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Ancient Hatreds and Mineral Curses

Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future.

SAMUEL HUNTINGTON, 'The Clash of Civilizations?', 1993[1]

An early explanation of why there seemed to be an upsurge of conflict in the 1990s was that what was being observed was not really new but merely the resuscitation of enmities with deep roots. In 1993 Samuel Huntington challenged the optimism of his former student Fukuyama. As ideological divisions faded, he argued, more basic factors would come into play, reflecting distinctive cultures and traditions which had been built up over centuries. The origins of these divisions were of less interest than their persistence, and their growing importance in the complex geopolitical setting of the post-colonial age. He did not deny the strength of Western civilisation, but he assumed it had peaked.

The conflicting civilisations had religious roots, but the actual importance of religion was unclear because religiosity could take many forms. Religion was an easy tag of identity, but then assigned to groups of people who might exhibit minimal observance of any religious practices it meant little. Religion could also refer to deeply held beliefs that shaped all aspects of life. Unless one was separated from the other, the argument

could easily become circular. If some sort of religious identity could be attributed to all political actors then all conflicts soon appeared to have had a religious cause.[2] A more discriminating approach tended to undermine Huntington's thesis. It certainly provided an unreliable explanation of past wars.[3]

As with Fukuyama the nuances of the argument were lost as his title, *The Clash of Civilizations*, turned into a slogan that appeared to capture the developing importance of nationalism and cultural identity in the conflicts of the 1990s. It reinforced an impression that the slaughter was nihilistic and almost instinctive, a reflection of ancient hatreds that consumed whole communities. The implications of a centuries-old conflict was that it was probably doomed to continue well into the future, and so little could sensibly be done to bring it to a close.

The wars in the former Yugoslavia seemed to fit Huntington's thesis because they indeed took place in and about the fault lines of Europe, the meeting points of the old Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires, and of Catholicism, the Orthodox Church, and Islam, and where national identities had been forged during the previous century with claims for self-determination. One of these claims, marked by a shot in the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo, had triggered the First World War. Early in the 1990s people were being forcibly moved from their homes because of their ethnicity—a process which came to be known as 'ethnic cleansing'. This was linked to comparable events in the region's history, notably the Croatian Ustashe's commitment to 'cleansing the terrain' during the German occupation of Yugoslavia, the euphemism employed in their assault against Serbs who were as often massacred as moved. This had been followed by equally brutal attacks by Serbs on Croats after the Germans had retreated, if not quite on the same scale.

So when comparable behaviour was observed in the 1990s there was an implication that this was such a deep-rooted process that it would not reach a conclusion until ethnically homogenous areas had been created:

> With no sizable minorities left within any state and with the warring factions securely walled off behind "national" boundaries, the best that can be hoped for is that the motors of conflict will be disabled and the fatal cycles of violence that have marred Balkan

history will finally have reached their end.[4]

Acting US Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger described the Yugoslav conflict as irrational. Ethnic conflict, he explained, 'is gut, it is hatred; it's not for any set of values or purposes; it just goes on.'[5] In 1993 the author Robert Kaplan published his book *Balkan Ghosts* which encouraged the view that the current conflicts emerged from a region 'full of savage hatreds, leavened by poverty and alcoholism', emerging out of 'a morass of ethnically mixed villages in the mountains.'[6] One implication was that there was really little to be done. President Clinton's reluctance to get involved in the conflict was said to be the result of reading Kaplan's book, which, it was noted, 'pointed out that these people had been killing each other in tribal and religious wars for centuries.'[7]

In an article that appeared in 1994, also read with approval by Clinton, Kaplan warned of a 'coming anarchy'. In place of nation states, he spoke of 'an epoch of themeless juxtapositions, in which the classificatory grid of nation-states is going to be replaced by a jagged-glass pattern of city-states, shanty-states, nebulous and anarchic regionalisms'. The prospect was grim:

> Future wars will be those of communal survival, aggravated or, in many cases, caused by environmental scarcity. These wars will be subnational, meaning that it will be hard for states and local governments to protect their own citizens physically. This is how many states will ultimately die.[8]

Later Clinton publicly regretted his embrace of the 'ancient hatreds thesis'. In 1999, now engaged in a campaign against the Yugoslav leader Slobodan Milošević over Kosovo, he apologised for blaming conflict on 'some Balkan disease' of endless ethnic blood feuds based on implacable hatreds. 'I, myself, have been guilty of saying that on an occasion or two,' he remarked, 'and I regret it now more than I can say.'[9]

Although the language often suggested that these conflicts were marked by neighbours killing neighbours, the numbers involved were usually only a tiny proportion of the adult male population. In addition, the victims were often moderates of the same grouping who opposed the

extremists. Even when communities had a long history of mutual antagonism, it still had to be explained why violence broke out between them at a particular time.[10] In other conflicts with similar levels of tension, violence was avoided.

