Levels of Analysis in Conflict Studies

INRODUCTION

In the study of conflict, there is an overwhelming tendency in the popular press to seek single-factor explanations. While most academic research examines multiple levels of causality, they do not always seek to provide a clear order of importance to, or link between, each factor in relation to the others. This is despite the fact that to understand a conflict situation what is needed is a processual model that can take into account combinations of factors, their entailments, and the dynamics of contentious politics.

By combinations, I mean the specific interactions between different factors and levels. For example, members of one ethnic group might have migrated to another island during the 1960s for historical and economic reasons, and adopted a certain occupational niche; subsequent political changes could bring the migrant group into conflict with local groups, the dispute having cultural overtones. These combinations need to be taken into account in a systemic analysis. Enactments result necessarily or predictably from certain courses of ac-
tion. Actual or perceived impunity will remove a significant impediment to violence. Crowds are less inhibited than isolated individuals when it comes to engaging in violence. One who decides to become the anak buah to a charismatic political or religious leader may find himself constrained to perform acts or adopt moral stances he might not otherwise have. Entailments are often perceived as the unintended consequences of one’s actions. A participant in a mob riot can rightfully claim he had no idea his group would suddenly turn violent, although those organizing the event must understand the entailments of assembling, arming and inciting a large group of youths. Contention politics is an often complex, dynamic process that begins “when people collectively make claims on other people, claims which if realized would affect those others’ interests” (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 1996:17).

Which levels of analysis are the most pertinent?
- Historical level (colonial legacy, history of conflict, etc.)
- Economic level (community and individual struggles over valued resources)
- Political level (mix of forces vying for power, alliances, etc.)
- Sociological level (analysis of social forces at play)
- Anthropological level (interethnic relations, cultural factors)

Although of course it depends on the case in question, I tend to be sceptical of purely culturalist analyses. Perhaps this paper, and my past research, will suggest why I feel this way.

THE HISTORICAL

First let us look at the historical level of causality. In Indonesian conflict situations we have to deal with a variety of possible causal factors:
- Legacy of colonialism (religious and ethnic antagonisms and inequalities bred or en-
couraged by colonialism have to be overcome)
- Violence of the independence struggle (countries which have to engage in a violent struggle for their independence have a legacy to overcome; Algeria is a notable case)
- Legacy of the New Order (various legacies of the 30-year totalitarian regime have to be overcome: propaganda and education discouraged critical thinking; support for violent movements to undermine mass Islamic parties, democratization forces, or other perceived threats to the regime, etc.)

These are the factors common to most parts of Indonesia. It is often claimed that these historical antecedents provided the pre-conditions for the emergence of violent conflict in post-Independence Indonesia. Yet, in many areas of Indonesia these factors have not led to conflict. The reasons why some areas are conflict-free while others are conflict-ridden is understandably a key question for the field of conflict studies. The answer is often complex, and we cannot of course offer a single answer that would apply to all conflict situations. New factors must be called on to explain how conflict arises in areas having experienced similar historical conditions.

In some specific cases, the above legacy factors alone may explain quite a bit. It appears, for example, that the roots of the particular form of violence known in Madura as carok developed in the particular colonial political context of that island. An oppressive tax collection system, the recruitment of Madurese as auxiliaries to the colonial army, and the absence of a functioning judicial system combined to encourage the development of vigilante or self-help methods of conflict resolution. The Madurese example is perhaps extreme: colonial indirect rule left Madura more isolated than the rest of the Dutch East Indies from some of the social movements occurring
### Table: Major differences in the views of Homer-Dixon and Hartmann

