Causes and cures VIII: Environmental violence

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A B S T R A C T

The past two years have been a landmark moment for violence prevention, with the publication of *The Global Status Report on Violence Prevention 2014*; a historic resolution on violence by the 67th World Health Assembly; and the release of multiple documents on violence by international and United Nations entities, with a corresponding building of momentum in scholarship. Most notably, in September 2015, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, addressing the need for violence prevention at an unprecedented scale. In this context, more than ever, violence studies have become a field of its own right. Still, a systematic approach of the topic has been lacking, and no textbook yet synthesizes the knowledge of multiple disciplines toward a cogent understanding. This article is the eighth of a series of fifteen articles that will cover, as an example, an outline of the Global Health Studies course entitled, "Violence: Causes and Cures," reviewing the major bio-psycho-social and structural-environmental perspectives on violence. Environmental violence, as defined here, includes: (a) the violence between people(s) over natural resources; (b) environmental policies that can be violent against people; (c) the secondary violence from the natural world as a result of human degradation of the earth; and (d) direct damage to the environment by humans that threatens their own survival. We discuss the link between perception of scarcity, access to resources, the political economy, and the urgent problem of environmental violence.

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We are living through a landmark moment for violence prevention. The past two years, especially, have seen an outpouring of documents reflecting a growing focus on the problem of violence and multilateral collaborations to solve it. In December 2014, for example, the World Health Organization, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, and the United Nations Development Program (WHO, UNODC, & UNDP, 2014) joined forces to launch *The Global Status Report on Violence Prevention 2014*, detailing the efforts of 133 countries to address interpersonal violence. It is the first major report on violence since the

World Report on Violence and Health (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002), an influential document that consolidated all the existing science on violence for the first time. In the same year, the 67th World Health Assembly (WHA, 2014) adopted a historic resolution addressing violence, bringing particularly to focus women, children, and other vulnerable members of the populations subject to systematic structural and institutional violence. Furthermore, *Global Study on Homicide 2013: Trends, Contexts, Data* (UNODC, 2014), *Hidden in Plain Sight: A Statistical Analysis of Violence against Children* (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2014a), *Ending Violence against Children: Six Strategies for Action* (United Nations Children's Fund, 2014b), *Preventing Suicide: A Global Imperative* (WHO, 2014), and *Preventing Youth Violence:*

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Taking Action and Generating Evidence (WHO, 2015), all appeared within a two-year time span, highlighting some of the major forms of violence. Most notably, on September 25, 2015, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (United Nations [UN], 2015), addressing the need for violence prevention at an unprecedented scale and recognizing the interdependence between sustained peace and sustainable development. In this context, more than ever, violence studies need to become a field of its own right, with university-level instruction capable of addressing the complexities and commonalities of the different forms of violence beyond the existing disciplinary barriers. Meanwhile, ongoing worldwide events highlight the urgent need for a cogent understanding of this life-or-death topic.

Over several issues, *Aggression and Violent Behavior* has graciously offered to publish a lecture series that has been implemented through the Global Health Studies Program at Yale College in a course entitled, "Violence: Causes and Cures." While it does not purport to be the definitive sequence for reviewing all the major bio-psycho-social and structural-environmental perspectives on violence, it is a proposal for a systematic approach. This article consists of the fifth of this fifteen article series, which carries the following order:

1. Introduction: Toward a New Definition
2. The Biology of Violence
3. The Psychology of Violence
4. The Symbolism of Violence
5. The Sociology and Anthropology of Violence
6. The Political Science and Economics of Violence
7. Structural Violence
8. Environmental Violence (in this issue)
9. Consequences of Violence (in this issue)
10. Criminal Justice Approaches
11. International Law Approaches
12. Public Health Approaches
13. Global Medicine Approaches
14. Nonviolence Approaches
15. Synthesis and Integration

1. Introduction

To corrupt or destroy the natural environment is an act of violence not only against the earth but also against those who are dependent on it, including ourselves.- Wendell Berry, *The Long-Legged House (1969)*

