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Book Review

Brainard, Lael and Derek Chollet, eds. 2007. *Too Poor for Peace? Global Poverty, Conflict, and Security in the 21st Century*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press. viii + 175 pp. ISBN 978-0-8157-1375-3 (pb). Price £13.99.

by Bjørn Møller (31 March 2008)

This is a short and concise introduction to the various aspects of the nexus between poverty, (in)security, and conflict, based on the contention that “poverty is both a cause of insecurity and a consequence of it” (p. 2). The work is multidisciplinary in bringing together economists, demographers, geographers, development specialists, and others. Most contributors are renowned experts in their respective fields.

In the introductory chapter the editors and Vinca La Fleur dismiss the all too often encountered simplistic thesis that poverty or economic inequality directly cause insecurity or conflict. Causal links are more complicated that, calling for the use of mediating variables such as rising and then frustrated expectations. Likewise, there are no direct links between natural resources and conflict, neither in the sense that a shortage of resources leads people to rebel nor in the sense that an abundance of resources has this effect. Once again, causal links are more complex and indirect.

These complex links are further explored by, for instance, Susan Rice in a critical analysis of the poverty-conflict nexus in which she introduces state fragility and failure as an intermediary variable. However convincing her analysis may appear, it does suffer from a lack of factual accuracy. For example, her claim that al Qaeda operated out of Somalia (as a failed state) is incorrect, as recently confirmed by the release of several al Qaeda documents by the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. There are plenty of good reasons to take the problem of failed states seriously, but the desire to hamper terrorism is not one of them.

Colin Kahl and Anthony Young in two separate chapters explore the links between natural resources and conflict, *inter alia* criticizing some of the more simplistic versions of neo-Malthusianism. For instance, Kahl advocates a distinction between renewable and nonrenewable resources and finds some correlation between resource scarcity and intrastate conflict, but absolutely not when international conflict is used as the dependent variable. Young, in turn, presents a convincing case for the causal impact of resource scarcity on both the Rwandan genocide and the Darfur conflict.

Another neo-Malthusian theme which has risen to prominence over the last half-decade or so is that of “security demographics” in general and so-called youth bulges in particular, that is, the theory that extraordinarily large youth cohorts significantly raise the risk of armed conflict. Once again, closer analysis shows the causal links to be more complex. Henrik Urdal convincingly argues the somewhat counterintuitive claim that a rise in tertiary education in combination with a youth bulge increases the risk of conflict (and particularly terrorism) whereas the bulge in itself does not have significant effects. Moreover, “bulges appear to provide greater opportunities for armed conflict in autocracies and greater motives in democracies” (p. 97), which is also not what

the uninitiated reader would expect. Marc Sommers provides another useful counter to the alarmism of neo-Malthusianism by highlighting the beneficial effects of large youth cohorts, even in conditions of rapid urbanization which are found by many authors to be particularly risky.

Even though the work has its limitations, mainly due to its short length, it is a very useful introduction to its topics and as such very much recommended to, for instance, practitioners and nonspecialists as well as for use in (mainly undergraduate) university classes.

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