

Christian Doll, PhD Candidate, Anthropology: Commentary on "The Conveyor Belt to Nowhere: Identity and Resistance at a Western Saharan Phosphate Mine from 1973-1976"

Sarah's historical analysis of the creation of Sahrawi national identity through resistance at a phosphate mine offers us deep context for understanding a largely forgotten conflict that has forced the whole-scale displacement of the people of Western Sahara for the past 42 years. Sarah argues that moments of dramatic resistance against Moroccan control of phosphate mining have crystallized a collective Sahrawi political identity, and ultimately forged a national identity of resistance that had never existed among the nomadic people spread across the vast western Sahara region. Sarah analyzes the ongoing symbolic significance of disrupting the vital conveyor belt in Fosbucra'a mine by demonstrating how it embodies the historic exploitation of Western Saharan resources not only by Morocco but by the former Spanish colonial regime. In doing so, Sarah offers an intervention in the historical literature and provides a deeply situated reading of the historical process that produced the current conflict. Sarah's history draws attention to the protracted, and still ongoing, postcolonial struggle, and suggests the way contemporary global capital has produced new exploitations as well as new forms of resistance. Sarah's discussion demonstrates how a largely taken-for-granted resource, phosphorous, has become central not only to the formation of Sahrawi political identity but to the self-conception of the Moroccan state. The resource, as a potential basis for continued wealth and state legitimacy, continues to be central to both sides' political ambitions.

I believe Sarah's paper opens up a number of important issues and questions I'd like to briefly suggest here. Sarah's explication of the actions of the Moroccan state reveals the pressing need to interrogate the so called "south-south" relations and internal colonizations that trouble the narrative of western exploitation and which cannot be easily understood using existing center-periphery, west-rest, or colonizer-colonized frameworks. Further, the decision of the International Court of Justice she discusses demonstrates a need to analyze how international bodies can be used as tools for the advancement of particular state interests (even if failed, as in the case of Morocco) and can also offer symbolic victories with no seeming practical effects for sides resisting state power. A comparative analysis of such decisions and actions might be a

useful way to think through the efficacy and unintentional consequences of international mediation efforts. Two parallels that come to mind and the ICC's unsuccessful trial against Uhuru Kenyatta or the UN's official recognition of the Palestinian Authority, neither of which seem to have met their intended goals.

I am also drawn to two intertwined theoretical insights about the nation-state that I think warrant further consideration and elaboration. First, I see Sarah's work offering a valuable break from the consideration of nationalism inspired by Benedict Anderson. For Anderson, nationalism is rooted in a on a long-term historical process of modernization and relies on understanding nationalism as a top-down process, moving from the professional and "literate" class to become a broader, taken-for-granted basis of identity. But Sarah suggests a nationalization process with a much shorter time-frame and that is rooted in particular material realities. It comes about, she suggests, through deliberate, recent actions of resistance and near-immediate memorialization of these actions. What does this tell us about the nature of nationalism more generally? Might we consider more forms of group identity as nationalistic in nature, rather than as "ethnic" or political? Might we dislodge nationalism as necessarily tied to the state? Does Sarah's reading of Sahrawi identity offer us insight into the splitting up or unmaking of nations in the contemporary moment? How can we better incorporate relationships to global capital and resource extraction into our understanding of national identity? Lastly, I am very interested in the theoretical implications for understanding a government/movement that governs and maintains coherence across disconnected refugee camps. How does the SADR government function and how coherent is the movement surrounding them? What does their deterritorial nature tell us about states that appear to be spatially coherent but are likely just as deterritorialized as that of the SADR? The generational divide over the nature of the future Sahrawi state is telling here. Sarah suggests that the older generation is nostalgic for a peaceful return to a past that may never have existed, a nomadic life that seems impossible within their hoped-for mining-based and centralized state. The SADR's government and their praxis of resistance suggests a greater resilience to a networked, acephelous, rhizomic political structure than we presume to be possible. What does the Sahrawi state, in its exile and largely unrecognized nature tell us about the unmooring of sovereignty from territory, the relationship of

sovereignty to the control of bare life, the relationship of sovereignty to controlling everyday life, and the importance of international legibility for state power?

A few further references that might be useful: James C. Scott's *Weapons of the Weak*, *Seeing Like a State*, and *The Art of Not Being Governed*; Danny Hoffman, *The War Machines*, Deleuze and Guattari's idea of rhizomes in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Liisa Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*.