Sovereignty in Exile

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As a contributor to a recent issue in *Cultural Anthropology* noted, enough attention has been devoted to sovereignty over the past 15 years to constitute a "turn" in the discipline (Bonilla 2017). This development, generative of an impressive number of studies on the topic in both article and monograph form, reflects a departure from analytical frameworks oriented by globalization, on the one hand, and the state, on the other. The "turn" can also be seen as a move away from over- and underdetermined units of study in political anthropology. Where the state presumes a standard unit of study, globalization studies has at times, with its emphasis on flows and scapes, been characterised by the celebration of a

certain formlessness. Sovereignty, by contrast, allows for the study of multiple, sometimes overlapping, political formations within a single analytic framework. Alice Wilson's *Sovereignty in Exile* exemplifies this approach through a perceptive ethnography of governance in refugee camps run by the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR).

These camps, formed in the desert region of southwest Algeria in 1975, present a site defined, at least in theory, by the "state of exception." Populated by Sahrawis who fled Western Sahara after Morocco annexed most of the territory from Spanish colonial rule, the camps have been supported by humanitarian aid since their establishment. They have also, however, always been a site of governance under what Wilson terms the "state-movement" of SADR. International representative of the Sahrawi national liberation movement, SADR has operated as a state-in-exile in the refugee camps since 1976, and has during that time been recognised by dozens of UN member states. Even as the political dispute over Western Sahara remains unresolved over four decades later, SADR's control of the camps has continued uninterrupted, if not unchanged.

> *Wilson makes these governing practices the subject of her study through the conceptual grid of what she calls "projects of sovereignty."*

These multiple projects include both SADR, and competing (often tribal) affiliations that have historically constituted "alternative projects of sovereignty to state power" (38) in Saharan society. Using the metaphor of a palimpsest, Wilson argues that the project of state sovereignty has at various times attempted to overwrite tribal authority while, at other moments and in other realms, tribal authority has reasserted itself in sometimes unexpected and deceptive ways. Neither inherently antagonistic nor complementary, the multiple political projects emerge instead as necessarily co-constitutive since they are based upon the same sets of social relations. Readers familiar with the anthropology of the Middle East and North Africa will find Wilson's novel incorporation of "older" topics of ethnographic research into the framework of sovereignty, such as tribe,

particularly refreshing in this respect. Readers interested in Western Sahara, meanwhile, will find this ethnography indispensable for insight into a complex political landscape usually approached through the institutional frameworks of international relations and conflict resolution studies.

Sovereignty in Exile's contributions extend well beyond regionally specific ethnographic insights, however. By analytically foregrounding social relations, Wilson avoids a preoccupation with legal definitions of sovereignty, preventing abstract institutional forms from overtaking her framework. Rather than taking recourse to normative definitions based on "kingship" or the state, Wilson's definition remains open to conceptualizing forms of authority as they are constituted "on the ground," so to speak. One of the strengths of this social relations-based approach stems from how it "decenters state power from discussions of sovereignty" (9) and, as a result, remains open to recognizing different forms of sovereignty.

Just as impressively, Wilson's approach displaces the direct relation between sovereign and territory that underpins normative conceptions of modern nation-state sovereignty. In doing so, Wilson extends insights from the anthropology of property, whereby property is a social relation between persons by means of things, into the realm of political authority (Verdery 1998). Situated first among social relations, sovereignty is made operative through control over "things" that may, or may not, be territorial in nature. This understanding of sovereignty as constituted by social relations and effected "in relation to resources, not necessarily in territorial form" (7) presents a framework particularly apposite to the context of the Sahara where what is often at stake in matters of authority is not landownership per se, but control over mobile forms of property, including livestock and labor (see also
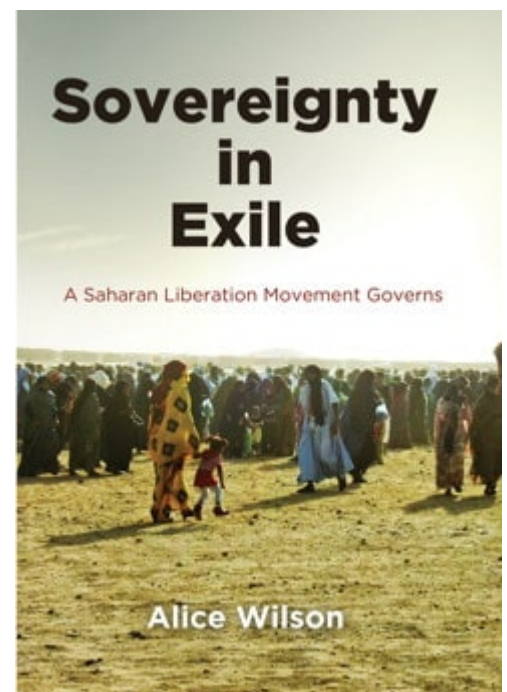
Scheele 2012).

