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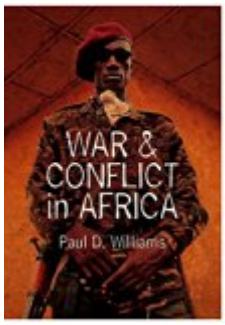
Paul Williams. *War and Conflict in Africa.* Cambridge: Polity, 2011. xii + 306 pp. $24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7456-4545-2.



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In the aftermath of the Cold War, much of the developing world witnessed a decrease in the number of armed conflicts. Across Africa, however, there seemed to be a sharp increase in political violence during this same period. Why was conflict increasing in Africa and at the same time decreasing everywhere else? What was it about Africa's international relations and political dynamics that drove this spike in conflict? This puzzle is the focus of Paul Williams's book *War and Conflict in Africa*. In this well-crafted study of the contexts and processes of armed struggle in Africa, Williams has two aims: to understand why Africa experienced so many conflicts after the Cold War and to examine the main international attempts to end them. He draws insights from both quantitative and qualitative research to provide a comprehensive account of the origins and nature of these wars and responses to them from the international community.

Williams argues that it was a combination of factors that caused the almost four hundred wars that took place in Africa from 1990-2009. While there are multiple explanatory variables, a thread that links the dynamics of the conflicts is the nature of state-society institutions, especially those associated with regime survival in weak states. As regimes pursue political strategies to maintain their survival and ensure their status, they create, manipulate, and alter state-society relations and in doing can exacerbate underlying tensions. One of the most important assertions that Williams makes is that the nature of warfare and the causes of conflict are not exclusively linked to "colonialism, postcolonial elites, ethnicity and greedy criminals" (p. 7). He argues against the African exceptionalism hypothesis that posits there is something so exceptional, something so different about the African continent that it cannot be studied as anything other than a *sui generis* political system. He claims instead that we need to see wars in Africa as the result of complex social systems.

Williams lays out his study in three parts. In part 1, he considers patterns of armed conflict in Africa from 1990-2009. He offers an accounting of the political terrain of conflict and provides data

on the definition of armed conflict, the number of struggles that occurred, the types of actors involved, and the main trends and patterns that emerged. In part 2, Williams analyzes the causes of conflict in Africa. He dismisses the idea that the causes of armed struggle can be reduced to one explanatory variable, such as the legacies of colonialism, socioeconomic inequalities, or ethnicity. Instead, he uses a culinary metaphor to argue that there are many ingredients that combine to cause war. He looks closely at five ingredients: governance systems and the role of neopatrimonalism; ethnic identity; sovereignty and self-determination; natural resources; and religion. With regards to the latter two variables, Williams contends that neither religion nor natural resources drives conflict. Rather, they are tools that are manipulated by powerful individuals to rally support and reify inter- and intra-group cleavages.

Williams's claim about the role of resources runs counter to recent studies that posit that resources, whether abundant or scarce, can trigger wars. Rick Auty's ***Sustaining Development in Mineral Economies: The Resource Curse Thesis*** (1993), Ian Gary and Terry Lynn Karl's ***Bottom of the Barrel: Africa's Oil Boom and the Poor*** (2003), and Michael L. Ross's "Oil, Drugs, and Diamonds: The Varying Roles of Natural Resources in Civil Wars" (2003), argue that oil and diamonds in particular are to blame for causing a variety of detrimental effects in sub-Saharan Africa, from poverty to corruption to conflict. Other scholars--for example, Matthias Basedau in his "Context Matters. Rethinking the Resource Curse in Sub-Saharan Africa" (2008)--argue that we cannot consider the impact of resources without examining the political and economic context in which they are found. Williams agrees with Basedau and states that it is political systems and not resources that increase the risk of armed violence. Thus, resources can be a blessing or a curse depending on the quality of governance. He writes: "inserted into a context where corrupt autocrats have the advantage, resources will strengthen their hand and generate grievances ... inserted into a stable democratic system, they will enhance the opportunities for leaders to promote national prosperity" (p. 93).

In the third part of the book, Williams evaluates international responses to African conflicts. In particular, he discusses strategies and institutions adopted by the African Union (AU) to promote peace and security. He argues that the new African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and its corresponding peacemaking, peacekeeping, and assistance initiatives have done little to "alter the nature of politics in Africa's weak states or the international politics of statehood" (p. 227). They have not put an end to patrimonialism or the manipulation of cleavages by elites. What they have done, however, is promote more restrictive requirements for the recognition of sovereignty. As a result, there were fewer wars being fought in Africa at the end of the 2000s. This decrease in the number of conflicts suggests that international engagement has been effective to some degree in reducing armed conflict. Williams also finds, however, that once conflicts have started, even those that begin as small rebellions, it becomes much more difficult to end the violence. The international community continues to struggle with conflict management strategies after the eruption of violence. Williams's study supports the argument that the best strategy for successful conflict management is early intervention before the fighting starts. Thus, a significant normative implication of Williams's book for policymaking is the need to concentrate efforts in the development of early warning systems. Moreover, the international community needs to focus on bridging the gap between analysis of early warning data and the implementation of strategies to reduce the likelihood of conflict.

In addition to calling for more research on early warning systems and preventive diplomacy, Williams also suggests areas for future research on the causes of conflict. He discusses briefly the

impact of youth bulges, that is, large numbers of unemployed young people, particularly men, whose presence can raise the risk of violence erupting. He also argues that land should be a central feature of quantitative research on the relationship between resources and conflict. Because many African economies continue to depend primarily on agricultural production, Williams asserts that it is critical to understand governance mechanisms and state-society dynamics with regard to land issues. Climate change will continue to have an impact, but unlike other scholars such as Solomon M. Hsiang et al. who in their article "Civil Conflicts Are Associated with the Global Climate" (2011) posit that vulnerability to climate change breeds war, Williams contends that environmental degradation will not in and of itself cause conflict. It may interact with other variables to make conflict more likely, but Williams is careful to remind the reader that armed struggles are always the result of careful calculations on the part of actors who perceive greater benefits from war than from peace. This focus on agency as instrumental to the outbreak of conflict suggests that when the international community is developing tools for peace, it needs to understand that conflicts are not the spontaneous result of bad luck or uniquely African conditions. Rather, conflicts result as the conscious decision of a set of actors.

Williams's book makes a critical contribution to the literature on war and peace less because it presents new or controversial explanations for violent struggle, but because it puts African conflicts into a broad comparative perspective and structures its analysis of causes and responses thematically. He synthesizes an enormous amount of research on the dynamics and processes of conflicts and thus provides useful data and interesting case studies. His is a critical text for scholars of conflict and peace, as well as policymakers who seek to devise more effective strategies for managing Africa's wars.

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