Thus one critique of the 'ancient hatreds' meme argued that what went on in Croatia and Bosnia was not so much about a 'frenzy of nationalism—whether ancient or newly inspired—but rather from the actions of recently empowered and unpoliced thugs.'[11] Warren Zimmerman, who had been the US Ambassador to Yugoslavia, observed how 'the dregs of society—embezzlers, thugs, even professional killers—rose from the slime to become freedom fighters and national heroes.'[12] That still begged the question of who had empowered the thugs. They were used for a purpose.[13] The more the analysis pointed to mutual loathing that welled up from within society rather than something that had been encouraged and developed at an elite level, the more it appeared insoluble 'rather than a mitigatable, deliberate atrocity carried out by an identifiable set of perpetrators.'[14] This did not mean that it was always so easy to identify the perpetrators. Each of the parties had its own narrative to explain why its fight was justified and in accord with the principles of self-determination.[15]

The antecedents of the Bosnian conflict were long and complex, but the origins of the immediate crisis lay in the instrumental use of nationalism by Slobodan Milošević as the president of Serbia. This put pressure on the unity of Yugoslavia. As the country broke up, then Serb strategy was to eliminate or expel the non-Serb population in Serb areas. The violence was not random but deliberate. The 'scale, range and consistency of the methods used', observed James Gow, 'required significant coordination and planning'.[16] Focusing on the elite without consideration of the circumstances which gave their nationalism credibility could be taken too far. It simplified the causes of the conflict and also flattered 'a deeply held conviction that people, like children, are generally good, and that as a consequence, bad behavior is best explained by bad leaders, teachers, or parents'.[17] Events in Yugoslava still needed to be understood by reference to the country's history, which provided the themes for the nationalist messages, or the social structures which conditioned the response. Yet in

the end it was politics that led to the country's devastation. Those seeking to resolve the conflict had to make sense of this politics.

The conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and elsewhere developed because certain political and military leaders willed them, and not because of a popular clamour. As a civil war was essentially a contest between repression and dissent, it was perhaps not surprising that an intensification of both, and in particular repression by an insecure regime, provided one of the best guides to the onset of civil war (although this could be a bit like saying that the appearance of tumours is a guide to the arrival of cancer).[18] Notably the Yugoslav wars were predicted. A US National Intelligence Estimate of October 1990 observed, without qualification or dissent, that: 'Yugoslavia will cease to function as a federal state within one year and will probably dissolve within two. Economic reform will not stave off the breakup.' Bosnia was seen as the 'greatest threat of violence'.[19] The cohesion of a country with 'six republics, five nationalities, four languages, three languages, two alphabets, and one party' had long been of concern. Pessimism about Yugoslavia's chances for survival had grown during the 1980s, and by 1990 the belief that the country could 'muddle through' was untenable. Yet this estimate led to no action. Not all policymakers agreed, the diplomatic agenda was incredibly crowded with the end of the Cold War and the Gulf conflict, but also the message was so stark that it pointed to no levers to pull to prevent catastrophe. Unlike so many of the warnings discussed in this book, this one implied no remedies.[20]

ONCE CONFLICT WAS UNDERWAY, A SENSE OF ETHNIC IDENTITY could grow and acquire a harder meaning. There was no natural correspondence between 'nation' and 'state, which is why references to 'nation-states' were rarely accurate. A state was a legal construct, a nation, tribe, or ethnic group was a social construct, less embedded or 'primordial' than often assumed.[21] Many were of relatively recent origin, encouraged in the past by colonial governments as part of strategies of divide and rule, or nurtured by angry intellectuals and opportunistic political leaders. Yet whenever and however identities were constructed they could still become vital facts of political life and, once mobilised, less malleable than

supposed. They could not be altered at will as political agendas changed, as if tensions could be intensified at one point but then played down for the sake of a later harmony.

