

**Philippe Le Billon.** *Wars of Plunder: Conflicts, Profits and the Politics of Resources*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. xi + 363 pp. \$30.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-231-70269-0.

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In a compelling look at the relationship between natural resources and conflict, Philippe Le Billon's *Wars of Plunder Conflicts, Profits and the Politics of Resources* aims to help informed readers look beyond the conventional belief that an abundance of natural resources leads to conflict. Le Billon chides predominant realist, neoliberal, and securitization views that explain resource-based conflicts and have birthed similarly limited conflict-termination strategies. Instead, he offers three hypotheses that focus on vulnerability, risk, and opportunity and provides rich contextual and explanatory depth to the shortfalls of traditional arguments. While not a book for the novice student of conflict, his comprehensive assessment seeks to reshape scholarly views of resource-based conflicts.

Given the nature of the topic, this is not a book for the average Joe. First, the author's use of social context to explain the causes of resource-conflict reflects a constructivist approach that the reader is assumed to understand. Coming from a trained geographer, Le Billon's contributions represent the diverse theoretical fabric that constructivism embodies.[1] Where realist, neoliberal, and securitized approaches of conflict predict bellicose behavior based on politics, power, or threat-based narratives, constructivism is more interested in explaining why certain conflictive behaviors

take place, who the key players may be, and what social structures exist.[2] Hence, explaining social factors that affect resource-based conflict, an inherently constructivist tack, presumes readers can distinguish between realism, liberalism, and constructivism. Next, Le Billon's argument assumes an understanding of conflict drivers commonly studied in international relations (IR) or political science programs. First, he contends that a nation's economic dependence on a specific resource sector creates a problem of *vulnerability*, increasing the chance for armed conflict. This is commonly called the "resource curse" in academic literature. He next argues that the "resource conflict" motivates individuals or groups to *risk* violence for a specific end. Finally, he posits that some resource sectors enable belligerent or militant group activity, providing them the *opportunity* to fight because the exploitation of "conflict resources" keeps them afloat. Thus, the resource curse, the resource conflict, and conflict resources all enable a conflict and natural-resource relationship typically studied in depth in IR and political science courses. Finally, the author's language requires exposure to more advanced conflict-based studies. For example, he uses a mixed method of study, explicitly calling on large-N and case studies to formulate his approach to assessing the relationship between resources and conflict. Addi-

tionally, he frames some of his arguments in political economy concepts, dependency theory, and modernization theory and specifically seeks to replace realist, neoliberal, or securitized viewpoints with socially constructed ones. In short, throughout the book, the author assumes his readers are well informed of constructivism's explanatory power as an IR theory, already understand its challenging dilemmas, and are fluent in the language and methods used to explain and assess these issues. While full of significance for the informed IR scholar, this book is not intended for a casual reader.

Parking structure to the side, the book provides a comprehensive assessment of an incredibly complex problem set. To begin with, *Le Billion* outlines conventional views of resource conflicts, highlighting how historical views were influenced by realist, neoliberal, or securitized narratives. Additionally, his literature review implies that these IR narratives oversimplify resource-based conflicts. In constructivist terms, he seeks to help readers look beyond a "here and now" view of resource-based conflicts by stressing social context that better explains the resource-to-conflict relationship. To bring out these social elements, he outlines vulnerabilities, risks, and opportunities present in cases of oil-, diamond-, and timber-based conflicts. This key context enables him to argue that "conflicts cannot be solely explained by [natural resources]" (p. 61). He then contends that predominant theoretical tendencies also affect current resource-conflict termination strategies—military intervention, economic sanctions, or purchasing peace. While not a panacea, *Le Billion* argues that a socially constructed understanding of resource-based conflicts can better match specific conflict types and common resources to a better suited resolution mechanism. He concludes by arguing that resource exploitation management, management of resource revenue, and resource governance can provide areas of focus, enabling natural resources to contribute towards a lasting peace instead of perpetual conflict. Thus, the au-

thor completes a holistic analysis, helping readers benefit from historical perspectives; better understand oversimplified theoretical tendencies; see social factors embedded in oil, diamond, and timber contexts; and note the shortcomings of common resource-based termination strategies. Additionally, readers get a sense of how natural resources can drive development instead of conflict.

Because this book seeks to reshape conventionally held views of resource-based conflict, *Le Billion* targets insightful IR scholars employing a constructivist approach that explains social vulnerabilities, risks, and opportunities through large-N and case studies of oil, diamonds, and timber. The book's conceptual framework supports this "reshaping conventional views" approach. The comprehensive review of resource-based conflicts seeks to get scholars to look beyond the natural resource itself and instead identify social factors that contribute to conflict or, even better, to peace.

#### Notes

[1]. Antje Wiener, "Constructivist Approaches in International Relations Theory: Puzzles and Promises," *Constitutionalism Webpapers*, ConWEB no. 5 (May 1, 2006): 9, available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1939758>.

[2]. Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "Taking Stock: The Constructivist Research Program in International Relations and Comparative Politics," *Annual Review of Political Science* 4, no. 1 (2001): 391–416; 393.

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