Borderlands, Climate Change, and the Genocidal Impulse

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The focus of this paper is on tracing and exploring some of the implications of climate change for various types of conflict with a particular emphasis on genocide and with specific reference to borderland regions. This paper examines some of the ways in which climate induced stresses may contribute to the development of conflict over resources and borders, and persecutory ideologies and practices against groups and populations defined as dangerous and /or superfluous.

Key words: Climate change, genocide, war, conflict, borderlands, state failure, resource scarcity, environmental refugees, scapegoating

In *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning*, the historian Timothy Snyder concludes with a warning about how climate change may create fertile ground for genocidal violence and concludes that, "understanding the Holocaust is our chance, perhaps our last one, to preserve humanity."[1] In many ways, his comments echo my own work in which I have previously called attention to the ways in which the impacts of climate change will increase the risk of conflict generally, and genocide more specifically.[2] Every year the evidence continues to mount. Global climate change is fundamentally altering the world as we know it. As this recognition increasingly permeates social and political discourse, our understanding of what this will mean also increases as scientists continue to delineate with ever greater clarity the impact of a warming climate on the natural world around us.[3]

The science is telling us that much of the globe will see new weather patterns develop resulting in increased precipitation in some regions, while other areas will have longer and deeper droughts. Furthermore, storm systems are predicted to increase in frequency and severity.[4] These kinds of changes will clearly impact the ability of various nations to grow crops, maintain livestock, and provide enough potable water for their populations. Sea level rise will also impact those nations with seashores since higher sea levels and storm surges will threaten coastal communities, and the millions who live and work in them, with flooding and lost or diminished supplies of fresh water as salt water infuses into coastal groundwater systems.[5] These dramatic changes will fundamentally alter ecosystems around the world and test the adaptive capacity of plant and animal species around the globe.

While our knowledge about and understanding of climate change continues to deepen, much of our attention has focused on the impact of these alterations on the natural world, specifically to weather, flora, and fauna. We must, however, recognize that climate change will not only challenge the ability of plants and animal species to adapt to a warming world and all that entails, but will also test the ability of human communities to cope and adjust to a different environmental, social, and political landscape. Slowly, we are waking up to this reality. Belately, many coastal cities around the world

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are beginning to assess ways in which they can protect themselves from rising sea levels,[6] while some nations have already begun acquiring land in the developing world in anticipation of future agricultural needs.[7] In July 2015, the Pentagon issued a report asserting that climate change represents an "urgent and growing threat to our national security," and suggests that "higher temperatures increase the strain on fragile threats and vulnerable populations."[8] Not renowned for being the most progressive of institutions, the Pentagon report nevertheless clearly acknowledges the looming threat posed by a rapidly changing environment.

One of the reasons climate change poses the kind of "urgent and growing threat" that the Pentagon report asserts, is because it will create continuous and ongoing stresses that will repeatedly challenge the ability of communities and nations to cope and meet the needs of their populations. The important point to emphasize is that these stressors are not one-off events, but will accumulate over time and may potentially erode the ability of any particular state to adapt. In describing this particular risk, the political scientist James R. Lee asserts that:

> Human society is capable of enduring events and seasons, but as these events and seasons accumulate over many years or even decades, accumulated wealth begins to draw down and eventually dissipates. Without renewal of society's wealth, human health and well-being decline, and over time the society itself may collapse.[9]