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Thomas F. Homer-Dixon</th>
<th>Betsy Hartmann</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What is the most common or primary cause of conflict?</td>
<td>Environmental scarcity &amp; population growth</td>
<td>Resource wealth</td>
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<td>2. How does scarcity arise?</td>
<td>Population growth and depletion of renewable resources. This can lead to “resource capture” by elites, intensifying scarcity for poor.</td>
<td>Resource capture by elites is the primary cause of scarcity, not a follow-up to degradation by a growing population</td>
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<td>3. What causes land degradation?</td>
<td>Poor peasants forced on to ecologically marginal lands</td>
<td>Land concessions to large-scale commercial interests</td>
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<td>4. Migration</td>
<td>Always negative force</td>
<td>Can be positive force by promoting spread of ingenuity, intercultural contact</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Population growth</td>
<td>Always negative</td>
<td>Can provide incentive to boost productivity through innovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Conflict due to pressure on resources is due to</td>
<td>Internal population growth and environmental decline</td>
<td>Demand and consumption by outsiders</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Risk of civil conflict increases</td>
<td>With scarcity of resources</td>
<td>With abundance of easily lootable primary commodity exports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Methodologies proposed</td>
<td>Environmental security approach</td>
<td>Gender analysis</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>“Environmental entitlements” framework</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Political economy</td>
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<td>Political ecology</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Future aims of research and intervention</td>
<td>Reduce the risk of increasing conflict – at least maintain status quo</td>
<td>Promote the possibility of positive political and economic transformations</td>
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</table>

In Java (Jonge 1982, 1985, 1993; Smith 1997, 2001). Yet, since Independence, the conditions have changed in Madura, and predictably we find fewer and fewer confirmed cases of *carok* (though violence involving a Madurese, anywhere in Indonesia, is bound to be described as *carok* in the newspapers). Violence of this sort is of course not confined to Madura. Indeed, even today we note that acts of vigilant conflict resolution are frequent in many parts of Indonesia due to the perceived absence of a credible justice system. This shows that similar conditions can cause similar cultural traits to emerge.

### THE ECONOMIC

In one of our first Reading Group discussions at the LIPI on conflict theory, we compared the work of a well-known theorist, Thomas F. Homer-Dixon (1999), with a critique of his work by Betsy Hartmann (Hartmann, 2001). In Table 1, I give an outline of some of their differences. Though the two points of view are opposed in many ways, they both agree on the importance role played by economic and ecological factors in violent conflicts. Both lay emphasis on the problem of resource capture by elites, though Homer-Dixon sees population growth as an important variable, while
Hartmann prefers to emphasize political factors. Homer-Dixon advocates a security approach that would reduce the risk of conflict or at least maintain the status quo, while Hartmann advocates radical political and economic transformations to remove the conditions for conflict.

The two schools are fundamentally opposed on the question of whether the risk of civil conflict increases in conditions of abundance or scarcity. We have seen how conflicts often arise in areas having great resource wealth, such as Aceh, Kalimantan or Papua, or in the diamond fields of Sierra Leone and Liberia. Hartmann may be right that resource-rich areas are prone to conflict when elites engage in resource capture, though the sorts of mass violence we have witnessed in such areas are often carried out by those who feel they have not received their share of the riches. The question would then be one of distribution rather than scarcity or abundance. If so, then inequality would have to be considered an important element predisposing an area to conflict (see Stewart, 2001).

It would seem clear that the ecological economics of resource control, and economic and social inequality are fundamental factors in most conflicts. Yet, we all recall that not so long ago, during the New Order regime, discussion of these issues was politically sensitive. Everyone knew resource capture was being carried out by crony elites, but discussion of the issue was muted. Cultural explanation of conflict was a favored mode in government, scholarly and media discourse during the New Order period, and to some degree old habits have persisted. Government is understandably (though I would say short-sightedly) keen to promote unity and harmony, and dismiss discord as marginal and illegitimate. During the New Order government, stress was put on the irrational, primordialist or even primitive impulses governing the behavior of parties to a conflict as a means of shifting the focus away from political or economic exploitation at the hand of the State or its cronies. Violence due to perceptions of inequality was written off as “social jealousy,” an attribution that implied weaknesses in human character were at the root of conflicts and cast aspirations for equality in a negative light. That was the New Order way of delegitimizing any movement toward or advocacy of a more just or transparent allocation of resources.

Popular and media discourse by and large still promotes cultural explanations over scientific ones, since the former are more readily digestible by their readers. It is perhaps a statement on the powerful attraction of culturalist explanations that even when multiple causes are admitted, the cultural factor is often highlighted.

**THE POLITICAL**

Ethnic killings are multi-faceted manifestations, with the most brilliant faces being ethnicity and culture. Thus, Horowitz in his book *The Deadly Ethnic Riot*, may perhaps be excused if his treatment of the Dayak killings of Chinese in 1967, anti-Madurese riots in West Kalimantan in 1997 and 1999, and anti-Chinese riots in Jakarta in 1998 makes little mention of the high political stakes being fought over, nor of the manifest state involvement, at least in the first and last cases.