Environmental violence, though not yet a full-fledged field of study, is a concept important enough in the study of violence to warrant a full article. From the *bio-psycho-socio-environmental model* that we have discussed in the beginning of this article series (Lee, 2015), the natural environment constitutes the largest level of physical influence on human violence. Exploring environmental violence, therefore, completes our discussion of *how to think about violence.* From the perspective of violence studies, it perhaps constitutes the least considered but the most urgent topic within its purview. We may even argue that addressing environmental violence is the most urgent task facing humanity today, as it continues to gain in ability to bring about its own extinction. Given the crucial importance of the environment to human survival, the disproportionate lack of concern in the face of scientific predictions of catastrophic changes, especially when we have been instigators of these changes, may amount to collective suicide. Damage to the environment is a *human* issue, for it is our own survival that is at stake (along with other species); the planet itself will continue. Apart from the importance of environmental violence as a field, humanity's unconcern for it—or unwillingness to have enough concern to change behavior—also points to a critical need for global psychology and global psychiatry. These fields would address just cross-cultural comparisons or awareness of geographic disparities, but global patterns that can help analyze and curb pathological tendencies in humankind as

a whole. Therefore, a proper treatment of the topic would have to be extensive and deep, going beyond the scope of this article.

First, it might be important to distinguish between *environmental science* and *environmental studies*. The former is a group of sciences that together attempt to explain how life on earth is sustained, what leads to environmental problems, and how to solve these problems. The latter deals with human interactions with the environment, be it natural or built, in order to solve more directly human problems. This article combines both with an emphasis on the latter because of its greater proximity to human interaction. Since the focus of this article is to review the rich and varied contributions of these fields to understanding human violence, we will return to global environmental violence only at the very end. We will also consider nuclear violence in this context. Meanwhile, we interpret environmental violence in many ways; it can be, for example, as varied as the way urban environments can oppress or the choice to build specific settings such as prisons. Nevertheless, we limit our discussion here to: (a) the violence between people(s) over natural resources; (b) environmental policies that can be violent against people; (c) the secondary violence from the natural world (in the form of excess earthquakes, tsunamis, heat waves, and hurricanes) as a result of human degradation of the earth; and (d) direct damage to the environment by humans that threatens their own survival. First, it is important for us to clarify some concepts.

2. Clarifying the concept

With regard to violence around the environment, it may seem on the surface that the most obvious contributors are *overpopulation* and *resource scarcity*. For centuries, this is what people have argued: if there were enough natural resources and space for everyone, there should be almost no reason for environmental conflict. One of the first proponents of this idea was English cleric and scholar Thomas Malthus, who wrote about this looming crisis in *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (Malthus, 1817[1798]). He was not wrong in his concern—for population grows exponentially while food does not—but he used that concern to advocate that we not provide for those in poverty but let them die, before disease and famine check population growth. He was mainly opposing welfare systems that supported the indolence and unrestrained reproduction of the working class, which would only intensify the crisis when we would not be able to feed all humanity. One can see, then, how this logic can lead to a justification to do greater violence than the shortage of food itself. Nevertheless, Malthus was the first to articulate environmental scarcity as a future cause of strife. Often dubbed the *environmental security* thesis, it continues to provide a powerful rationale for violence against groups of people. American population studies professor Paul Ehrlich expounded it more recently in *The Population Bomb* (Ehrlich, 1968), where he foretold a coming crisis from overpopulation and limited resources. Most recently, American journalist Robert Kaplan made a similar argument in *The Coming Anarchy* (Kaplan, 2000), writing that the developing world, especially "the Dark Continent," represented a threat to the developed world due to population increase, undernourishment, and consequent barbaric acts of violence.

While they each bring attention to important issues—a surging population, air pollution, water depletion, spreading disease, deforestation, soil erosion, and mass migrations leading to conflict and violence—overpopulation and waste of resources always happen with other people in other places, with implicit contempt for "the other." Blatantly uneven resource accumulation and consumption do not receive mentioning. Political maneuvering or mismanagement of resources so as to create political instigators of war does not enter into the equation. Yet these constitute far more potent causes of environmental violence (Peluso and Watts, 2001). Rather than a linear cause-and-effect linkage, problems of the environment, populations, and violence revolve around issues of *power*—not around absolute scarcity. Overt violence is site-specific with ties to local relationships and histories, but the larger process of material transformation and power relations plays a crucial role.