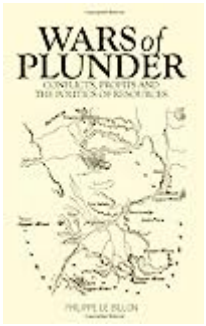
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Philippe Le Billon. *Wars of Plunder: Conflicts, Profits and the Politics of Resources.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. xi + 363 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-70268-3.

Reviewed by Richard Maass (Notre Dame)

Published on H-War (June, 2013)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

Diamond in the Rough?

In *Wars of Plunder*, Philippe Le Billon provides a valuable resource to students of international conflict and civil wars. A wide range of scholarship has targeted the relationship between resources and conflict, and Le Billon admirably commands that vast literature in composing this comprehensive study of their relationship. With the decline of ideological sponsorship after the Cold War and the globalization of international economies, militarized commerce based on exploitable natural resources has emerged as a primary source of revenue for armed factions. The likely endurance of this trend in the decades to come ensures that *Wars of Plunder* will not lack interested readers.

Launching with the broad argument that "resource sectors influence the likelihood and course of armed conflicts," *Wars of Plunder* undertakes a general survey of the relationship between resources and conflict (p. 4). Le Billon offers two main theoretical structures to help us understand this relationship. First, he identifies three key forms the relationship might take. The "resource curse" form describes how "resource dependence results in economic underperformance and a weakening of governing institutions, rendering a society more vulnerable to armed conflict." The "resource conflicts" form describes how the risk of conflict is higher in resource-rich areas due to "grievances, conflicts and violence associated with resource control and exploitation" (p. 13). The "conflict resources" form describes how resources can provide financial opportunities for sustaining conflicts. This tripartite conceptualization underlies much of the book's analysis.

Second, Le Billon offers a probabilistic causal theory that aims to attribute certain types of conflicts to certain types of resources. At its core, this theory labels resources according to their characteristics of control and access, distinguishing, on the one hand, between resources that are "proximate" to or "distant" from central governmental control, and on the other hand, between resources that are "point" or "diffuse" (localized and defensible by the government or widespread and easy for locals to access) (p. 28). These characteristics inform a convenient 2x2 table predicting the type of conflict likely

to emerge, with proximate-point resources susceptible to seizure in coups d'etat, proximate-diffuse resources likely to incite mass rebellion, distant-point resources vulnerable to secessionist ventures, and distant-diffuse resources prone to localized warlordism.

These central theoretical structures are complemented by a variety of other observations informed by related literature. For example, regarding conflict duration, if access to resources benefits the weaker side it is likely to prolong a conflict, but when it benefits the stronger side, it is likely to enable swift military victory. Similarly, due to their tendency to attract short-term profit seekers, groups relying on resources are more likely to abuse civilians than those that do not. Le Billon also observes that resource-related conflicts generally afflict poor countries rather than those enjoying vast resource wealth, making such conflicts particularly devastating as resources that might be used to sustain basic public services are instead routed to sustaining an insurgency or corrupt elite.

This theoretical discussion is directly based on a wide range of scholarship, and is complemented by empirical chapters investigating the specific relationships between conflict and three particular resources: oil, diamonds, and timber. Drawing on the author's experiences in Angola, Cambodia, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the former Yugoslavia, and Sierra Leone, these studies provide rich analysis of the roles played by three of the resources most widely associated with conflict. Ultimately, Le Billon finds a strong connection between oil and conflict, mixed findings with respect to diamonds, and little evidence for timber. Oil dependence, onshore (but not offshore) oil production, and the institutional setting within oil-producing states all influence the risk of conflict. Le Billon questions conventional narratives regarding diamonds, such as the "diamond curse," "blood diamonds," "and the claim that diamonds are a "rebel's best friend," ultimately concluding that "diamond exploitation can be a factor for peace as well as a factor in increasing vulnerability to conflict" (p. 121). Regarding forests, he finds no statistical support for a connection between forests and conflict, but he does observe anecdotal evidence that guerilla groups benefit from operating in forested terrain and taxing logging companies.

Wars of Plunder deserves praise first and foremost for its excellent and comprehensive literature review, spanning a rare diversity of fields, including political, historical, ecological, and sociobiological studies. A student launching a research project related to resources and conflict could find no better starting point. Indeed, substantial portions of the book read as extended series of one-sentence summaries of related literature, an invaluable primer for interested newcomers to the field. Beyond the literature, a variety of empirical approaches are presented throughout the book, ranging from descriptions of individual cases to statistical analyses to maps of resource and conflict distribution, that collectively provide an excellent starting point for those interested in the realities of resource conflicts.

Another of the book's notable strengths is its nuanced perspective, as Le Billon eschews black-and-white all-or-nothing claims in favor of teasing out the subtleties of the relationship between resources and conflict. As he writes, "I do not believe that resources cause conflicts. Geology and biogeography are not destiny" (p. 4). This is most evident in his conceptualization of violence, which he breaks down into three types: structural violence, whereby the failure to harness resources for the public good injures the local population through its unrealized potential; environmental violence, whereby the extraction of resources entails negative social and environmental consequences; and armed violence, whereby people engage in resource-related killing and forced displacement. The formulation of the core concept of "resource" is also compelling, entailing not just the physical existence of materials but also the roles assigned to them by human society: "while nature creates these substances, it is their use by humans that turns them into resources" (pp. 9-10). Resources are thus "simultaneously material and socially constructed," and power relations are inherent in both their supply and demand, shaped as the latter is by social practices like driving cars or assigning status to diamonds (p. 10).