We have seen how important the role of elites is in conflict zones, as when they are drawn to high-value extractive resources, and seek to control them. One problem is that in many conflict zones, elites are not convinced they can prosper more by means other than predation (Bates, 2001:102). Elites, both local and national, also are instrumental in mobilizing ethnic and religious groups for their own ends. Unfortunately, Indonesia does not have a strong tradition of analysing mobilization along ethnic/language and religious lines between sub-national groups within a multi-ethnic state, as in the case of India, for example.
(Klinken, 2002:3). In addition, the behavior of
government elites and the security apparatus
largely determines whether isolated disputes
become coordinated riots, or a few displace-
ments become widespread ethnic cleansing.

The Sampit massacre of 2001 could not
have come at a worse time: the political situa-
tion in Jakarta was in disarray, with the Presi-
dent and Vice-President at loggerheads, and
the security forces, police and army, divided
or unwilling to intervene. Violent protagonists
realized that impunity would be the likely re-
sult of their actions. As Horowitz reminds us:
"When rioting is seen as necessary, when it
can be accomplished with impunity, and when
it is widely believed to be justified, there is
a strong chance it will happen." (Horowitz,
2001:331). In the case of Sampit, rioters sensed
they had strong local elite support. Again
Horowitz:

> Authoritative support is so common a pattern in
> ethnic riots that many students of violence, from a
> variety of vantage points, have identified this
> factor as the one that makes the difference be-
> tween at most a series of isolated assaults and
> large-scale collective violence. (344) [...] When
> authorities move slowly to suppress the first acts
> of violence, rioters sense tacit permission (349).

In Sampit, as in Sambas and other areas
experiencing serious episodes of communal
conflict, the spark which ignited the riots was
often a relatively minor incident: an altercation
on a bus, a fight between youths at a dangdut
concert over a girl, or a similar incident. Inci-
dents such as these happen every year in
nearly every Indonesian town, and most of
the time they are settled locally, without un-
due violence. The important questions are not:
What sparked the conflict? or Who hit whom
first? or Who killed whom first? The question
we need to answer is this: Why is it that in
some places the sparks fall on water, while in
others they fall on petrol?

Seeking answers to this question requires
intimate knowledge of the political context at
the local and regional levels, and a good chron-
ology of the conflict evolution and the behav-
ior of elites, government, and the security forces.
It is also a plus to be able to compare both
peaceful and conflict-ridden areas in the same
region, to test both contexts (the water and the
petrol). Some recent studies have attempted to
do this (Klinken, 2002; Varshney, 2002).

THE SOCIOLOGICAL

Homer-Dixon, Horowitz and many other
observers often trace the origin of conflicts to
migration flows, since many conflicts involve
native population and ancient or recent immi-
grant populations (Northern Ireland, Maluku,
etc.). The case is often made that interethnic
conflicts in Indonesia's outer islands are the
result of the government's decades-long trans-
migration programme to move impoverished
populations from the inner islands of Java,
Madura and Bali to the outer islands, notably
Sumatra, Kalimantan, Sulawesi and Irian Jaya
(or Papua). In such explanations, Transmigra-
tion, and the spontaneous movements that of-
ten accompanied the official programs, virtu-
ally ensured that ethnic strife would follow
burgeoning ethnic competition and the relax-
ation of New Order controls on ethnic-based
claims. While such explanations must be in-
vestedigated in each case, they cannot provide a
general explanatory model for the simple rea-
son that in the vast majority of inter-ethnic
and inter-religious interactions resulting from
these decades of migration, a reasonable de-
gree of ethnic or religious harmony has been
achieved. In many cases, this is due to occupa-
tional complementarity, or native percep-
tions that the influx of migrants has spurred
positive development in the form of schools,
roads, markets and health clinics. Inadequate
planning, lack of concerted negotiations with
locals, or the use of migrants to displace or
manipulate local populations, could however
provide a recipe for conflict. Thus, while mi-
gration per se cannot be assumed to be the
cause of violent conflict, "malmigration" might be. How migrant communities are formed, and their interactions with local populations are key subjects that deserve more study in areas experiencing conflict.

