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Libyan Studies: A Call to Sociology

For decades Libya has been described by scholars and observers as a "stateless" society that lacks key institutions that define modern states, rendering the country a "pariah" and an exception. If, however, we take up the definition of the state offered by sociologist Max Weber as a "human community that (successfully) claims the *monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force* within a given territory,"[1] Libya can certainly not be denied its statehood. Indeed, it is the monopoly on violence within the state in Libya that has defined its paradigmatic features and fissures over the course of the last several decades. If we understand this violence as a key defining feature of *all* states, we can appreciate that Libya is not so much an aberration or exception as it is a compelling case to inform understandings of states and societies around the world.

I open the discussion of the future of Libyan studies with the acknowledgement that it is regarded as an exception because any inquiry in the field of Libyan studies must first attend to the question, "What is Libya"? On a regional level, Libya has largely been written out of Middle Eastern Studies, which tends to define the Middle East in terms of Egypt and countries to its east. States in North Africa—Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco—remain identified across literatures as "the Maghreb" owing to their common history of French colonial rule. It is in this way that, epistemologically, Libya has been largely omitted from both the fields of "Middle Eastern Studies" and "North African Studies." The absence of Libya in these spaces compels us to acknowledge that epistemological categories are themselves colonial legacies that impose artificial boundaries around geography itself. These legacies are legible in an example offered by Egyptian writer and doctor

1 Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology,* edited by H. Gerth & C.W. Mills (Abingdon: Routledge, 1948 [1919]), 78.

Nawal El Saadawi who writes that she was once asked "What country are you from?" to which she responded "Egypt." Her interlocutor questioned, "Do you consider Egypt to be in Africa?" At that moment, El Saadawi reports, she found herself questioning the empirical realities of geography and, by extension, her very identity: "So I found Egypt being uprooted from Africa too...Now I no longer know the continent in which Egypt can be found, nor do I know if I am Arab, or African, or whether I should be here at all."[2]

This is the first critical point of intervention required of Libyan Studies - we must make Libya legible as a contemporary state shaped by complex and overlapping contexts and interactions that span multiple regions and geographies. Studies of Libya should be central to discussions unfolding in the fields of Middle Eastern studies, Maghreb studies, African studies, Mediterranean studies, and American studies, among others. By studying Libya from multiple disciplinary lenses, we invite modes of inquiry and comparative frameworks that simultaneously acknowledge its uniqueness and the histories, cultures, and political systems it shares with other societies and states. To take it a step further, when we open up the space to earnestly consider Libya as a case that is not exceptional but, rather, central to understanding dimensions of social and political life within and beyond its borders, we might be able to acknowledge its importance to numerous other fields.

Indeed, there is a profound intellectual debt owed to societies in North Africa in the development of social theory. There is little acknowledgement in the social sciences that so many of the key theorists whose work continues to impact disciplines such as anthropology and sociology undertook their studies in North African societies. Pierre Bourdieu studied the Kabyle in Algeria to develop theories of *capital*, *habitus*, and *symbolic violence*, concepts that have transformed cultural anthropology and approaches to ethnography in sociology.[3]

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2 Nawal El Saadawi, *The Nawal El Saadawi Reader* (New York: Zed Books, 1997), 118.

3 It is acknowledged that Bourdieu especially drew from his studies of North Africa in his *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1972). See, for instance, Craig Calhoun, "Pierre Bourdieu and social transformation: lessons from Algeria," *Development and Change* 37/6 (2006), 1403–1415. Also see Julian Go, "Decolonizing Bourdieu: Colonial and Postcolonial Theory in

Michel Foucault lived and worked in Tunisia shortly after its independence from French colonial rule and become politically active in contesting neocolonialism in the emerging state.[4] It was partly from these observations that he developed his theories of *disciplinary power*, *governmentality*, and *biopolitics*.[5] Such frameworks have become indispensable to critical studies in sociology of state, power, and politics.

The work of making Libya epistemologically legible will lay the necessary foundation for a second critical intervention in Libyan studies, namely shifting foci from macro-level to micro-level analyses. Any inquiry into scholarship produced about Libya offers a relatively narrow set of possibilities, generally a mix of sand and Gaddafi as in Lindsey Hilsum's *Sandstorm: Libya from Gaddafi to Revolution*.[6] Some texts implicitly define Libya by Gaddafi as is the case with John Oakes' *Libya: The History of Gaddafi's Pariah State*[7] or Alison Pargeter's *Libya: The Rise and Fall of Qaddafi*.[8] Others may simply foreground Gaddafi in the title or book cover, such as Annick Cojean's *Gaddafi's Harem: The Story of a Young Woman and the Abuses of Power in Libya*[9] or Ulf

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Pierre Bourdieu's Early Work," *Sociological Theory* 31/1 (2013), 49–74.