To cope with such long term challenges will require a great deal of political will and adaptive capacity on the part of societies and their leaders. The key issue is adaptation. Those nations best able to adjust to the altered circumstances will be better able to endure and survive. Much will depend on the social, economic, and political resiliency of communities and nations, but these vary tremendously because of local variations in geography, resources, wealth, and the social, political, economic, and religious structures that often guide choices and beliefs. Large sections of the African continent, for example, are believed to have low resiliency and are thought to be particularly vulnerable.[10] Much of North Africa, for example, is considered to be at high risk because of extreme environmental fragility and poverty,[11] while West Africa's ability to confront climate change will be compromised because of endemic political corruption and pervasive ethnic conflict.[12] Europe and North America, on the other hand, are viewed as having more resiliency and adaptive capacity that should allow a greater ability to cope with climate induced changes, although even among European nations risk levels vary tremendously. Differential amounts of wealth, political authoritarianism, economic development, and geographic location mean that the consequences of climate change will impact European states in multiple and complex ways. Essentially, resource rich states with stable political systems and well developed infrastructures will tend to have the economic and political capital to alleviate the demands of the changing climate, while poorer nations will face a much harder time. In fact, poor nations will face an escalating and compounding situation in which resource loss may lead to violent conflict, which in turn will further reduce resources and deepen the inability of communities to cope and ameliorate the situation, thus leading to more risk of conflict.[13] This doesn't mean however, that the industrialized world will always cope well or easily. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina, a strong category three storm with sustained winds of 125 mph at landfall, hit the coast of Louisana and plowed through New Orleans. In the face of this

crisis, local government collapsed with a resulting breakdown in law and order, leading the governor to give a "shoot to kill" order to help the National Guard suppress looting. Evacuation of the population was sporadic and mismanaged, leading to many deaths.[14] Keep in mind that this was a single event in the one of wealthiest nations on earth.

Acting in concert, the ripple effect of these challenges will severely test the capacity of nations to accommodate the changes while maintaining security and social order, as well as providing adequate shelter, food, and potable water.[15] Those states that are unsuccessful in meeting these demands risk failing and allowing internal conflict and social disorder to erupt as competition for diminishing resources intensifies. Unfortunately, examples of failed states in the modern era are all too common and illustrate the dangers of such failure for conflict, war, and genocide. In the mid-1990s, state failure in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) facilitated the outbreak of civil war that was subsequently used by adjacent countries to gain access to the Congo's natural resources.[16] Simply put, the anarchy in the DRC was exploited because it served the economic and political interests of neighboring states to do so. Ironically, this example of state failure was triggered, in part, by the genocide in neighboring Rwanda spilling over its borders as refugees from the violence sought safety in refugee camps in the DRC. These exiles were soon followed by perpetrators of the genocide, who fled across the border as they sought to escape the consequences of losing the civil war that helped spawn the genocide in the first place. Ultimately, this influx of people and the resulting conflict and turmoil helped destabilize the entire region.

Some scholars have specifically asserted that resource loss is likely to bring about intergroup conflict and violence, especially in the developing world.[17] In fact, history has shown that diminishing resources have indeed sparked conflict and wars in the past and evidence suggests that the earliest known examples of war represented attempts to steal resources.[18] Similar patterns may reemerge as states struggle to cope with the challenges of resources lost in the face of climate change. These effects will be mediated by geography and scale, since within geographically large and diverse states the shift in resource capacity may be absorbed domestically, but in smaller states with more limited territory and resources those shifts may cross international borders and pose a heightened risk for conflict between those neighbors. Access to lost or dimished resources, such as water, have already heightened tensions and conflicts between communities and nations.[19] As the sociologist Christian Parenti summarizes, "all across the planet, extreme weather and water scarcity now inflame and escalate existing social conflicts."[20] Some have pointed out, for example, that the ongoing conflict in Syria, which has cost thousands of lives and provoked much suffering, can be traced to the social and political unrest brought about by a deep and long-standing drought in the region.[21] One can also point to the genocide in Darfur since resources, especially water, were at the heart of the genocide. This isn't to diminish the importance of the roles that contemporary identity politics and religion played in facilitating the violence, or the long standing prejudices that fueled and justified the persecution, but underneath it all lay a long standing drought that diminished grazing land for herds and arable fields for cultivation.[22] In both of these examples, Syria and Darfur, resources provided an underlying impetus toward violence. In short, climate change poses some real risk for conflict as nations around the world increasingly confront the reality and challenges of a changing world. This begs the question, however, of how does this relate to genocide?