Although a book like Horowitz's is extremely valuable for the wealth of comparative material it provides, one must guard against making spurious correlations based on a few salient or common elements. As sociologists will tell you, it is not because something correlates that it is necessarily relevant.

THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL

Anthropologists are trained to undercover the significance of cultural traits and practices of all sorts. Violence has not escaped the gaze of the anthropologist, though early anthropologists were most interested in the more exotic and bizarre practices such as headhunting. Many classical treatises on headhunting or ritual killings, however, conclude that such practices are timeless idiosyncratic cultural remnants of traditionalism or tribalism, without analyzing the specific historical, ecological and political contexts which gave rise to such practices in the past. Indeed, such methods of analysis were not available to early anthropologists. To use the classical works as explanatory aids today is therefore highly speculative.

The levels of violence seen today are shocking, even for anthropologists familiar with the literature on "primitive war." Responding to the alleged death of one of theirs, one group will burn down an entire neighborhood, killing innocent people. We see severed heads paraded on sticks, or hear of young warriors gleefully tossing enemy babies in the air so they fall down onto sharpened bamboo stakes. Through such horrifying images, we can regard the violence witnessed in Kalimantan, Poso, and Maluku as essentially similar to each other, and comparable to that seen on television screens following the break-up of ex-Yugoslavia, all of which have resulted in ethnically-cleansed nation-states or enclaves. As Keane reminds us "it would be mistaken to conclude that they somehow represent a lapse into 'traditionalism' or 'tribalism.' They are in fact quintessentially modern, not only because of their implication in the struggle for territorially bound state power, but also because they are illustrations of the rational-calculating use of violence as a technique of terrorizing and demoralizing whole populations and preventing them from engaging in organized or premeditated resistance" (Keane, 1996: 30-1).

TWO CONCLUSIONS

I end this paper with two brief conclusions. The first is a conclusion on causality drawing on the above discussion, and the second a plea to cultivate what Keane calls public spheres of controversy.

What is my conclusion as to how to integrate levels of causal analysis? First, I believe that a systemic model of causality that can take into account different causal levels, empirically evaluate the contributions of each level to the problem, and weigh the interactions between them must guide us. Such studies will provide a potentially more complete picture of the conflict problem. The results of systemic studies can be quite useful in the policy domain, although moving to implementation poses more complex issues than, say, research postulating a single-factor explanation that can be targeted readily, if misguided. With the problem spanning different causal levels, resources must be marshalled for each, taking into account the existing correlation of political forces. The best statesmen will not hesitate to take radical steps to protect the innocent, provide humanitarian assistance, and take politically risky measures if necessary to uphold the rule of law, promote social justice, and ensure that all communities may live together in peace and security. But politics being as it is, researchers will sometimes have to grudgingly trim their policy recommendations.
to target more limited but precise items having a real chance of being implemented.

As we recently broached the subject of extreme violence, I would like to end with my plea, actually a concrete suggestion in the area of both conflict prevention and civil society development, two things that I am convinced go hand in hand. In essence, I would submit that the usual practice of hiding the actual extent of violence when conflicts erupt is misguided. The decision to ban photographs and films of the violence in Kalimantan was unfortunate. The practice gives rise to every sort of rumour as to the extent of the actual killing and violence. It encourages sanitized impressions of the extent and means of violence. Still today, many Kalimantan perpetrators claim straight faced that they remained in their villages while their weapons took off from their hands, flew great distances to the enemy camps, severed heads, before being whisked back bloodied into their hands again. This failure to bring the Kalimantan riots fully into what John Keane calls “public spheres of controversy” (Keane, 1996:165-6) sets back the two goals of developing civil society and reducing the potential for future violence in Indonesia. As John Keane writes:

[...] the cultivation of public spheres of controversy, in which the violent exercise of power is monitored nonviolently by citizens, is a basic condition for reducing or eliminating incivility and for minimizing the chances of its return, in no small measure because of the quadruple propensity of public spheres: to cultivate shared memories of times past when terrible things were done to people; to heighten citizens’ and governments’ awareness of the nature and extent of actually existing incivilities; to canvass and circulate to other citizens ethical judgements about whether or not (or under what conditions) a certain form of violence is justified; and to encourage the formulation of remedies for incivility, particularly those that are mindful of the complexity of the whole subject and the troubling implications of violence for democratic institutions. (Keane, 1996: 165-6).

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


