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Book Note

Kahl, Colin H. 2006. *States, Scarcity, and Civil Strife in the Developing World*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. xvi + 333 pp. ISBN: 0-691-12496-X (hb). Price: \$35.00.

Reviewed by Bjørn Møller [22 May 2007]

What one might call “the political economy of armed conflict” has for some time been dominated by the econometric and highly formal models of economists such as Paul Collier. They have pointed to significant correlations between, for instance, extractable resources and the outbreak of civil wars. Whereas non-economists such as Paul Richards have criticized this approach for disregarding agency – e.g., the motives of the actors involved – others such as Homer-Dixon have pointed to other significant correlations that seem to indicate the presence of completely different causal links between economic factors and armed conflict.

This book is in the tradition of Homer-Dixon and other so-called “neo-Malthusians.” Following Thomas Malthus, they focus on demographics but combine this with environmental considerations. Just as Malthus saw population growth and the finite amount of arable land as the likely cause of future wars – also a remedy for the discrepancy between land/agricultural production and population – neo-Malthusians focus more on the specifics of demographic developments and on distinguishing between renewable and nonrenewable resources.

Kahl adds many new insights to the findings of Homer-Dixon and advocates of “security demographics” such as Cincotta and his collaborators. First of all, he combines the demographic and environmental parameters into a single demographic-environmental stress (DES) parameter for the measurement of which he distinguishes among various kinds of resources. But land occupies a central position. According to the author, DES does not (or at least very rarely) cause conflict directly. Instead, its effects are indirect; it creates relative and absolute deprivation that easily translates into grievances, just as it may activate an intra-state security dilemma. This phenomenon (mainly associated with the work of Barbara Walters and Jack Snyder) leads some societal groups to attack other groups, not out of malice but for fear of their own security. They thereby jeopardize the security of other groups who will respond in kind, thus creating a vicious circle. Moreover, DES also weakens the state as an institution, in a few cases even to the point of complete state collapse. Besides thus including the political level in his analysis as a causal pathway to conflict, Kahl also introduces two intervening variables: “groupness” and inclusivity. The more society is subdivided into fixed or at least durable and salient ethnic or religious groups, and the less inclusive is the state, the higher the propensity for a society to end up in an armed conflict.

This fairly comprehensive and complex analytical model is applied to two quite elaborate country case studies in which the model fares well. It can both explain the outbreak and intensity of the communist insurgency in the Philippines and the outbreak of small-scale ethnic conflicts in Kenya in the 1990s, just as it can explain why the latter did not spread to engulf the entire country. The main reason for this is that the pervasive groupness of the rural areas was balanced with more mixed identities in urban areas. Not only does the model thus pass the test, but in the concluding chapter, the author also, and more tentatively, applies it to a number of other conflicts (e.g., Rwanda, Somalia, and Mexico) as well as to instances of “dogs that did not bark” such as Costa Rica.

Besides presenting his own neo-Malthusian model, the author also provides critical but fair accounts of its theoretical competitors, e.g., the (neo-Marxist) “political ecology” paradigm and the (neo-classical) theories of Collier and others. The book is generally well-structured and well-written, requiring neither mathematical nor economic training of the reader. It is highly recommended as an important contribution to general conflict theory.

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