Over the last 20 to 30 years, genocide studies has come a very long way and we now know a great deal more about the etiology and dynamics of this particular form of collective violence than we once did. Specifically, we now understand that genocides and other forms of mass atrocity and violence are not inevitable, but instead are the result of choices made by a variety of political, military, social, and religious leaders who conceive of and initiate what might be called the genocidal impulse: the desire to remove and destroy a population from within a community. We also know that this compulsion does not simply happen. Even though genocides are often portrayed as erupting or exploding—imagery that strongly suggests an unanticipated and random event—the reality is that genocides are planned and conscious attempts to annihilate a group. They are deliberately brought about as the end result of many decisions, extensive planning, and logistical preparations carried out at many levels of a society and state. In criminological terms, we might therefore suggest that genocides are largely instrumental in orientation.[23] In other words, even though they may appear to be senseless expressions of hatred and intolerance, in actuality genocides are somewhat rational attempts to achieve specific goals, and any study of genocide usually reveals an underlying logic at the core of the genocidal impulse. It's important to note, however, that this seeming rationality is one that is heavily tempered and influenced by various emotive elements.

Researchers have shown that emotion is an important element in all rational decision making; indeed it is crucial to the decision making process.[24] The cooperative relationship between rationality and emotion goes a long way toward explaining the role that irrational beliefs, attitudes, prejudices, fears, religious intolerance, xenophobia, nationalism, racism, and political affiliation often play in perverting the rational decision making processes that may lead to the genocidal impulse. During troubled times, for example, negative and retaliatory attitudes and opinions tend to develop, grow, and harden, and political, social, and religious leaders can easily capitalize on such feelings to implement more repressive policies.[25] Uncertainty and fear, in other words, breed intolerance and hostility, especially against those perceived to be outsiders, and especially if they are seen as unfairly benefiting from a society.[26] Consider the recent wave of anti-immigrant rhetoric and posturing during much of 2015 in both the United States and Europe, most prominently in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Paris on 13 November 2015. As the number of climate change refugees increases over the coming years, such antagonism is likely to increase and may well manifest in stronger anti-immigrant policies as well as violence against these outsider groups. During the 1990s, reports indicated that around 25 million people had been displaced because of droughts, disasters, and environmental degradation of natural resources.[27] As disturbing as these numbers are, predictions suggest that by 2050 nearly 200 million people may become environmental refugees, while one assessment suggests the number may be closer to 700 million people.[28] Such large numbers of both internally displaced people and refugees will place significant strains on societies and communities already struggling to meet the challenges of climate change. Popular sentiment and anger can easily coalesce against groups defined as being different or as somehow representing a threat. In the past, politicians and demagogues have not been averse to exploiting the pent up fear, anger, and prejudice that surfaces during troubled and threatening times. They have done so to gain or retain power, scapegoat groups to divert attention away from failed policies, provide easily understood answers with emotional resonance, or as a pretext to act on pre-existing stereotypes and prejudices. This kind of process is made easier

where long-standing antipathies and prejudice have wide currency. Just as Hitler and the Nazis scapegoated the Jews for Germany's defeat in the First World War and the subsequent collapse of the German economy during the Great Depression, so too may others blame vulnerable groups for the problems of a particular place and time. Adolf Hitler was able to come to power, Daniel Chirot writes, because "he offered a coherent ideology of national salvation to a people who felt that their world had almost totally disintegrated between 1918 and 1932."[29] Unfortunately, intolerance and prejudice have very long lifespans and are relatively easily resurrected during difficult times, as needs dictate. In such a situation, it's entirely possible for resource-based conflict to assume ethnic, religious, or national overtones. In the 1980s, for example, water and land issues mutated into ethnic conflict in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan as the crisis pitted communities against each other and heightened ethnic antagonisms.[30] In point of fact, genocide scholars have long identified tough times as one common factor leading up to the genocidal impulse because of the kinds of attitudes that they foster.[31]

