

## **Nils Petter Gleditsch<sup>1</sup>: Comments on four papers by Scheffran, Mesjasz, Oswald Spring/Brauch & Brauch/Oswald Spring/Dalby<sup>2</sup>**

All these four papers are very substantial, and very learned. They cover a great deal of literature and I learned a lot from reading them. I will no doubt learn even more when I follow up some of the references, as I plan to do. For those who know of Hans Günter Brauch's very impressive publication program, it is not surprising that he is also able to put together an interesting panel with four solid papers. The papers are also quite up to date, In Jürgen Scheffran's paper even commenting on events as late as 11 March. Finally, they are well-written and readable.

I am less certain about the new contribution of the papers. The Norwegian political sociologist Stein Rokkan is sometimes cited (although this may be a myth) as having said that in our age a scholar has a choice between reading or writing. That was 35 years ago. Clearly these authors have no problem combining reading and writing. But in working my way through these papers I wondered if they might have benefited from attacking more limited problems with a more constrained literature review and with a clearer focus on making a new contribution.

Another and closely related problem is that I don't see a clear effort to derive testable hypotheses in these papers. When I was a student, my mentor Johan Galtung, warned me against what he called 'dimensionalism', long lists of 'dimensions' of a problem, with associated two-by-two or three-by-three tables with cross-classifications of the dimensions. There's a lot of this in these papers.

Are there some other unifying themes? All of the paper place major emphasis on global problems, mostly global environmental problems but in the case of the Mesjasz paper also the problem of global economic security. Taking a global view is certainly warranted, whether we are talking of militarized interaction between states, environmental effects of human activities, or economic interaction. Absolute geographic restraints on interaction matter much less than they used to. Relative geographical influences on interaction is a different matter, however. Therefore, most wars are local and most environmental problems are also local (even though they may be similar from one country to another). Also, the financial crisis does not have the same impact on, say, Greece, Norway, and Botswana, and although the economic impact of the earthquake and tsunami in Japan will be felt globally, it is in Japan that it is really going to matter.

A second theme that runs through the papers is that many of our problems are self-inflicted. The increasing range of human activities implies that we are able to influence both the physical environment and our own living conditions in a way that is unsurpassed in human

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history. In that sense, Paul Crutzen's term, the Anthropocene, which Brauch has adopted, is quite appropriate. Yet, a caveat is in order here, too: Although we can exert a strong influence on living conditions for all living organisms on Earth, we are still only scratching the surface of our planet and have virtually no influence beyond it, even in our own solar system. Moreover, we are by no means masters of the forces of nature, as most recently evidenced by the events in Japan. And we are completely dependent for our energy requirements on energy derived from the Sun, which remains totally outside our control. Ignoring the human influence in our planet would be folly, but exaggerating it would be a case of hubris. Moreover, the history of evolving civilization is in many ways a story of how man has mastered nature. To the extent that there is implication in these papers that our mastery of nature is entirely a bad thing, I would disagree.

A third theme that runs through all papers is a certain pessimism about the human condition and its future, although this is much clearer in the two Brauch & Spring papers than in the other two. Personally, I take a much more optimistic view of the world. The increasing global reach of human activities makes it possible for us to create global problems, such as global warming, but also to build a better world society. So, today, we are richer, healthier, live longer, fight fewer wars, and use violence less than has been the case historically. I don't get much of a sense of these success stories in these papers. I can recommend books by Indur Goklany (*The Improving State of the World*), Matt Ridley (*The Rational Optimist*), and others as an antidote.

A final, common problem with these papers is that despite the lip service that is paid to the need for cross-disciplinary research to solve the big problems, none of the papers actually draw much on original research in the natural sciences, with a partial exception for Jürgen Scheffran's paper. I see few if any references to *Science* or *Nature*.

Then some specific comments on the individual papers, in the order they were presented:

I begin with the Brauch/Spring/Dalby paper on 'political ecology for the anthropocene'. This paper argues that we need a fundamental rethinking of the relationship between humankind and nature. I am not so convinced. A call for new thinking is hard to contradict. After all, who wants to speak out in favor of 'old thinking'? Nevertheless, I don't think we're well advised to call for 'new thinking' every time we come up with a new problem. I personally think that good, old-fashioned social science can make a significant contribution to analyzing the causes and consequences of global warming. My main personal research interest is in the possibly security implications of climate change and as the Scheffran paper well illustrates, the last few years have seen a very impressive growth of new research in this area. The Brauch & Spring is also the one that calls most strongly for cross-disciplinary research. Since the references are missing, it is hard to judge how much it draws on the natural sciences, but I suspect not a whole lot. For instance, in commenting on the incidence and impact of natural disasters (p. 17), the paper cites a paper from 2006 by two human geographers. But there is a very lively and nuanced debate about this among climatologists, oceanographers, etc. As a social scientist, I am not competent to participate in that debate, but it is clearly

important to monitor it if we want to take the incidence of natural disasters as a starting-point for assessing the social effects.

