

Africa's Resource Curse

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Chronicling the pillage of Africa's resources by venal dictators, greedy ruling parties and bloodthirsty rebel movements, this week's readings detail the plunder of the continent's riches as well as the appalling corruption and gross mismanagement by the kleptocratic regimes and oligarchic elites. The set of readings focus on how the resources that should have spurred African development instead have fed nothing but strife. However, this week's fare doesn't simply describe the economic failures, retrogression and resource confrontations, but rather offers a framework to understand the various conflicts by constructing an analytical economic lens to judge the civil conflicts. The series of articles then fill in the bleak picture with vivid anecdotal evidence provided by the various case studies on Angola, Liberia, and Congo.

In Paul Collier's "Economic Causes of Civil Conflict and Their Implications for Policy," we are provided with a framework to understand the conflicts in Africa, one that deconstructs the prevailing popular discourse regarding civil conflict. Collier offers a provocative and insightful analysis that systematically addresses the role of economic interests as the cause of civil conflict. He iconoclastically examines the prevailing narrative of rebellion as protest movement, dismissing the fanciful bromides, and reframes these same rebel movements as "large-scale variants of organized crime (Collier, 198)."

Collier structures the economic argument of civil conflict around the predation theory that highlights three variants: greed, lust for power, or grievances (real or imagined). He argues that the economists would disregard distinguishing the three variants so long as there is a feasibility of predation to spur conflict, Collier then offers various statistic-backed theories to burnish his hypothesis. He notes the factors that lead to conflict, such as: a) a country reliance primarily on the export of primary commodities, b) the geographic dispersion of population; c) a history of previous civil conflicts; d) the existence of a large diaspora, especially if located in America; e) ethnic and religious composition, especially in regard to ethnic domination. For the sake of this essay, the author will focus on Collier's arguments related to the relationship between resources, rebellion and civil war in Africa.

Collier particularly highlights the role of primary commodity exports as the catalyst of predatory conflict. He cites that primary commodities exports "are the most lootable of all economic activities. An economy that is dependent on them thus offers plenty of opportunities for predatory rebellion (Collier, 205)." He further notes that the characteristics that make these resources readily available for governmental taxation also drive rebel plunder. Moreover, Collier notes the existence of legalized predation by national governments in which resources are subject to major taxation to bankroll the ruling elite. Meanwhile, he outlines the geographic vulnerabilities that are tied in with primary commodity exports.

Continuing his argument, Collier addresses the low-income aspect of rebellion. He re-examines and refutes the notion that rebel movements are able to easily recruit those who are so poor that they have little to lose. He notes, "if young men can be

recruited cheaply by the rebel organization, they can also be recruited cheaply by the government (Collier, 2006).” Instead, Collier highlights the fact that the paucity of tax collection by poor governments ensures that their revenues stem mainly from taxation on primary commodity resources, and leave governments often vying for the same economic base as the rebel movements.

Furthermore, Collier shunts aside the notion that rebellion is carried out by the poor seeking to redress grievances, and is instead often an act of the wealthier regions who seek to maintain their resources. He notes, “One way in which a rebel movement can lock into predation of primary commodity exports is to secede with the land on which the primary commodities are produced (Collier, 2006).” He then offers clear examples of resource-rich African regions taking up the secessionist banner, including the Katanga region in Zaire, the Biafra region in Nigeria and Eritrea- formerly part of Ethiopia.

Once Collier’s framework has been laid out, examples to support his thesis are plentiful among the week’s readings. Martin Meredith’s chapters from The Fate of Africa on Angola and Liberia offer example after example to back Collier’s propositions regarding the nature of rebellion as being more mafia syndicate than protest movement. In all cases, the thin veneer of protest is quickly swallowed amid the resource ransack by various rebel movements.

Angola proves almost a perfect case study for Collier’s hypothesis. In Angola, both the MPLA and UNITA proved adept at using public diplomacy to foster an ideological image to Western and Soviet patrons, but reality showed these convictions to be thin veneers over movements dedicated to plundering Angola’s vast diamond and oil resources. Any ideological pretense of the fight between the MPLA and UNITA proved

hollow as both sides readily plundered Angola's resources as a means to further their fight to take the whole pie.

Strikingly similar sentiments are observed in Meredith's chapter on Liberia. In the Liberian case, the kleptocratic Americo-Liberian oligarchy was swept aside in the name of quickly-ignored grievances by the kleptocratic Doe regime, and then swept aside by the kleptocratic warlord Charles Taylor. Taylor took his resource-plunder one step further, spreading his turmoil into neighboring Sierra Leone.

Collier's thesis is most profound in the tragic case of the Democratic Republic of Congo. In Gerard Prunier's piece "The Economic Dimensions of Conflict in the Region," the sheer theft of resources by various rebel movements acting in Congo is laid bare. Prunier notes, "First of all, in all rebel areas the troops started the war by looting every movable asset they could lay their hands on (Prunier, 107)." Meanwhile, the role of various African nations support for rebel movements as a means to loot—a central component alluded to by Collier, and prevalent in the other case studies, is most acute in the Congo conflict. Congo's regional neighbors all pillaged and waged war by proxy in Congo's vast territory, and took part in plundering the nation's vast resources.

In conclusion, there is ample fodder in the many case studies exhibited in the reading to support Collier's thesis on the true nature of rebellion in Africa. Both African governments and rebel movements in Angola, Liberia and Congo clearly used predation as a means to enrich themselves, and profited mightily from their plunder. In surveying the week's list of required and recommended readings it remains hard for even the most optimistic to not be swayed towards Afro-pessimism, as the litany of failures among the most mineral-rich nations on the African continent are grimly illustrated.

Citations:

Paul Collier, “Economic Causes of Civil Conflict and Their Implications for Policy,” Ch. 12, Chester Crocker et.al., *Leashing the Dogs of War: Conflict Management in a Divided World.*, Washington, D.C.: US Institute of Peace Press, 2007, pp. 197-219.

Martin Meredith, *The Fate of Africa*, Chs. 29, and 32.

Gerard Prunier, “The Economic Dimensions of Conflict in the Region” in Gilbert M. Khadiagala, ed. *Security Dynamics in Africa’s Great Lakes Region*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2006, Ch. 6, pp. 103-117.