Paradigm in Distress?

PRIMARY COMMODITIES AND CIVIL WAR

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This special issue of the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* contains six articles discussing the link between primary commodities, political instability, and civil war as well as a response essay by Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler (CH). The latter is especially welcome given that all our contributors wrestle, in one way or another, with the implications of CH's early claim for a correlation between a country's propensity to experience civil war and its dependence on the export of primary commodities. Although the robustness of this statistical finding is increasingly being questioned (Ross 2004; Lujala et al. 2005 [this issue]; Fearon 2005 [this issue]), we are in its debt for helping to initiate a barrage of elaborations, criticisms, and extensions. Cumulatively, these have helped reinvigorate debates over the sources of political violence, spurring the creation of new paradigms for the study of civil war and its associated resource curse (Sambanis 2004; Ross 2004).

This special issue is one of the few devoted solely to the topic of natural resources and civil war and perhaps the only to contain critiques and defenses by the field's leading figures. Our contributors represent an emerging "second generation" in the primary commodities and war subfield, bringing regimes, states, and economic institutions back into the picture. Natural resources have powerful effects on civil wars, our authors suggest, but they do so in ways that are profoundly political, a claim downplayed or undertheorized in much of the earlier work. Most important, resource abundance can create low-capacity states that are vulnerable to rebel challenge. In so

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arguing, our authors (re)discover the relevance of earlier political economic scholarship on the characteristics of rentier states and on the political dysfunctions of countries "cursed" by resource abundance (cf. Karl 1997; Luciani 1990; Mahdavy 1970; Ross 1999).

The scholarly debate on resources and war was initiated chiefly by CH's early econometric work under World Bank auspices, which unearthed counterintuitive findings and advanced controversial theories to explain their results.[1] Most important, they offered a development economist's perspective on the origins of post–World War II civil war, arguing that poverty and its correlates, including the dependence on primary commodity exports, were the strongest predictors of civil war onset.[2] Like earlier Marxist works on third world rebellion (e.g., Paige 1974), their starkly materialist approach had much to commend it, including a parsimonious explanation for the clustering of armed conflict in the global south.[3] At the same time, however, their interpretation departed from recent theorizing in political science and political sociology focusing on political variables such as regime stability, government repression, political legitimacy, and state strength. The World Bank conflict research group headed by Paul Collier was unconvinced by political interpretations, suggesting instead that deep economic structures had greater explanatory power.

Poverty and primary commodities do not in and of themselves cause civil war, of course; it is mechanisms that provide the link. And as Macartan Humphreys (2005 [this issue]) notes, such mechanisms also serve as entry points for policy makers seeking to prevent, defuse, or end conflict. For the most part, the development economist's preferred mechanisms draw on assumptions of methodological individualism and instrumental rationality. In this view, rebellion stems from utility-maximizing decisions by (male)[4] individuals in poor countries with limited opportunities for economic gain. When the perceived economic opportunities from violence outweigh perceived risks, armed revolt is more likely (Collier 2000). Rebels, in this formulation, have more in common with common criminals than with aggrieved, Fanon-style warriors eager for liberation, revenge, or cultural integrity. To be sure, not all criminologists share this interpretation of their subjects' motivations. While some stress calculation and rationality (cf. Sanchez-Jankowski 1992), others highlight cravings for recognition and respect (cf. Bourgois 2002). Nonetheless, the rebel-as-rational-predator metaphor is evocative and surely does portray reality in at least a subset of civil wars. It also is likely to have attracted the attention of many because of its clear policy implications for development agencies such as the World Bank: *economic growth*, which

1. Basic arguments appear in Collier and Hoeffler (2002) and Collier et al. (2003). See Collier and Hoeffler (2005 [this issue]) for an updated list of published papers.

2. The economic approach to civil wars has flourished in recent years, with some arguing that rapacious motivations have become more prevalent since the end of the cold war. This interpretation is rejected by Ballentine and Sherman (2003), Kalyvas (2001), and Newman (2004), among others.

3. Marxist theories of rebellion, of course, are far less inclined to rely on methodological individualism.

4. The gender dimensions of political violence are often overlooked. Virtually all rebels and government soldiers are male, however, and their resort to violence relies on masculinity narratives portraying aggression as appropriate responses to poverty, repression, or humiliation. See Goldstein (2001) for gender and war, and Connell (2000) more generally.

would provide the poor with nonviolent alternatives for survival and gain; and *sanctions* on rebel-financing activities, such as the clandestine trade in hijacked primary commodities (Collier 2003).[5]

The theoretical underpinnings of all this are not new. As noted above, the problems of resource abundance have long been a concern of political economists concerned with rentier states. And the emphasis on rebel opportunity rather than grievance was popularized early on by Skocpol's (1979) work on revolutions, which argued for the importance of state collapse. The "opportunities" Skocpol highlighted were political, not economic, but she shared the development economists' skepticism with the importance of political grievances. Materialist interpretations of mobilization and protest were common in the 1970s, especially with the "resource mobilization" perspective in social movements (McCarthy and Zald 1977). The political turn taken by our authors in this issue has its echoes in the social movement theory of the 1980s, which replaced resource mobilization with "political opportunity theories" (McAdam 1985; Tarrow 1998) emphasizing the importance of shifts in established political patterns. Political opportunity theory stressed political change rather than state capacity, but its emphasis on politics, rather than economics, resembles the direction our authors have taken in their work.

