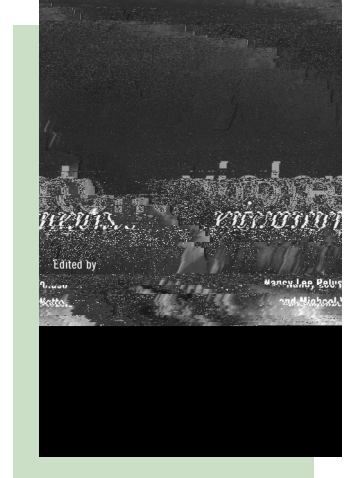
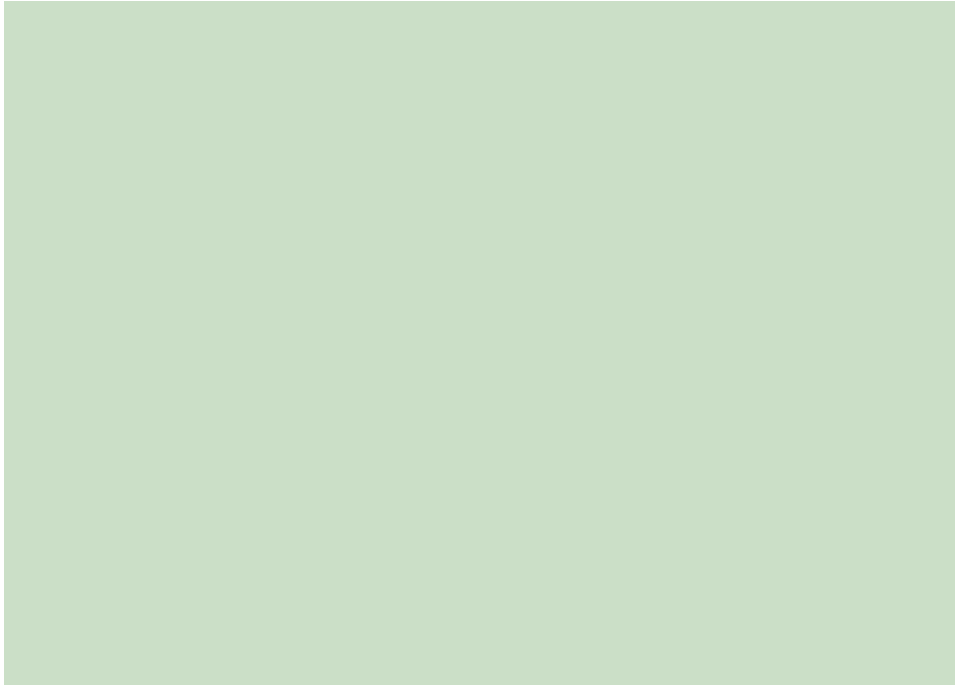


EXCHANGE



Debating *Violent Environments*

By *Thomas Homer-Dixon*

In the first two chapters of *Violent Environments*, Nancy Peluso, Michael Watts, and Betsy Hartmann assert that I am a sloppy and dishonest scholar with a grudge against the poor whose research has no theoretical cohesion and whose findings have little empirical basis. They also strongly imply that my research has links to the military and is intended to provide theoretical and ideological cover for continued large military budgets.¹

These authors launch a severe critique of work that I carried out—in close collaboration with a large number of other researchers, specialists, and experts—under the auspices of the University of Toronto, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science.² Although *Violent Environments* includes several chapters severely critical of this work, and although I strongly disagree with much of this criticism, due to

space constraints here I will focus on the first two chapters.