The strength of this framework, then, lies in its capacity to trace the changing lineaments of sovereignty without presupposing the form that it takes.

Through a series of carefully observed examples, Wilson shows how political authority in the camps has been made and remade through the medium of social relations. She connects shifts in sovereignty during SADR's governance to the production of new political subjects. Drawing upon stories and documentation from SADR's "early revolutionary" period of the late 1970s and early 1980s, Wilson shows how the implementation of mass participation in camp governance displaced kin-based membership through the production of a new public domain. The state-movement's revolutionary policies effectively diminished the kin group's role (in Saharan society, the *firgan*, or collection of tents) in shaping refugees' sense of social belonging and political affiliation. Whereas SADR radically reshaped social relations through a series of "early revolutionary" interventions, *Sovereignty in Exile* suggests that the ramifications of these changes were complex and far from unidirectional.

From one chapter to the next, the study deftly moves across time, from "early" to "late" revolutionary camp life, as well as across different realms of governance: conflict resolution and the law; the appropriation of labor and the distribution of goods; elections; and the changing regulation of marriage in the camps. During the aforementioned "early revolutionary" period of governance in the refugee camps, for example, SADR attempted to reconfigure marital arrangements that had previously been guided largely by tribal relations. In doing so, the state-movement sought to replace marriage based upon hierarchies within and across tribes with practices that would mark equality between citizens. As the state-movement's revolutionary aims gave way to more modest interventions, and as a ceasefire transformed life in the camps, customary marriage practices returned. In their reemergence, however, new configurations of state, tribal and market relations in the refugee camps reshaped marriage practices anew.

In this way, changing governance in the Sahrawi camps illustrates how sovereignty is made and remade through attempts to manage social relations across a variety of realms.

Sovereignty in Exile offers several important contributions to the burgeoning anthropological literature on sovereignty. The ethnography's focus on the camps' internal governance contrasts with recent studies that consider the performative qualities required of would-be sovereigns seeking recognition in the international realm (Rutherford 2012; Bobick 2017). Indeed, many of these "external" dynamics of sovereignty are bracketed in *Sovereignty in Exile*, and yet have been integral to the refugee camps' existence as a political space. Thinking of these "internal" and "external" dynamics in tandem suggests that these approaches could be complementary, rather than mutually exclusive. By focusing on relatively quotidian governing practices, the ethnography also departs from more well-worn approaches in political anthropology that examine sovereignty through the instantiation of violence and the rule of the exception. Wilson's approach has the advantage of examining how sovereignty operates through specific governing practices, from committee work to the regulation of marriage practices to the distribution of resources, rather than through an overarching logic of power. Much the way that postcolonial studies has demonstrated how competing forms of political authority coexisted with the colonial state's limited reach, Wilson draws our attention to multiple, overlapping projects of sovereignty in a context of unresolved and ongoing decolonisation. In this respect, *Sovereignty in Exile* exemplifies one of political anthropology's longstanding strengths of providing a more elastic, and less normative, approach to understanding relations of authority, while taking this approach in new and exciting directions.

Works Cited

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