Poverty plays a central role in the development economist's research into civil wars, but much of the policy and media discussion focused more specifically on the link between primary commodities and civil war. As Ross (2004) notes, a small cottage industry has emerged on the purported association between natural resources and civil war, with economists, geographers, and political scientists joining area experts and policy analysts to explore its various facets. Much of this research conforms to what Thomas Kuhn (1970) dubbed "normal science," that is, research within a shared paradigm motivated by a founding model or exemplar.[6] It seems reasonable to argue that CH's early findings served as this exemplar, but Kuhn might also note that their work was sufficiently open-ended to provide room for elaboration and innovation. Kuhn's "normal scientists" typically do not question the fundamental assumptions of the original exemplar but generate progress by resolving those questions or puzzles still left open.

Evidence for the existence of a resource and war paradigm is myriad. In recent years, for example, scholars working in the subfield have initiated their articles with

5. Both economic growth and international sanctions can have unanticipated and very negative results, of course, although these are frequently neglected in this literature. Prominent critics of development include Escobar (1994) and Ferguson (1994); Andreas (2005) offers a critical discussion of international sanctions.

6. The term "exemplar" is used somewhat ironically, as the thrust of Kuhn's (1970) work was to suggest that the exemplar's work, and the paradigmatic knowledge that followed, was not always a true representation of reality. The social science applicability of Kuhn's insights into the natural sciences is contested, of course, as is noted by Eckberg and Hill (1980), among others. This is not the place to delve into the debates surrounding the limits and uses of Kuhnian paradigms. Suffice it to say that I use the term because of the intensity of the scholarship sparked by Collier and Hoeffler's early claim of a link between natural resources and civil war. I thank Richard Snyder for suggesting that the concept of successive research "generations," as noted by Goldstone (1980) in his discussion of scholarship on revolutions, is a valuable, alternative formulation.

reference to CH's findings and then proceeded to engage in "normal scientific" efforts, that is, to respecify or elaborate upon the resource-war link in one way or another.[7] They typically take the resource-war relationship for granted, however, fulfilling another of Kuhn's conditions for the emergence of a paradigm: convergence around core assumptions. This special issue breaks with that trend by questioning the robustness of the original statistical association.[8]

Broadly speaking, the articles appearing in this issue elaborate upon and depart from the paradigm in crucial ways. First, several of them challenge the consensus surrounding the resource-war association, suggesting the entire research agenda has been on shaky empirical and methodological foundations. Second, our authors offer theoretical interpretations that inject a heavy dose of politics into the equation, linking research on resources and war to more established traditions in political science and political sociology. More specifically, they largely speak to issues of state strength and capacity in the developing world, a long-standing social science concern.

Fearon (2005) offers the sharpest statistical challenge, conducting probing robustness tests on CH's original data and methods and arguing that much of the resource-war association is explained by oil exports, which trigger conflict through political, not economic, mechanisms. Oil abundance creates weak extractive apparatuses, and the low capabilities of rentier states create political opportunities for rebellion. As such, Fearon's argument resembles Skocpol's earlier formulation in its concern with state weakness as a key rebel political opportunity, and evokes the rentier-state research of scholars such as Karl, Luciani, Mahdavy, and others. Next, Päivi Lujala, Nils Petter Gleditsch, and Elisabeth Gilmore (2005) present new data on the global distribution of diamonds and find little support for a link between the gems and civil war onset during 1945 to 1999. Neither lootable nor nonlootable diamonds have a statistically significant effect on civil war generally, leading them to argue that much ink was mistakenly spilled by authors misled by individual, high-profile wars. Diamonds are not entirely unrelated to conflict, however, since lootable diamonds do appear to increase civil war duration in ethnically heterogeneous wars and may also contribute to the onset of ethnic wars. They find that nonlootable diamonds, by contrast, tend to *decrease* the incidence of civil war. The physical configuration of the resource matters tremendously, as do other social and political factors; diamonds in and of themselves are not the problem.

A third econometric twist is offered by Humphreys (2005), who rigorously outlines multiple alternatives to the conventional mechanisms used to link resources and war. Until now, Humphreys notes, most cross-national studies have not attempted to conceptually sort out these different causal paths, much less find the data and devise

7. For a recent example, see Englebert and Ron's (2004) study of the civil war in Congo-Brazzaville. The empirical case was complex, and we might easily have employed another theoretical vehicle, including theories stressing the danger of hasty democratization, the perils of Western corporate involvement in the developing world, or links between ethnicity and conflict. Although all these were reasonable entry points, we chose the resource curse and war framework due, in part, to the policy relevance discussed by Fearon (2005 [this issue]). As Kuhn might have observed, research on civil wars is shaped by sociological and professional dynamics, not only by empirical events and data.

