Richards, Paul. - *Fighting for the Rain Forest : War, Youth & Resources in Sierra Leone*

Madame Marianne Ferme

---

Citer ce document / Cite this document :


http://www.persee.fr/doc/cea_0008-0055_1998_num_38_150_1823_t1_0722_0000_2

Document généré le 02/06/2016
informed set of essays on issues as vital for understanding international relations as for the providing hope to the people of Central Africa. The essays deserve wide diffusion; the issues deserve deep reflection.

David Newbury


This book challenges what Paul Richards dubs “New Barbarism”, a thesis about the nature of warfare in the post-Cold War world that is exemplified by “The Coming Anarchy”, an influential 1994 article by journalist Robert Kaplan. Kaplan’s article argues that Sierra Leone is a “microcosm” for West Africa and “much of the underdeveloped world”, and that the “criminal anarchy” displayed in the civil war that broke out there in 1991 constitutes the “real strategic danger” for the future of the whole civilized world. The strength of Richards’s book is that to disprove Kaplan’s doomsday scenario, it places the Sierra Leonean civil war and by implication other small modern conflicts involving conventional weapons and young combatants fighting within national borders—in the context of the rich ecological, political, and historical material he has gathered in some twenty years of anthropological research in the country. Richards’s focus on peasant knowledge and use of natural resources puts him in an ideal position to refute the New Barbarism thesis that the key factors in precipitating post-Cold War conflicts are over-population and competition for scarce resources.

The book begins with an overview of the conflict’s main phases leading up to 1996. The war must be understood in the context of “a patrimonial state running out of resources (especially resources to support education), emergence of rural slums in diamond districts, and the agrarian failures of an urban—(and mining)—biased development policy” (pp. 51-52). The reductive economic determinism of those who see resource scarcity as the catalyst for this and other African conflicts is countered by Richards with a discussion of specific factors, such as the global recessions leading to the end of the Cold War. The shrinkage of the patrimonial state—which is vividly conveyed in Richards’s portrayal of socio-economic life on the Sierra Leone-Liberian border—is linked to a decline in the price of commodities on which Sierra Leone depends for its revenues, and magnified by the government’s failure to regain control of the diamond trade from the shadow economy it has shaped over the post-independence years. Richards underscores the fact that patrimonialism—the redistribution of public resources to bolster personal, rather than institutional loyalty—is a political strategy, and not one aimed only at personal gain. It is a form of patronage that tends to flourish in states that rely heavily for their revenues on the extraction of natural and mineral resources. The young suffer particularly in a crisis of patrimonialism, because payment for education is an “end point of much patrimonial redistribution” (p. 36). And

Cet ouvrage a fait l’objet d’un double compte rendu.
it is partly as sources of alternative forms of education and training, Richards suggests, that the rebel, government, and other irregular forces at war have gained legitimacy.

The book argues that the war waged by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) against the state is led by, and appeals to, a young, "excluded intellectual élite" (pp. 25-33; 84). The RUF leadership—it is argued—is made up of rusticated, relatively educated urban youth without decent employment opportunities, who developed a rational ideology and a disciplined approach to warfare, backed by training (primarily in Burkina Faso and Libya). This point is supported throughout the book with relevant quotes from the RUF’s 1995 manifesto, *Footpaths to democracy: toward a New Sierra Leone*, and other public pronouncements made through an expertly handled international media. Richards also supports his claim about the rationality of the RUF's campaign of terror through the analysis of the "dramaturgy of the war" it deploys. Even at its most "barbaric", the RUF's campaign appropriates symbols and idioms of violence with strong resonance in regional history and culture, for example through conscription and training practices that parallel rites of initiation, or through rumors and accusations of "cannibalism". Richards's argument aims to undermine Kaplan's characterization of the youth elements fighting the war as "loose molecules"—products of a criminal, drug-using subculture no longer integrated in the social fabric.

The strongest parts of Richards's thesis are those where environmental and social analysis are intertwined to expose the fallacy of New Barbarism's contention that overpopulation, deforestation, and competition over increasingly scarce resources in retreating states are determinant to the Sierra Leonean and other post-Cold War conflicts. Two types of evidence are offered in support of this thesis. The first is a historical argument that violence, trade, and primitive accumulation have long been linked in the experience of forest dwellers in the Liberia-Sierra Leone region, and that the demand by outsiders for resources ranging from the human capital of slavery to ivory have brought this area into the "creolized" Atlantic world of inter-cultural contact that shaped its modern identity. It follows that the same cultural resources developed in the context of a violent history of relations between forest dwellers and outsiders offer the means for managing conflicts in a modern setting. Institutions like secret societies, or practices such as accusations of "cannibalism" against individuals who accumulate resources without redistributing them have long been potential resources for waging war—and the RUF has skillfully manipulated their symbolism for its own purposes—but also for checking the abuse of power.