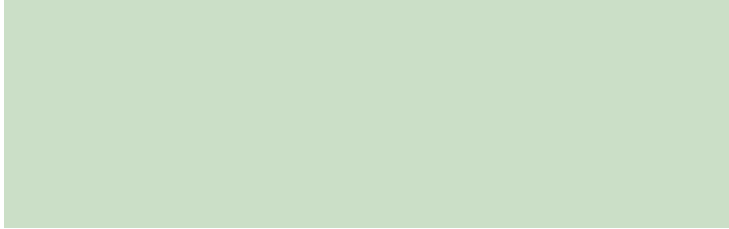
In *Violent Environments*, Peluso, Watts, and Hartmann repeatedly misrepresent my work, take my arguments out of context, and misquote me. They make factual mistakes about the nature of the research projects I directed and about the theory developed to explain the relationship between environmental scarcity and violent conflict. They use straw-man argumentation, they represent research hypotheses as empirical findings, and they take little account of my previous and widely-cited rebuttals of criticisms similar to theirs.³

What emerges is a grotesque caricature. The errors and misrepresentations of this book have the effect of portraying my arguments as far less nuanced and subtle than they actually are. On occasion, Peluso, Watts, and Hartmann are right in their criticisms, o

Violent Environments (Cornell University Press, 2001) provided a scathing critique of influential approaches to environmental as well as an alternative to these approaches based in political ecology. In particular, Peluso, Watts, and their authors targeted the influential neo-Malthusian writings of figures: journalist Robert Kaplan; Günther Baechler, the lead author of *The Limits of Growth* (1972); and the late environmentalist Paul Erlich. *Violent Environments* (Cornell University Press, 2001) provided a scathing critique of influential approaches to environmental as well as an alternative to these approaches based in political ecology. In particular, Peluso, Watts, and their authors targeted the influential neo-Malthusian writings of figures: journalist Robert Kaplan; Günther Baechler, the lead author of *The Limits of Growth* (1972); and the late environmentalist Paul Erlich. *Violent Environments* (Cornell University Press, 2001) provided a scathing critique of influential approaches to environmental as well as an alternative to these approaches based in political ecology. In particular, Peluso, Watts, and their authors targeted the influential neo-Malthusian writings of figures: journalist Robert Kaplan; Günther Baechler, the lead author of *The Limits of Growth* (1972); and the late environmentalist Paul Erlich.

they are right in important ways. But their wholesale rejection of our work leaves little room for dialogue.

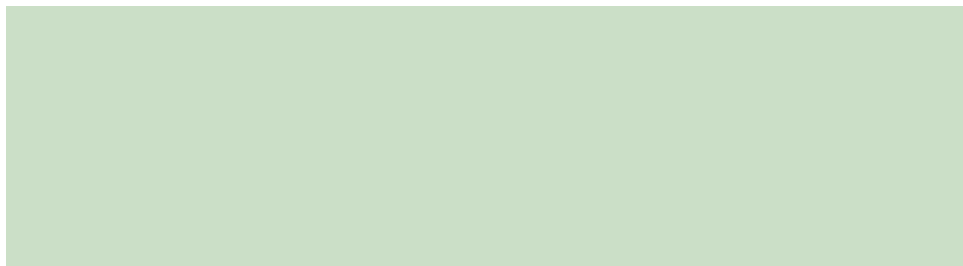
At the University of Toronto, we have always welcomed debate and criticism, because we want to promote the accumulation



of knowledge. In the course of our research in the 1990s, we sought out people with a wide range of scholarly backgrounds and ideological perspectives to ensure that our conclusions were well-grounded and thoughtful. Indeed, Nancy Peluso attended and participated in one of our workshops. We have also tried to promote a dialogue with—and support the research of—our acknowledged critics. For this reason we opened our extensive archives of correspondence, research results, databases, and financial records to Hartmann when she was studying the origins and development of the environment-conflict research program. (Surprisingly, this support is nowhere acknowledged in Hartmann’s chapter in *Violent Environments*.) Unfortunately, the authors of *Violent Environments* never once contacted us for our comments, suggestions, or responses.

Such an exchange could have significantly improved the book. Here are some examples of errors we could have flagged:

- Peluso and Watts say that I propose “automatic, simplistic linkages” (page 5) between increased environmental scarcity, decreased economic activity, migration,



weakened states, and violence. They say I argue that “conditions of resource scarcity...have a monopoly on violence” (page 5), which implies that I believe scarcity is a necessary and/or sufficient condition for violence.

