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Book Review

Parenti, Christian. 2011. Tropic of Chaos: Climate Change and the New Geography of Violence. Nation Books: New York. ISBN 978-1-56858-600-7. (hb) 304 pp. \$25.99.

By Tal Zarankin (4 August 2011)

This important and thought provoking book—by an award-winning writer—takes the reader on a fascinating journey through time and across the globe, focusing on what the author refers to as the Tropic of Chaos: a deadly convergence of poverty, violence, and climate change. The main premise of the book is that drastic climate change adversely affects the behavior of millions of individuals who live in areas where vital resources, such as water and food, are scarce. According to Parenti, such nations and their inhabitants are turning to violence in their struggle to adapt to climate change and this violence will, eventually, affect other, more stable and developed economies as well. Therefore, this book should serve as a “wake-up call” to those fortunate enough to reside in such economies to take some necessary action to adapt to climate change in a way that will allow sustainable life worldwide.

Readers begin their journey in a remote village in northwest Kenya, where Ekaru Loruman, a pastoralist of the Turkana tribe is murdered during a cattle raid of an enemy Pokot tribe. The raid was motivated by the desire of competing tribes to replenish their cattle herd which decreases in number during droughts. Parenti asserts that climate changes in that area are marked by longer periods of drought than previously, interspersed by short, violent rain storms, which create floods that mostly go to waste. As a result of longer droughts, water and grazing become scarce and cattle suffer increased illness and mortality. Depending on cattle for their livelihood, the Pokot tribe conducted their violent raid and 35-year-old Ekaru paid with his life. This story of violence is but a metaphor for the much larger scale and wide-spread violence around the globe.

Parenti describes U.S. policy for dealing with the instability created by climate change and resulting violence around the world. Basing his arguments on alleged federal agency investigation reports, Parenti argues that ever since the mid-19th century, U.S. governments have regarded climate change as a threat to global, political, social, and economical stability that require military action. As examples of this policy, Parenti cites U.S. military action against native Americans, nationals in South American countries such as Guatemala, Chile, and Peru, and in Asian countries such as Vietnam and Afghanistan.

Parenti then focuses on the devastating effects of the deadly combination of poverty, climate change, and violence in Africa, Asia, and South America. He cites the proliferation of devastating conflicts in countries such as Sudan, Somalia, and Uganda in Africa, Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, and India in Asia, and in Brazil and Mexico. Parenti concludes that what is common to all these regions is their approach to dealing with climate change. The nations mentioned in the different regions all turned to violence, using arms imported from the U.S. and other relatively powerful economies. While assuming that the policies of the U.S. and allies were not designed to harm those struggling countries, Parenti emphasizes the role of those policies in the escalation of the deadly effect of the combination of poverty and severe climate change.

The final chapter of the book is dedicated to Parenti’s conclusions and recommendations for addressing the disturbing phenomena described in the book. In short, Parenti claims that the more established and prosperous countries should utilize their resources differently in addressing the catastrophic convergence of climate change, poverty, and violence. Specifically, Parenti states that even though technology and financial resources are available to effectively address these concerns, political will is missing to implement necessary foreign policy changes. Parenti tries to create a sense of urgency and to appeal to readers’ moral standards, especially in powerful democracies around the world, to pressure their elected leaders to change their countries’ policies to deal more effectively with the critical issues described in the book.

Accessible to a general audience, the book makes a very interesting read. It can make a positive contribution as a supplemental reading in undergraduate and graduate courses in economics (environmental economics or economics of conflict in particular). It can also add value to courses in history and political science or perhaps any other discipline with an interest in the impact of climate change on human behavior.

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