When governments acted on the basis of identity, especially in a discriminatory or repressive fashion, then identity grew in salience.[22] The longer conflict endured in one form or another, the more past grievances, atrocities, and betrayals became part of the cultures of groups, and prepared them for future rounds. Ethnic and religious diversity might not invariably lead to war, but once war occurred these animosities were likely to be aggravated and then linger. Moreover, those who spoke for the distinctive groups, even when they were culpable for the original violence, were hard to exclude from any peacemaking process. They could still demand to be part of the solution to a problem they had created. This is why in practice the combined logic of an ethnic focus and the self-determination principle led to proposals for partition and relatively homogenous statelets, and why ethnically polarised conflicts could be amongst the hardest to conclude, unless one side was actually comprehensively defeated in war.[23] When national groups were spread across states (for example the Kurds in the Middle East) then a neighbour might do its best to prevent a defeat of those with a shared identity. The interaction between social and political structures was therefore complex. Nonetheless, the starting point for any understanding of the prevalence of civil wars and the difficulty of resolving them lay in the weakness of states and the political exploitation of division.[24]

AFRICA WAS A PRIME EXHIBIT IN ROBERT KAPLAN'S 1994 warning of a 'coming anarchy'. 'Africa's immediate future could be very bad', he reported, to the point where 'foreign embassies are shut down, states collapse, and contact with the outside world takes place through dangerous, disease-ridden coastal trading posts'.[25] In 2000 a headline in *The Economist* spoke of 'Hopeless Africa'.[26] The continent displayed too many of the features that made civil war more likely. In addition to chronically weak states there was poverty, inequality, and not enough gainful employment for young men. Even the terrain seemed to suit guerrilla warfare, offering sanctuary and opportunities for ambushes and occasional territorial

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At the heart of much of the worst African violence was the Congo, the second largest country in the continent and at its centre, with troubled countries all around it—including the Central African Republic and South Sudan to the north, Rwanda to the east, and Angola to the South, all of which had their own bloody wars. The area around the Congo basin was first established as almost a private venture of King Leopold of the Belgians until it was taken over by his government in 1908. After the country gained independence in 1960, a struggle developed among the different factions in the independence movement. This turned into a full civil war, which lasted for five years, drawing in the Belgium government, which regularly sent forces in to rescue expatriates, the superpowers, and the United Nations, offering an early demonstration of the problems of establishing a peacekeeping force without a peace. After a 1965 coup Mobutu Sese Seko came to power in the Congo, which he renamed Zaire. With inefficient and corrupt armed forces and massive debt, this apparently strong state became hollow inside. Mobutu's reach barely stretched beyond the capital Kinshasa. He exacerbated intercommunal violence to divide potential opponents. Gradually its own troubles became intertwined with those of its neighbours.

Angola only achieved its independence in 1974, after which the three different guerrilla groups who had been fighting the Portuguese began to fight each other. The Marxist MPLA formed a government in the capital Luanda. Fearful of a Soviet gain the United States encouraged Zaire and South Africa to intervene on behalf of the two other groups, the FNLA and UNITA. With Cuban help the MPLA kept hold of Luanda but were unable to establish control over the rest of the country. After 1990, though superpower rivalries no longer fuelled the civil war, it was sustained by the country's mineral wealth, which factions used to fund their armies. UNITA relied largely on the sale of diamonds. The conduct of the war, which lasted until 2002, was appalling on all sides, with young men forced to fight and young women raped and abducted. Nobody knows how many died. The figure of 500,000 usually cited is so round that it indicates the uncertainty.

On the other side of the Congo was Rwanda, one of the smallest

countries in Africa, which, with neighbouring Burundi, had also been run by Belgium after they took over the colony from Germany following the First World War. There was tension between the Hutu, favoured by the Belgians, and the disadvantaged and disaffected Tutsi. The Hutu continued to control the country, often with brutal methods, but found it difficult to suppress the Tutsi whose militants often raided from neighbouring countries. After a military coup in 1973, Juvénal Habyarimana took power and seemed to stabilise the country, but with a fast-growing population competing for scarce land, tensions built up. A civil war began in 1990, as the result of a Tutsi insurgency led by Paul Kagame's Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), fully backed by Uganda.[28] There was a tentative ceasefire in 1993, but Habyarimana was killed in a plane crash the next year. The radical Hutu regime in Kigali that replaced him unleashed the genocide that killed some 800,000 Rwandans over three terrible months.