I argue nothing of the kind. Here’s what I actually wrote in the opening pages of *Environment, Scarcity, and Violence*: “Environmental scarcity is never a sole or sufficient cause of large migrations, poverty, or violence; it always joins with other economic, political, and social factors to produce its effects” (Homer-Dixon, 1999, page 16). And in the book’s conclusion, I write: “[E]nvironmental scarcity produces its effects within extremely complex ecological-political systems. Furthermore, environmental scarcity is not sufficient, by itself, to cause violence; when it does contribute to violence, research shows, it

conception of social structure (page 20). Yet, in our Rwanda case study, this diagram did not represent a research finding. Rather, it represented a particular *hypothesis* about the relationship between environmental scarcity and violence in Rwanda. Moreover, Percival and I argued *against* this hypothesis (Percival & Homer-Dixon, 1998).

- Peluso and Watts write that “[t]oday, environmental security as an institutional project is truly global, with academic centers in Toronto, Zürich, Oslo, Cambridge, New York, and Paris. All have garnered significant foundation support, and many are linked to national militaries” (page 10). They provided no evidence for this extraordinary claim about military links. Certainly the research carried out at the University of Toronto received no funding from the military, nor did it have any formal or informal links to any military research, intelligence, or policy activities. I believe this is also true for most of, if not all, the other environment and conflict research projects on their list.
- Peluso and Watts present a straw-man account of my argument about the role of ingenuity in society’s adaptation to environmental scarcity. They assert, for example, that my concept of ingenuity is “synonymous with technological innovation” (page 22 of *Violent Environments*). Yet in *Environment, Scarcity, and Violence* I wrote at length that technological innovation is insufficient by itself and that societies need copious “social ingenuity,” which is “key to the creation, reform, and maintenance of public and semipublic goods such as markets, funding agencies, educational and research organizations, and effective government” (Homer-Dixon, page 110).
- Peluso and Watts say that the environment, in my analysis, is a “trigger” of violence (pages 5 and 22 of *Violent Environments*). However, in *Environment, Scarcity, and Violence* I argued explicitly against a trigger model of environmental scarcity’s role as a cause of violence. I propose instead that environmental scarcity is best seen as a deep, “tectonic” stress that can have multiple, long-term effects on a society’s economy and political stability (Homer-Dixon, 1999,

pages 18, 106, and 177).

- Hartman says that, in my analysis of deforestation in the Philippines in *Environment, Scarcity, and Violence*, I neglected to note that “under the Marcos dictatorship fewer than two hundred wealthy individuals controlled a large fraction of the country’s forests” (page 51).

Actually, however, I wrote: “The logging industry boomed in the 1960s and 1970s and, following the declaration of martial law in 1972, President Ferdinand Marcos handed out concessions to huge tracts of land to his cronies and senior military officials. Pressured to make payments on the foreign debt, the government encouraged log exports to the voracious Japanese market. Numerous companies were set up with exclusive opportunities to exploit forest

The tone of *Violent Environments* suggests that all perspectives other than those based in Marxian political ecology are by definition theoretically incoherent.

—Thomas Homer-Dixon

resources, and they rarely undertook reforestation” (Homer-Dixon, 1999, page 66).

- Later in her chapter of *Violent Environments*, Hartmann suggests that Valerie Percival and I manipulated the findings of our Rwanda case study for essentially political reasons—in particular to avoid any association with “environmental determinism and racial stereotyping of Africans” (page 58). She provides no evidence for this serious charge of scholarly misconduct.

Given these examples, I would maintain that *Violent Environments* occludes rather than encourages dialogue.

In the interests of promoting such a dialogue, let me identify what I think are the three key issues at the heart of our disagreement. First, Peluso, Watts, and Hartmann use Marxian political ecology as a theoretical framework to guide their analysis of environmental problems in the South. I agree that such a perspective on processes of

production, accumulation, and distribution can generate critical insights. It can help fill some of the serious gaps in our analysis—especially, for example, our relative neglect of the powerful influence of the capitalist global economy and Northern consumption patterns on environmental scarcity in the South.

