

Alice Wilson, *Sovereignty in Exile: A Saharan Liberation Movement Governs* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), ISBN 978-0-8122-4849-4, 312 pages.

How does attending a wedding or strolling around an informal market in a refugee camp provide insights into capital-letter political concepts such as revolution, statehood, sovereignty, governance, and democracy? To what extent are these core notions broadened or unsettled by the everyday micro-politics of the anomalous yet normalized “state of exception”¹ (Agamben 1998) that protracted exile constitutes? More specifically, and puzzlingly enough for politics and law scholars educated in the indissoluble marriage between sovereignty and statehood, can there be sovereignty beyond and below the state? Can sovereignty, or “projects” thereof, be found in decentred, extraterritorial, and liminal refugee settings? Or in the doings of tribal authorities working through traditional informal institutions and practices?

Alice Wilson’s answer to these questions is positive and compelling. In the first place, *Sovereignty in Exile* is a wide-ranging ethnography of the internal politics of the Sahrawi refugee camps near Tindouf, in south-western Algeria.² These host a large part of the indigenous civilian population who fled Western Sahara when the conflict with Morocco over this non-self-governing territory broke out from 1975 to 1976, along with their descendants. They are *de facto* jointly ruled over by the Sahrawi national liberation movement (Polisario Front) and the state it proclaimed in exile in 1976, with limited yet not negligible international recognition (Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, SADR)—an often indistinguishable governing pair that Wilson refers to as the “state-movement.”³ A first-class ethnography, the book is the fruit of the anthropologist’s long and deep immersion in the Sahrawi refugee community, grounded in thick description and rich vignettes, honest in acknowledging the fieldwork’s challenges and limitations—such as the political taboos surrounding tribalism,⁴ the spaces such courts of justice

that remain closed to researcher⁵—and permeated by a good deal of self-reflexivity, including at times doubts about the right questions being raised⁶. The reader is offered a vivid journey through various facets of the socio-political life of the camps, punctuated by sharp observations, analysis, and even notes of humor that that put a smile on their face.

At the same time, *Sovereignty in Exile* is much more than a political ethnography. In addressing state-society relations from the latter's (micro) perspective, the study focuses on a certainly unclassifiable and difficult case: a protracted refugee situation associated with a mostly extraterritorial state-in-exile struggling to assert its statehood under the political authority of an also atypical state-movement duo. Yet Wilson makes the most of the Sahrawi political exceptionality, confirming that deviant or extreme cases may be particularly productive for shedding light on the norm.⁷ This is a key point in both the literature on liminality and Giorgio Agamben's notion of the state of exception, with which the author appropriately engages. The relationship between the sovereign power (norm) and the state of exception is one of co-constitution and, therefore, the one cannot be understood without the other. The wider significance of the findings of the ethnography, combined with relevant comparative insights and theoretical ambition, results in a persuasive meta-argument that runs through the book's chapters and speaks to a range of social science debates and disciplines. This is where both the beauty and the risk-taking of Wilson's work lie.

The core concept at stake is sovereignty. In order to challenge its longstanding state-centric focus and thereby “[decenter] state power from discussions of sovereignty,”⁸ Wilson defines the latter as “social relations between governing authorities and governed constituencies.”⁹ Based on this, non-state social relations of sovereignty such as those of tribes may defy and impinge on the taken-for-granted state monopolies on legitimate violence¹⁰ and the

state of exception—“sovereign is he who decides on the state of exception.”¹¹ In the case of the Sahrawi refugee camps, Wilson argues that two non-mutually exclusive “projects of sovereignty” have coexisted maintaining a dynamic relationship for decades, i.e. those of the SADR/Polisario Front and the Sahrawi tribes. In the late 1970s and the 1980s, the former strove to both recycle and replace the tribal social relations of sovereignty as part of its revolutionary aspirations and in order to set up the “paraphernalia of state power.”¹² However, the stubborn reality of the resilience and resurgence of tribal influence forced continuous compromises and presented the state-movement with growing political dilemmas, especially in the post-ceasefire phase of frozen conflict starting from 1991. This could be paraphrased to say, in Homi Bhabha’s postcolonial terms, that the SADR/Polisario Front’s “mimicry” of state sovereignty—their “desire to emerge as ‘authentic’” despite being “*almost the same but not quite*”¹³—ended up yielding to state(ish)-tribe “hybridity”—“the construction of a political object that is new, *neither the one nor the other*, (and) properly alienates our political expectations.”¹⁴

Wilson traces the ups and downs of the relationship between the projects of sovereignty of the SADR/Polisario Front and the Sahrawi tribes throughout what she calls the “early revolutionary period” (1975 to 1991), marked by the heavy influence of the revolutionary model of Muammar Gaddafi’s Libya, and the “late revolutionary period” (which began in 1991), a phase of political, economic, and social liberalization following the ceasefire with Morocco—which could have been more properly referred to as “post-revolutionary period.” Her argument is profusely substantiated by her ethnography of the refugee camps’ governance and micro-politics in the spheres of law and justice,¹⁵ political economy, resource appropriation, and redistribution,¹⁶ the regulation of family matters (marriage) and management of social inequalities,¹⁷ responses to the emergence of private entrepreneurship and markets,¹⁸ and the

holding of parliamentary elections absent multipartyism.¹⁹

Particularly illuminating are the findings on the political economy of the camps. This is shown to rely on the SADR/Polisario Front's universal redistribution of international humanitarian aid (food rations and non-rations aid) among Sahrawi refugees, as well as the appropriation of refugee labour (labor conscription) which replaces taxation in the particular context of material scarcity imposed by exile. Its non-reliance on taxation makes the SADR/Polisario Front somewhat akin to rentier states, which raises questions as to the applicability of the broader connection between rentierism and authoritarianism identified within Arab world²⁰ and elsewhere. An important caveat Wilson notes on this point, however, is that in the Sahrawi case "the divorce from taxes... is associated with an increase, not a reduction, in the state-movement's needs to generate and maintain legitimacy."²¹ This peculiar political economy is also claimed to be significant in terms of sovereignty due to its implications for the expected state monopoly on taxation²² and its partially drawing on traditional tribal practices of appropriation.