While much of the scholarship concerning genocide has highlighted the political, historical, and social dimensions of this crime and the decisions and choices leading up to the destructive policies, increasingly scholars have also begun examining the influence of geography and climate on the perpetration of this crime.[32] The importance of these issues to political conflict and genocide, especially in an era of climate change, becomes clear when one focuses on border regions which have often been contested zones of empires, nation states, and populations. Here, in the boundary zones, we have often seen nationalism, ideology, ethnicity, religion, and other human drives, ambitions, and rivalries play out in violent and destructive ways. The geographic confluence of political and social boundaries creates frontier regions that can situate states, diverse populations, and variable resources in close proximity to each other; and in the past this has often resulted in friction, hostility, and competing claims for territory, resources, and populations. The conflicts in Eastern Europe, for example, between Imperial Russia and the Turks, Poles and Ukrainians, Christians and Jews, Germans and Slavs, and Serbs and Muslims illustrate this reality well. It's no accident that the borderlands of Eastern Europe have sometimes been referred to as the Bloodlands.[33] As with other border regions around the world, this part of Europe has often been prone to a heightened risk of mass political and communal violence as competing powers vied and struggled for control. It doesn't help that the history of these areas has many examples of communal and political violence between different groups and populations, and that these past conflicts and hostility can all too easily be fanned into flame during future times of upheaval and stress. The genocidal impulse has often been facilitated by old prejudices, past conflicts, and intergroup rivalry. Nationality, religion, ethnicity, language, and culture are the fault lines around which war and genocide have erupted in the past and may play a deadly role again. Keep in mind that the geography of border regions concerns not just the physical terrain of an area, although that is certainly part of it, but also what might be termed "spatiality."

Geographers have long understood that where humans live dramatically impacts how they live and also what they believe. Consequently, border zones have often been influenced by the social geography of various movements and ideologies that imagined a nation or region free of the physical presence of some population or group. This is the essence of genocide. It's about reimagining a geographic landscape from which all members of a particular group have been physically removed because of ethnic,

political, religious, or other differences and then attempting to bring that vision into reality. It concerns a vision of purity in which the social and physical landscape is free of the polluting presence of certain groups. Border regions, because they are zones of interaction and are usually demographically diverse, tend to be seen as particularly dangerous sources of racial and/or ethnic degeneration and pollution and it is in these zones of contamination that the genocidal impulse may be unleashed. This is the essence of Mark Levene's magisterial two-part work concerning genocide in what he terms the European Rimlands; that part of Eastern Europe where the geographic nexus of close borders, failing empires, and ethnic communities clashed over national and ethnic identity, politics, and territory.[34]

Although we often view them as being static and unchanging, borders are often fluid and contain contested boundaries that can shift over time. As the fortunes of empires and nations have waxed and waned, political borders have also often changed. But those historic claims to land and people were not necessarily forgotten, and as states confront the challenges of coping with climate change and as they eye the resources of neighboring countries, the solutions they envision may well be informed by ideas of historic territorial loss and injustice. Political leaders may be influenced, not only by the need to acquire vital resources, but also by notions of reclaiming lost land. The need for vital resources, combined with popular notions of national and/or ethnic identity and past victimization are potent sources of potential conflict. Lost territory and sovereignty have often played a powerful role in shaping national identity and a sense of injustice and loss; as Christian Parenti puts it, "societies, like people, deal with new challenges in ways that are conditioned by the traumas of their past. Thus, damaged societies, like damaged people, often respond to new crises in ways that are irrational, shortsighted, and self-destructive."[35] The perception of past victimization has often played a powerful role in helping facilitate violence, whether genocidal or not. Serb propaganda, for example, exploited the notion of Serb victimization at the hands of the Ottoman Turks in 1389 and by the Croats during the Second World War,[36] and these images of past persecution and oppression helped justify the aggression inflicted against the Bosnian Muslims and Croats during the campaigns of ethnic cleansing in the 1990s. These notions of past victimization were supported by messages suggesting that Bosnian Muslims were engaged in planning to attack Bosnian Serbs yet again. Both of these messages served to legitimate the aggression of the Bosnian Serbs as being both retributive and defensive in nature.[37]