But other theoretical tools are often useful too, including, for instance, the theories of relative deprivation, social identity, civil violence, and endogenous economic growth that I use in my work. Unfortunately, the tone of *Violent Environments* suggests that these other perspectives (and indeed all perspectives other than those based in Marxian political ecology) are by definition theoretically incoherent.

Second, we do sharply disagree about the role of population size and growth as a cause of environmental scarcity. In *Environment, Scarcity, and Violence*, I provided abundant evidence that population pressures—when combined with certain social, economic, and political factors—can make environmental problems far worse.

Third, while I believe that nature can

have an independent or exogenous influence on a society's political affairs and trajectory of development, Peluso, Watts, and Hartmann do not allow for this influence as a possibility. Here lies, I think, our sharpest and most important disagreement. In *Environment, Scarcity, and Violence* I argue at length, and with numerous detailed illustrations, that sometimes our natural environment has an independent causal role. I support Daniel Deudney's call to "bring nature back in" (Deudney, 1999)—to expand our explanatory repertoire from strictly "social-social" theory (theory that posits only social causes of social outcomes) to include "nature3(theor)umncity(theory lude e2

bewildering array of ways as the analyst or reader sees fit.

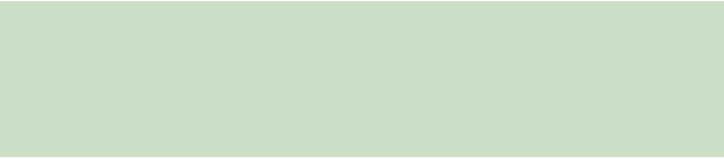
Our concern in our introduction to *Violent Environments* was to look carefully at the purported causal mechanisms that Homer-Dixon does deploy—and the connections he purports to make—and to scrutinize them. (Such scrutiny should hold equally for our theoretical apparatus, but there is no such scrutiny in Homer-Dixon's remarks above.) Here we stand by what we said in that introduction. It is one thing to claim that your analysis does “a” and “b”; it is quite another to actually *demonstrate* “a” and “b.” Thus, while Homer-Dixon denies the language of “trigger” (a denial we acknowledge as much

in our own chapter), his analyses, in fact, nearly always deploy trigger mechanisms—events that set off violent interactions.

Ultimately, it is not possible to review

Dixon cites above as informing his work—“relative deprivation, social identity, civil violence, and endogenous economic growth”—do not make for an alternative theoretical approach to the political ecology that we use. They are not formulated in relation to anything and therefore provide no means for empirical analysis.

The second question Homer-Dixon raises speaks to our self-evident differences of opinion over population size and growth. Here the question is whether any or all of the studies presented in *Violent Environments* deny any role to population in understanding violence, and whether our studies provide counter-evidence to the “abundant evidence” he claims to have marshaled. To take one illustration, Aaron Bobrow-Strain (in his chapter “Between a Ranch and a Hard Place: Violence, Scarcity, and Meaning in Chiapas, Mexico) takes one of Homer-Dixon’



social and environmental sciences *and* enough internal debate among contributors to belie the very idea of the dead hand of Marxian closure. We focus on the specific institutions and processes of production, accumulation, and resource access as well as the forms that nature and social relations take as a basis for understanding the nature of resource conflict. This perspective ties all of our case studies together, although there is nothing like a unity of vision among the authors. We all engage a variety of theoretical insights and grapple with the strengths and weaknesses of a political ecology model.

Homer-Dixon sings the praise of

Note

¹ Indeed, in editing this response, ECSP Editor Robert Lalasz pointed out that “ECSP, for example, works with Kent Butts at the U.S. Army War College—yet we would strenuously resist the suggestion that there is complicity between what we do and everything the U.S. Army War College does, or the Army, for that matter.” This was precisely our point.

References