



Resource Policies: Effectiveness, Efficiency, and Equity'

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Toward Understanding Global Tension: Natural Resources and Competing Economic Histories

ABSTRACT

Any pertinent discussion of the human dimensions of global environmental change cannot proceed in silence with respect to the emergence of profound fissures in the global community. In the oddly stable era of what we now call the Cold War, there were three domains of interest: (1) the market-oriented West; (2) the planned economies of the Soviet Union; and (3) the marginalized remainder. Both super-powers played perverse political and economic games with the rest in hopes of recruiting allies in the global contest over economic systems. Interest in the poor was strictly instrumental. Now, China is emerging as a serious super power, Russia is seeking to regain its place in Europe (and the larger world), and the United States is politically crippled by a foreign policy that defies coherence. The void is now being filled by a novel phenomenon—sub-national agents with the financial and technical means to project their political agenda onto the world stage. Whether acting as free agents, or as clients of recognized nation-states, these cadres have become the defining metaphor of the new millennia.

It has become too easy to blame these troubling events on religious extremists. While such individuals may be the cause of the new tensions, they are not—and they cannot be—the reason for such tensions. Those reasons, I suggest, are found in the colonial history of the West, and that colonial history is one driven by a desire to gain access to, and control over, primary resources. Whether we think of timber, rubber, quinine, minerals, tropical agricultural products, or petroleum, colonial history is a story of gaining preferential access to natural resources. If we are to come to grips with the human dimensions of global change in the new millennia it is first necessary that we explore our own environmental history. Out of that exploration, I suggest, will come the means for understanding the present political turmoil. Only then will we be able to craft global environmental policies—new institutional arrangements—that might address the rising source of global conflict.