Geography is likewise treated in explicitly political terms. Resources are considered "proximate" when in an area firmly controlled by the government even if that area is far from the capital city, but they are considered "distant" when in territory filled with opposition groups. Similarly, when discussing the geography of resource wars, Le Billon notes how the relevant areas include not just the "front lines around the production area, but also the spaces along the commodity chain" that enable resources as financial opportunities for combatants (p. 28). *Wars of Plunder* is also mindful of temporality as the motivations of warring factions are observed as changing from ideological to increasingly material over time. The political sensitivity that permeates the book's conceptualizations illuminates in great detail the intricate processes that connect resources to conflict, a virtue not shared by many scholarly treatments of the subject.

That virtue will appear a vice to readers valuing parsimony and research design, however. They will find that *Wars of Plunder* errs on the side of an "everything and the kitchen sink" approach to conceptualization and introduces redundant theoretical devices that are inconsistently applied. For example, what appears at first to be a clean 2x2 typology of resources determined by control and access (described above) ends up depending on no fewer than sixteen overlapping and often cross-cutting factors: proximity to the capital, porousness of borders, representation or marginalization of local residents, presence of opposition movements, government control of the resource area, geographical breadth of the resource area, number of producers, defensibility of production sites, capital intensity of production, legality, transportability, concealability, obstructability, revenue levels, revenue distribution, and demand elasticity. Numerous theoretical labels introduced in rapid succession tend to confuse rather than clarify, as with the redundant triads "resource curse, resource conflicts, and conflict resources"; "institutional weakening effect, motivational effect, and opportunity effect"; and "vulnerability, risk, and opportunity." Ironically, the conceptual sensitivity displayed with regard to diverse forms of violence noted above is abandoned throughout much of the book, which tends to focus primarily on armed conflict.

With regard to research design, the theory section contains an admirably broad literature review but stops short of formulating new hypotheses for empirical testing. Despite offering the causal theory attributing conflict type to resource type mentioned above, Le Billon largely jettisons this theory in his empirical chapters on oil, diamonds, and timber, instead choosing to focus on descriptive analysis and certain prevailing narratives found in the literatures on each of these specific resources. Rather than employing a set of research methods designed to test the competing predictions of rival theories, *Wars of Plunder* includes empirical evidence to support localized critiques of common myths or conventional wisdoms. Such critiques are not without their own merits, and the empirical chapters offer much useful descriptive information, but readers looking for a comprehensive theory of resource conflicts will feel like they have instead found an enormous literature review supplemented by a variety of anecdotal evidence. Further, where it does employ evidence for causal analysis, the book is vulnerable to the criticism that it applies a correlational methodological approach to areas with very few cases deserving more detailed case study research. In one example, correlational conclusions are drawn on the usefulness of revenue-sharing agreements in cases involving illegal lootable resources (i.e., drugs), of which only two cases are listed: Colombia and Myanmar.

Those looking for definitive solutions to resource conflicts will also come away empty-handed. The concluding chapters examine mechanisms for ending conflicts, including military interventions, economic sanctions, and revenue-sharing agreements, again displaying an admirable command of the literature on each subject but ultimately concluding that "the question is not, 'Capture, share, or sanction?' but rather, 'What is the right combination of conflict termination instruments?' " Unfortunately, that question remains an open one after reading this book, which suggests simply that "the choice of conflict termination instruments should reflect the characteristics of commodities, the structure of the resource sector, and the motivations and capacities of actors along the commodity supply chain" in addition to resource type and conflict type (p. 186). With the acknowledgement that these are often cross-cutting, with no clear guide to adjudicate among them, and the recognition that resources are "rarely the only source of revenue and motivation for belligerents, who often find ways to adapt their struggle to more difficult economic conditions resulting from effective resource-focused initiatives," policymakers will likely struggle to take away many useable principles for action (p. 185).

One area for further study not directly touched on by this otherwise comprehensive book is the role of resources in enabling foreign interference and intervention in conflicts. Le Billon's comments on intervention here are limited to the ways that foreign powers intervene rather than the effects of resources on intervention, a surprising decision in an otherwise resource-focused book. In light of such examples as the French company dominating oil production in the Republic of Congo allegedly favoring Sassou Nguesso over Lissouba during the mid-1990s conflict there, it would be interesting to hear Le Billon's views on how resources enable and condition the interference and intervention of foreign companies and countries in resource-based conflicts.

The bottom line is that *Wars of Plunder* represents a near-exhaustive study of the relationship between resources and conflict. In light of its command of a vast literature and its wealth of descriptive details, it should be given a prominent place on the bookshelf of any researcher in related fields and should be the first book read by any new student of the field. Although it will satisfy neither scholars searching for parsimonious theories

and rigorous empirical testing nor policymakers searching for definitive solutions to foreign policy challenges, *Wars of Plunder* is an enlightening read that concentrates and advances an important field of study.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-war

Citation: Richard Maass. Review of Le Billon, Philippe, *Wars of Plunder: Conflicts, Profits and the Politics of Resources.* H-War, H-Net Reviews. June, 2013.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37726