8. In fact, a few authors have already begun to questioning the systematic nature of the link; see Ross (2004) and Lujala et al. (2005 [this issue]) for details.

econometric tests for each. Humphreys offers both new data and new methods to probe different mechanisms and, like other articles in this issue, finds support for state strength arguments. His study is far more complex than that, however, offering richly complex explorations of multiple hypotheses about war onset, duration, and termination.

Data and econometrics aside, many of our authors stress politics over economics. Thad Dunning (2005 [this issue]) extends Fearon's and Humphrey's concern with weak states, using formal logic and case studies to explore why the rulers of poor, resource-intensive countries may undermine local attempts at economic diversification and growth, even when this reduces their long-term ability to stay in power. Under certain conditions, Dunning explains, rulers such as Zaire's Mobutu will pursue a short-term strategy that actively sabotages domestic growth, promoting a crippling reliance on primary commodities that renders them vulnerable to external shock. Richard Snyder and Ravi Bhavnani (2005 [this issue]) offer another state-centered analysis, suggesting that a primary commodity's physical characteristics, together with the manner in which it is extracted, helps determine state capacity in resource-rich countries. When mineral extraction requires major capital investment, for example, the state has a better "tax handle," boosting its ability to earn the revenue required to deter or defeat rebellion. Their formal argument and case studies dovetail nicely with Lujala, Gleditsch, and Gilmore's cross-national study of the impact of lootable vs. non-lootable diamonds. It is also gratifying to note the connection with Fearon's and Humphrey's claims regarding state strength, as both Dunning's and Snyder and Bhavnani's work help explain variation in the capacities of resource-rich states.

Jeremy Weinstein (2005 [this issue]) involves neither econometrics nor state-centered analysis; instead, he goes in an entirely new direction, focusing on rebels themselves. He finds that insurgents can also suffer from a resource curse, chiefly in their recruitment efforts. Rebellions blessed with plentiful resources are flooded with low-quality, opportunistic recruits seeking easy gain, and many of these fit the "rebel as criminal" profile. Poor insurgencies, by contrast, mobilize support by relying on an entirely different type of recruit, including individuals with more education, ideological commitment, and ethnic solidarity. As a result, these tend to be more effective and disciplined rebel forces. Weinstein's work contributes to the debate by helping to explain why *both* greed and grievance-driven rebels exist at the same time in history.

Overall, this special issue's focus on politics suggests a return to the political opportunity theories used in contemporary social movement and revolutionary theory, as well as a renewed emphasis on the political origins of poverty. After all, as Englebert (2000) suggests, poor economic growth is itself a political product. Postcolonial states suffer from low levels of political legitimacy, prompting rulers to engage in the neopatrimonial policies that bleed development efforts dry. Poverty, in other words, is itself a political outcome, and fully articulated theories of civil war should take this into account. The link to civil war is made by Holsti (1996), among others, who suggests that neopatrimonalism creates the distributional conflicts that prompt violence.

At the broadest level, the link between civil war and states is complex and multifaceted, and scholars offer a range of hypotheses to link the two. For example, a state's military, rather than rebels, could be the real initiator of a civil war, creating "protec-

tion rackets" to stimulate opposition and justify elite payoffs (Stanley 1996). A second hypothesis is offered by Cohen, Brown, and Organski (1981), who claim that states trigger conflict by expanding their administrative reach and assaulting peripheral strongmen, stimulating violent counteroffensives. For Wickham-Crowley (1993), it is regime type that matters, with personalistic dictatorships such as Suharto's Indonesia being particularly rebellion-prone due to a dearth of domestic and international legitimacy. Hegre et al. (2001) offer some quantitative evidence to suggest that partially democratic regimes spark wars, hypothesizing that this is due to their instability and weak coercive powers. In Goodwin's (2000) and White's (1989) case studies, state repression and lack of political flexibility pushes oppositional groups' backs to the wall, offering them "no other way out" than armed revolt. And finally, Fearon and Laitin (2003), among others, argue that indiscriminate state responses to nascent rebellions create bitter grievances where none previously existed, creating escalatory tipping points. These and many others have repeatedly found that politics and state capacities play an important role in civil wars initiation, advancing multiple hypotheses that require further replication and testing. We should not lose sight of the state-civil war connection, even when focusing on economic structures' conditioning impact.

Taken together, the contributions to this special issue suggest that the natural resources and civil war paradigm is in a period of growth and innovation, even though the validity of the original correlation and mechanisms appear questionable. Primary commodities may not effect civil war onset in the way we originally thought, but they do have important direct and indirect effects on states, rebels, and economies, and these remain worthy of serious attention. CH's thinking on all this is not static, as their response essay in this issue clearly suggests. They have taken note of earlier criticisms of their work and are already pursuing some of the research avenues suggested here. Their interest in governance, for example, is a clear indication of their concern with the role of state capacity, regime type, and politics. And like many of our contributors, they readily acknowledge that primary commodities can relate to civil war in multiple ways. In a sense, the eager consumption of their early, unpublished work has not done them full justice. This special issue helps push the debate forward in exciting ways, and we hope the paradigm will continue to expand in innovative and self-critical ways, subjecting all assumptions and claims to rigorous theoretical and empirical test.

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