The other type of evidence uses demographic and environmental data over time, to show that this region continues to have among the lowest population densities and most extensive forest covers in West Africa (in Liberia, p. 116). Richards's path breaking studies of the integration of swidden rice cultivation and forest systems in this region find their way into this argument, when he shows that the perception that fallow periods are becoming shorter (a feature often attributed to population pressures on the land) is due to a misunderstanding of the coexistence of long and short cycles in the process of converting forest into farm (pp. 118-119). If anything, the Liberia-Sierra Leone border region has far too much forest, in the sense that patrimonial resources such
as cheap imported rice are used to support illegal diamond miners there, who would otherwise be farming on good agricultural land that instead lies fallow (p. 124).

Two central chapters explore interviews conducted before and during the war, featuring the voices of different categories of youth, and their views about the relationship between violence, modernity, and the media. According to the interviews, the first of the “Rambo” films, Cold Blood, is popular not because it glorifies violence, but because it is thought to educate viewers in survival skills through the portrayal of an individual forced by an indifferent government to retreat into the wilderness, relying on his own wits to survive (pp. 109-111). As Richards points out, if this is “criminal anarchy”, it is as much as in Sierra Leone.

The importance of this book is underscored by the fact that it has already been at the center of lively debates. Ironically, even some who strongly disagree with Richards’s original insights into the intersections between global youth culture, the media, and violence do so in a manner that furthers his thesis—among other things, through the choice of the Internet as a forum for such debates. Richards’s notion that the RUF leadership is made of “organic intellectuals” is criticized for failing to address the “lumpen” and criminal elements among its membership, and its ideological shallowness. Furthermore, in most cases this membership cannot be linked to the country’s radical political organizations with connections to international revolutionary ideologies and resources (p. 53). Indeed, for Richards, the “excluded intellectual elites” are a broad category; they range from members of student groups at the university involved in discussions of revolutionary literature like Qaddafi’s Green Book, to the dregman dem—streetwise types who often have little formal education, and engage in illegal diamond mining or itinerant income-generating activities in remote forest areas along the Sierra Leone-Liberia border. For the latter group, inclusion among the excluded intellectuals seems to be justified by their critical engagement with a global youth and consumer culture through media technology—radios, generator-powered VCRs, etc.—despite their isolation from the Sierra Leonean state and its urban life (pp. 100-104; 126-129).

Some are not satisfied with Richards’s answer to the obvious question: if the RUF is a revolutionary movement seeking a stronger integration of marginalized rural people within the state, why are rural civilians its main victims (p. 84)? Richards attributes the RUF’s love-hate relationship with rural and forest life to the fact that this life brings home to the rebels—who by-and-large have urban backgrounds—their marginality to the patrimonial state (p. 85). Ultimately, though, he gives the somewhat startling response that the RUF’s trail of mutilations, public executions, rape, and forced conscription of...
young foot soldiers in rural Sierra Leone “is academic talk—the world view of the lonely and disregarded intellectual—not the practical wisdom of those who know that forest beliefs must work for the community, or there will be no one left to inherit the vision” (p. 84).

Others whose work has focused on Sierra Leonean political history have challenged the links between the retreat of the state, the demise of patrimonialism, and the end of the Cold War. While both Richards and the Kaplan thesis he criticizes take for granted that we are witnessing a different breed of post-Cold War conflict in Sierra Leone and Liberia, there are continuities as well. Cold War ties resurface in new forms in the private redeployment of demobilized armies and their military hardware. During some phases of the Sierra Leonean conflict, the state’s control over a shrinking territory was shored up by “Executive Outcomes”, a private company made up of demobilized units from the South African army. This company’s role became increasingly state-like, as it provided Sierra Leone with mercenaries, military training, intelligence, logistical support (including air transport), and even assistance in meeting the government’s foreign debt obligations. In exchange for these services, “Executive Outcomes” received lucrative mineral and business concessions. Thus the dismantling of old patronage networks is also linked to a privatization of state functions—including violence—that is reminiscent more of classic Imperialism than of the end of the Cold War. From this perspective, the marginalization of certain categories of citizens may be seen not as an effect of failed patrimonialism, but as a deliberate move by the state to protect itself from potentially dangerous elements whose economic usefulness has decreased.

What finally makes Richards’s book stand out in the regional literature, and in the literature on post-Cold War violence, is its search for a solution to the Sierra Leone conflict in the same cultural and environmental factors that according to others are its primary causes. This is a book infused with scholarly knowledge, but also with the passion of a personal commitment to a peaceful future for Sierra Leone—an outcome towards which the author has worked with his critical interventions in policy and international mediation efforts. This is why Richards cannot give up hope, even while acknowledging that no matter how rational some RUF leaders may have been, they allowed themselves to be hijacked into a campaign of terror and strategies of accumulation that ultimately undermined their egalitarian political vision. Ultimately, the political future of Sierra Leone lies in the hands of the young people involved on all sides of the conflict—however one might define them—and of those like them who have chosen not to use violence.

Mariane Ferme