The interaction between the existing tensions within Zaire and the Rwandan conflict produced a perfect storm of murder and mayhem.[29] Rwandans, including Hutu who had been involved in the genocide, flowed across the border into Zaire. The new Rwandan government worked with Uganda, Angola, and local Tutsi forces to take the offensive against the Mobutu regime. Mobutu was eventually deposed in May 1997. Laurent-Desire Kabila formed a government, and the country became the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Kabila lacked the strength to disarm the Hutu militias so Rwanda invaded again, joined by Burundi and Uganda with their own concerns about rebels finding sanctuary in the DRC. Zimbabwe and other members of the South African Development Community (Chad, Sudan, Lesotho, and Namibia) backed Kabila. To complicate matters further Angola switched sides because Kabila, unlike Mobutu, did not back UNITA.

This was now a hybrid conflict of extraordinary complexity, with breakaway factions, internecine disputes, and side deals. Foreign forces clashed with each other on DRC territory; UN peacekeeping forces were put together and then failed to make any difference. Eventually Kabila was assassinated, to be replaced by his son. A peace deal was signed between the DRC and Rwanda in July 2002. A transitional government was formed the next year. Neighbours, and in particular Rwanda, still worried about

threats to their own stability and meddled continually. Conflict and violence remained routine.[30]

THE SOCIOLOGICAL EXPLANATIONS OF CONFLICT, ADDRESSING ethnic and religious differences, tended to be most in play with the wars in the Balkans. Though they certainly had relevance for the wars in Africa, here economic explanations had more influence. Until the 1990s economists, even those working in the development field, gave little consideration to civil wars. The textbooks contained few if any references to war and conflict. The field was about how to raise the living standards of ordinary people in the developed world. Military coups and extravagant arms purchases distorted economic priorities, and wars set back the development process, but beyond that there seemed little to add. The priority was to give sensible advice to states able to take it and the international bodies striving to help them develop. In 1994 Jack Hirshleifer, observing how little attention economists had paid to the 'dark side' of human affairs, of conflict, crime, revolution, and warfare, urged them to explore this whole 'intellectual continent'. Economists who did so, he added, 'will encounter a number of native tribes—historians, sociologists, psychologists, philosophers, etc.—who, in their various intellectually primitive ways, have preceded us in reconnoitering the dark side of human activity.' Betraying something of the imperial tendencies of economics, he confidently anticipated that these 'a-theoretical aborigines' would soon be brushed aside.[31]

As economists began to make their first forays into the field, one particular issue grabbed their attention—how unauthorised groups could take control of natural resources in weak states to enrich themselves. The backdrop was a steady rise in the number of conflicts in petroleum-rich and diamond-rich countries. Up to 1974 they occurred at a rate of about one a year, but over the next eighteen years this moved up to just less than five a year. One obvious reason was the rise in the number of petroleum-rich states following the 1974 OPEC price rises, up from fifteen to forty-two by 1980. The incidence of violence involving these states went up sharply. It then dropped down between 1985 and 1995, along with the oil price, before rising sharply again. Conflicts involving diamond producers

also grew, notably after 1986. Another trend was an increase in the use of contraband by rebels, including gemstones, timber, and narcotics. Contraband funding was evident in seven of ninety-two civil wars beginning between 1945 and 1988, but then in eight of the thirty-six wars that began after 1988.[32] In the DRC, Namibia's president was alleged to be interested in protecting his family's mining interests while Chad had connections with Congolese gold mines. Zimbabwe was owed money by Kabila and also appears to have seen economic opportunities in the DRC's diamonds, gold, and copper. (Zimbabwean troops congregated around important mining towns). On the other side Rwanda and Uganda exploited territory to export diamonds.[33]

THE TRIGGER CONDITIONS FOR CIVIL WARS BECAME A MATTER of intense academic debate. An influential study of 2003 by Fearon and Laitin argued that:

> The conditions that favor insurgency—in particular, state weakness marked by poverty, a large population, and instability—are better predictors of which countries are at risk for civil war than are indicators of ethnic and religious diversity or measures of grievances such as economic inequality, lack of democracy or civil liberties, or state discrimination against minority religions or languages.