The conclusion on p. 25 that political events cannot be predicted could probably need a bit more substantiation than just saying that 'the cold war has convincingly demonstrated' this and a reference to Braudel. I don't think Bruce Bueno de Mesquita would agree. And even if we didn't have the tools in 1989 to predict the end of the Cold War, or at least not the timing, that doesn't mean that social scientists may not be able to develop such tools in the future.

This paper talks about 'a downward spiral' in terms of global change, even coping strategies are dismissed as 'asset stripping exercises' (p. 31). This pessimism is even stronger in the Spring/Brauch paper, which argues that a cornucopian vision of business as usual has brought the world to a major environmental and economic crisis. Actually, as I understand the cornucopian position, its essence is *not* business as usual, but rather an emphasis on man's capacity to innovate and change that enables us to deal with new problems when they arise. This paper also argues that if people fail to realize where we are heading, it must be because they have a mindset with cultural lenses that prevent them from seeing reality, or else they are manipulated by cynical self-serving elites and the mass media. However, in a paper that lists all the world's ills as if we were relentlessly marching towards doom, without listing any of the success stories that I've just mentioned, this exposes the authors to the charge that they may not themselves be free of certain cultural lenses that make them perceive the world in a particular way. For instance, on p. 3(note 2) the authors maintain that malaria is 'spreading worldwide', but the WHO's *World Malaria Report 2010* speak of remarkable progress in combating malaria and a 20% reduction in malaria deaths in the first nine years of the millennium.

This paper also touches peripherally on some notions that I would regard as rather outdated, such as the possible environmentally benign effect of authoritarian government (p. 10) and the idea of the peaceful and environmentally-friendly savage (p. 5). Neither of these notions find much support in today's academic literature and my advice would be to leave them out unless they can be substantiated.

I have a great deal of sympathy for the idea of a sustainable peace, combining the goal of sustainable development (in itself a combination of environmental and economic goals) with peace. But I think we are much closer to realizing this goal than the authors of this paper give us credit for. I note that the authors present the world relentlessly marching towards increasing liberalism and that associated disasters derive from this. But surely there are many major human disasters in the past that happened under very different circumstances; such as the many environmental disasters in the former Soviet Union or the world's largest tragedy of one-sided violence, the 'Great Leap Forward' in China from 1958-1961. According to the most recent research by Hong Kong historian Franz Dikötter based on Chinese party archives, this campaign claimed at least 45 million lives in four years.

Jürgen Scheffran's paper in my view provides a much more balanced assessment of the research literature on the security implications of climate change. I agree completely with the assessment that 'global warming is a fundamental challenge' (p. 3) but his summary of the literature shows that from what we know so far about possible security effects, there is currently little basis for future scenarios involving major violent conflict. The question remains about this paper, too, where it's original contribution lies, besides providing a good summary of the literature. I found the emphasis on 'stability' in the opening pages quite refreshing, but it also raises a number of issues: Was the past ever 'stable' in environmental terms? Would the present be stable even in the absence of global warming? Can we learn to live with instability? The 2007 report from the German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU), cited in the paper, speaks of 'an originally stable political and social situation', but I wonder if this is any more than a hypothetical construct. Another problem is that I felt that the focus on stability was lost in the final sections of the paper, which goes on to talk about social networks, reviews the empirical evidence for a relationship between resources and conflicts, and discusses how to do integrated assessments of social effects of climate change. I think this would be a stronger paper if it held more closely to the original idea of analyzing the conditions for stability and the consequences of instability. Also, given the author's academic background and his role in a major cross-disciplinary environment at the University of Hamburg, which bridges the divide between the natural and social sciences, puts him in a unique position, which I hope he will exploit more in future papers.

Finally, the paper by Czeslaw Mesjasz. This paper is not so much about the environment, but borrows from the environmental literature on vulnerability and tries to use it in a conceptual discussion of economic insecurity. This is, of course, an issue that unfortunately has become much more topical with the recent financial crisis. Czeslaw starts from the premise that like other cases of 'fuzzily defined normative concepts', vulnerability is a bit of a buzzword. The relationship with security is quite simple if you equate vulnerability with insecurity. But that doesn't necessarily get you very far, given the many competing definitions, wider and narrower, of the security concept. I found the overview of different approaches quite instructive. But once again the question arises of what the specific contribution of this paper is. Here are some questions that came to my mind: Does vulnerability predict to problems like recurrent conflict or serious human rights violations? What variables do the various vulnerability measures have in common? Would a factor analysis reveal that there is a common vulnerability factor – or are we talking about a multidimensional phenomenon? I completely agree with the author when he says on p. 39 that the literature on vulnerability 'leaves the reader with an impression of an "overflow" of definitions and interpretations', and I hope that in the next version of this paper, the author has undertaken more of a bush-clearing and zeroed in on the concepts and definitions that seem more promising. For example, I like the discussion of Amartya Sen's argument about entitlements, probably among the approaches discussed in the paper this is the one with the best theoretical foundation. Perhaps it would have been better to make this the centerpiece of the argument of the paper and relate other approaches to Sen's argument.

In summary, four papers well worth reading, a lot to learn, even though in my comments, as is usually the case, I have concentrated my critical remarks on points where I am critical.