Another important reason why border regions are particularly vulnerable relates to the heterogeneous nature of many frontiers. While borders divide people, they are also areas of interaction and are consequently fairly diverse. By definition, then, these regions are home to majority and minority groups. During times of peace and stability these groups often exist peacefully, but during more difficult times, such as during wars, economic downturns, or political instability, these underlying distinctions and tensions sometimes assume a new and more potent significance. In his work on tyranny, Daniel Chirot proposes that,

> reactive nationalism that is based on fear and resentment of the outside world, that demands communal solidarity of the entire nation, regardless of the cultural and individual differences which exist, and that faces serious internal ethnic and religious diversity is likely to impose itself by force.[38]

Violence accompanied the breakup of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, and it's no accident that most of it took place in Bosnia, the most ethnically diverse province of the former Yugoslav republics. Similarly, much fighting took place in the Krajina region of Croatia. In Serbo-Croatian *Krajina* actually means "frontier," and was the most ethnically diverse region in the Croat republic.[39] The death of Tito in 1980 and the end of the Cold War allowed for the reawakening of ethnic identity in the early 1990s and a weakening of a common Yugoslav identity, a situation exploited by power hungry politicians, such as Slobodan Milošević and Franjo Tudjman, who capitalized on these fractured identities and heightened ethnic tensions between the various groups.[40] In the wake of Slovenian and Croatian independence, Serbs in Bosnia were mobilized in anticipation of a Bosnian declaration and the stage was set for the ethnic cleansing that followed. The pretext was that the minority Serb population in Bosnia was being oppressed and needed protection.[41] This was to be accomplished by the establishment of a Serb Republic in Bosnia-Herzegovina that would defend Serb lives and interests. While much of the violence was directed by the Serb regime in Belgrade, it was the Serb population in Bosnia that facilitated and made possible the campaign of ethnic cleansing in this new Serb republic.[42]

Border zones are also problematic for a number of other reasons as well. Often defined as frontiers, these areas are typically on the periphery of state power and are perceived to be more lawless and less regulated than regions closer to the core. Border areas are also where national security and state interests collide with international relations. The Ukraine, for example, has always been defined as being essential to Russian national security and within its sphere of interest, while many European nations see the former Soviet states as providing a geographic buffer against Russian influence and power.[43] The current situation in the Crimea and Eastern Ukraine certainly speak to the ways in which such border issues can play out in dangerous and violent ways. Geography, then, is intimately linked with climate change, conflict, and genocide on a number of different levels. The physical and social terrain of border areas have made them vulnerable to conditions that have sometimes led to warfare and genocide in the past and in an era of climate change with its attendant effects on the nations and communities in these boundary zones, this vulnerability is unlikely to change.

The above discussion is not meant to argue that conflict and genocide are inevitable outcomes of climate change. In many ways, this paper has been an exercise in examining worst case scenarios in a world in which nations and communities will increasingly struggle to meet the demands of a changing climatological, social, and political landscape. We should remember, however, that we live in a world of probabilities and possibilities, not of certainties. While climate induced stresses will impact all regions, communities, and nations, the choices and strategies of accommodation, adaption, and amelioration will no doubt vary tremendously as localized conditions and needs, and cultural, religious, economic, and political values and practices shape local, regional, and national responses. Much depends on the decisions made by communities and their leaders in terms of the strategies they adopt, their willingness to embrace unpopular, costly, or difficult solutions, and the role that hate, prejudice, and intolerance are allowed to play in coping with and explaining the situation. Whether or not individual communities and nations will be successful in avoiding the pitfalls and impulses toward scapegoating, persecution, violence, and genocide is something that only time will tell.

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