As in the past insurgencies had been marked by rural guerrilla warfare (although by this time urban fighting was becoming more important) and this could be sustained by as few as 500 to 2,000 active guerrillas then what mattered was 'whether active rebels can hide from government forces and whether economic opportunities are so poor that the life of a rebel is attractive to 500 or 2,000 young men'. According to this strand of thinking, civil wars were almost entirely opportunistic, an unsurprising response to a set of conditions rather than a deliberate political project. This approach discouraged attempts to look beneath broad indicators of a troubled society to attempt to understand the specific sources of conflict or pay any attention to sub-state actors. It played down the motives and aspirations of those doing the fighting, as if any cause would do.[34]

Even when looking at motives it was possible to argue that people did

not really care what they said they cared about. Oxford economist Paul Collier led the way, working closely with the World Bank, arguing that in explaining the incidence of internal conflicts, 'greed' was more important than 'grievance' and 'loot' more so than 'justice'. The presence of natural resources, and in particular oil and diamonds, made countries particularly war prone. There might be no surprises in finding tendencies to violence in countries that were struggling to raise their per capita income and experiencing severe inequalities, or that young men with not much else to do were available for armies and gangs. What really made the difference, Collier and his colleagues argued, was the opportunity to make money. Here was the incentive for rebellion and the means by which a conflict could be sustained. The opportunity alone was sufficient. 'Our model suggests that what is actually happening is that opportunities for primary commodity predation cause conflict.'[35]

The most depressing conclusion was that even if a particular conflict could be stopped, unless ways could be found to generate a healthier pattern of economic development it would recur. Collier suggested that some 40 per cent of countries that had suffered conflict returned to violence again in the decade after fighting had supposedly been brought to a close. In a World Bank report he noted:

> Once a country stumbles into civil war, its risk of further conflict soars. Conflict weakens the economy and leaves a legacy of atrocities. It also creates leaders and organizations that have invested in skills and equipment that are only useful for violence. Disturbingly, while the overwhelming majority of the population in a country affected by civil war suffers from it, the leaders of military organizations that are actually perpetrating the violence often do well out of it.[36]

The power of greed could be overwhelming: 'neither good political institutions, nor ethnic and religious homogeneity, nor high military spending provide significant defenses against large-scale violence'.[37] Later Collier went further, taking an even more deterministic view. 'Where rebellion is feasible it will occur: motivation is indeterminate, being supplied by whatever agenda happens to be adopted by the first social entrepreneur to occupy a viable need'.[38] This line of argument was

criticised as being 'extremely reductionist, highly speculative, and profoundly misleading'.[39] Collier himself moved away from his focus on greed to explore a wider range of factors, including the influence of culture.[40]

One key issue was how to explain the relationship between natural resources and conflict.[41] Diamonds were important in only a few conflicts, which rendered attempts to generalise from them unsafe.[42] With oil, which had the most pernicious effects, the impact depended on whether it was found onshore (offshore reserves had little impact on war proneness) and then in relatively poor regions with marginalised ethnic groups. Oil wealth was also used by autocracies to help them stay that way, and so encouraged corruption and repression.[43] Depending on circumstances, the desire to take advantage of natural resources could result in a coup, a secessionist movement, a local rebellion, intervention by a neighbour, either directly or using proxies, forms of extortion so that rents could be collected from those in charge of the resources, or permutations of these possibilities. In addition, what might happen when raw material prices were high would be different to when they were low, especially in countries over-dependent on a single commodity. Then grievances could develop as people became suddenly poorer.

The implication of the economic focus was that a more balanced economy, with a decent manufacturing sector, would be more stable—with less inequality, and more commerce within a country. This related to a similar case to that made before 1914 about how the interpenetration of economies reduced incentives for war and so could be a force for peace.[44] As with the question of ethnicity the question of economic incentives was different when considering the origins of a war than how it was sustained. With all wars, between states as well as within them, a failure to achieve a quick victory meant that the ability to finance and sustain a military effort was as important as the ability to prevail in battle. With both types of war, opportunities were created for criminal activities, especially those engaged in smuggling and trafficking. With civil wars they could become more important than the notional issues at stake. In this respect rebel groups could suffer just as much of a 'resource curse' as the states they were subverting. Opportunities for loot helped in recruitment, but this was

not the same as a deep ideological commitment to the cause and loyalty to the organisation. In poorer environments activists understood that there was to be a long struggle before they could expect to benefit.[45] When the resources were available, fighting groups took money from wherever they could, plundering resources, trafficking in arms, drugs, people, and diamonds, as well as seeking remittances from diasporas and siphoning off funds intended for humanitarian assistance. David Keen described how

> members of armed gangs can benefit from looting; and regimes can use violence to deflect opposition, reward supporters or maintain their access to resources. Winning may not be desirable: the point of war may be precisely the legitimacy which it confers on actions that in peacetime would be punishable as crimes.

For this reason 'civil wars that appear to have begun with political aims have mutated into conflicts in which short-term economic benefits are paramount.'[46] This was one explanation for the indecisiveness of contemporary civil wars: they were not resolved by battle and were often sustained by crime.[47]