On the other hand, as analytically suggestive as it is, Wilson's use of sovereignty seems to suffer from some conceptual overstretching, especially in its application to the management of inequalities. The link between this sort of social policies and the conventional understanding of (state) sovereignty does not appear to be strong enough²³ as to warrant this extrapolation. Other more simple terms such as political authority or power may have worked better here. Another limitation of the book in relation to the notion of sovereignty is the lack of consideration of its external dimension, which is essential to its traditional conception as well as to its recent influential theorization by international relations scholars such as Stephen Krasner.²⁴ Some of Krasner's more critical ideas could have been productively applied, for instance, to examine the

impact on sovereignty of the Sahrawi refugee camps' humanitarian aid dependency, or the increasing economic, human (migration), and communication flows driving globalization processes. Also empirically, on this and other points, the reader is left hungry for more "studying up"²⁵ of the SADR/Polisario Front's agents, structures, and governing techniques.

Sovereignty aside, in relation to the issue of democracy and human rights in the Sahrawi refugee camps, Wilson strikes the right balance between the general sympathy for interlocutors required by ethnographic research and some healthy critical distance. On the one hand, she contends that, despite not conforming to the liberal democratic standards, the "party-less" parliamentary elections for the Sahrawi National Council she observed in the camps were "hotly contested," uncertain in terms of results, and "more pluralizing than some multiparty elections."²⁶ This does not prevent acknowledgement that "crucial moments in the allegedly democratic process in the camps are closed to outsiders"²⁷ and that recent electoral reforms may have had mixed effects in terms of broadening political representation, including some "democratic casualties."²⁸ On the other hand, regarding human rights, it is rightly pointed out that the Algerian official position delegating responsibility to the SADR over the protection of the rights of Sahrawi refugees is in contradiction with international law.²⁹ Significant restrictions to the refugees' civil liberties affect the freedom of press (official censorship), freedom of association (absence of political parties), and to a lesser extent freedom of movement (restriction of access to Algerian passports to travel/migrate to Europe).³⁰ Also, an unintended consequence of the professionalization of the SADR's legal and justice system has been the increase in the profile of Islamic law within the Sahrawi penal code, especially for crimes such as theft, murder, rape, and extramarital sexual relations.³¹

In sum, if Wilson's more-than-ethnography provokes so much thinking and curiosity, it is

because it is as intellectually ambitious as honest. *Sovereignty in Exile* makes a major and largely unprecedented contribution on the internal politics of the Sahrawi refugee camps, which will surely appeal to those interested in the under-researched Western Sahara conflict, while being also relevant to students and scholars of political anthropology, refugee and forced migration studies, contested states, and politics and society in North Africa.

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Endnotes

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¹ GIORGIO AGAMBEN, *HOMO SACER: SOVEREIGN POWER AND BARE LIFE* 18 (Daniel Heller-Roazen trans., 1998).

² ALICE WILSON, *SOVEREIGNTY IN EXILE: A SAHARAN LIBERATION MOVEMENT GOVERNS* (2016).

³ *Id.* at 2.

⁴ *Id.* at 31.

⁵ *Id.* at 103-04.

⁶ *Id.* at 219.

⁷ *Id.* at 13.

⁸ *Id.* at 9.

⁹ *Id.* at 7.

¹⁰ Weber, Max (1919/1965) *Politics as a Vocation*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

¹¹ Schmitt, Carl (1922/2005) *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* [translated by George Schwab]. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹² WILSON, *supra* note 2, at 104.

¹³ Homi Bhabha, *Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse*, 28 OCTOBER: DISCIPLESHIP: A SPECIAL ISSUE ON PSYCHOANALYSIS 125, 129-30 (1984).

¹⁴ HOMI K. BHABHA, *THE LOCATION OF CULTURE* 25, 37 (1994).

¹⁵ WILSON, *supra* note 2, at 89-115.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 116-46.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 147-82.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 183-203.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 204-35.

²⁰ Giacomo Luciani, *Economic Foundations of Democracy and Authoritarianism: The Arab World in Comparative Perspective*, 10 *ARAB STUD. Q.* 457 (1988).

²¹ WILSON, *supra* note 2, at 120.

²² *Id.* at 118.

²³ *Id.* at 149.

²⁴ STEPHEN D. KRASNER, *SOVEREIGNTY: ORGANISED HYPOCRISY* (1999).

²⁵ Hugh Gusterson, *Studying Up Revisited*, 20 *POL. & LEGAL ANTHROPOLOGY* 114 (1997).

²⁶ WILSON, *supra* note 2, at 224-26.

²⁷ *Id.* at 83.

²⁸ *Id.* at 231.

²⁹ *Id.* at 252.

³⁰ *Id.* at 215-16.

³¹ *Id.* at 105-08.