about environmental concerns.

A key difference between the two books is how each one evaluates the relationship between First World, industrial nations and the global environment. In *Ecology*, there is a continual bashing of Western financial institutions, especially the World Trade Organization, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. This constant criticism is based on another theme, which is a strong resentment against capitalism as practiced over the past two centuries. On the other hand, *Ecoviolence* gives a much better picture of how environmental concerns can produce frequently unmanageable civil wars and regional warfare. As renewable resources diminish, ecoviolence and ecoterrorism will continually become sources of tension. As Vaclav Smil notes, rich nations that expect to enjoy abundant energy and a smooth ecological situation are being unrealistic.²

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Endnotes

1. Michael T. Klare, "Resource Competition and World Politics in the Twentieth-First Century," *Current History* 99, no. 641 (December 2000), p. 403.

2. Vaclav Smil, "The Energy Question, Again," *Current History* 99, no. 641 (December 2000), p. 408.