4 The recent allegations of Foucault's sexual abuse and exploitation of Tunisian youth also reiterates a necessary reckoning for the academy concerning the relationship of academics to the communities and societies in which they immerse themselves. For more information about the allegations against Foucault, see the interview with Guy Sorman in London's *The Times* entitled "French Philosopher Michel Foucault 'abused boys in Tunisia'," March 28, 2021, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/french-philosopher-michel-foucault-abused-boys-in-tunisia-6t5sj7jvw.

5 See Kathryn Medien, "Foucault in Tunisia: The encounter with intolerable power," *The Sociological Review* 68/3 (2020), 492–507.

6 Lindsey Hilsum, *Sandstorm: Libya from Gaddafi to Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012).

7 John Oakes, *Libya: The History of Gaddafi's Pariah State* (Gloucestershire: The History Press, 2011).

8 Alison Pargeter, *Libya: The Rise and Fall of Qaddafi* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

9 By focusing on a Libyan woman's experience of sexual violence by Gaddafi, Cojean's work offers an example of a micro-level analysis that could enrich our understandings of the relationship between politics and everyday

Laessing's *Understanding Libya Since Gaddafi*.[10] While a four-decades long regime necessitates a sustained focus on its leadership, this focus enjoys a disproportionate share of the corpus of scholarship that we could envision in Libyan studies. In addition, the focus on Gaddafi—in domestic Libyan politics or international relations—typically offers a macro-level analysis that privileges as interlocutors agents of the state, loyal or defected. The insights we acquire from macro-level analyses are critical to our understandings of any state and society but they must also be complemented with micro-level analyses that afford us what Clifford Geertz infamously described as "thick description."[11] The observations of everyday life are not divorced from politics; on the contrary, politics permeates daily life in the institutions and policies to which individuals react, conform, and rebel.[12]

A shift toward micro-level analyses in Libyan studies opens a vast horizon of potential subject matter, much of which stands to challenge long-standing assumptions and premises of sociological inquiry. Libyan studies should take up the sociological emphasis on social groups—gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, social class, and age—as well as institutions ranging from the family, state, military, economics, religion, and healthcare while also extending frameworks in these areas in new directions. For instance, the study of social classes in sociology represents a long legacy of studying capitalism in European societies, in which social class is a key social group that animates political life. This has become institutionalized in areas of study within sociology, particularly as capitalism has expanded globally beyond anyone's ability to escape it. However, other logics of social group solidarity and contention persist and ought to be understood and ex-

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life in Libya. See Annick Cojean, *Gaddafi's Harem: The Story of a Young Woman and the Abuses of Power in Libya* (New York: Grove Press, 2013).

10 Ulf Laessing, *Understanding Libya Since Gaddafi* (London: Hurst and Company, 2020).

11 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 27

12 Veena Das reiterates the significance of everyday life to politics, specifically in the case of how state violence manifests itself in everyday social life. See Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

amined more thoroughly. In North Africa, kin groups have historically been of central import to social and political relations, coming to more prominence in some countries than others during the colonial era in particular.[13] The politics of kin groups were also central to Gaddafi's grievances with the post-colonial monarchy in Libya and kin groups were the basis from which key social movements emerged to contest state violence under his regime.[14] Kin groups as political forces do not currently occupy a prominent role in sociological analyses of social or political life and Libyan studies could become an intellectual space where such issues are explored.

Similarly, the opportunity to shift toward micro-level and comparative analyses affords us the possibility of producing new insights about a range of subjects and political epochs. Taking the colonial period as an example, Algeria is widely considered to have experienced one of the most deadly and violent colonial contexts. The estimated death toll varies significantly by source with Algerians claiming that upwards of 1.5 million Algerians—nearly one half of the population at the time—were killed by French colonial authorities over a 132-year period.[15] Libya was distinct from its North African counterparts in that it was colonized by Italy and lost fewer people to colonial violence. However, if we put colonial violence in context, the deaths orchestrated by

13 Studies like that of Mounira Charrad, who has studied the role of what she terms "kin-based solidarities" in the development of women's rights in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, point to the significance of kin groups as political actors. This moves us beyond simple claims about "tribes" into a more critical analysis of how social forms do or do not have ongoing relevance in particular regions of the world. See Mounira M. Charrad, *States and Women's Rights: The Making of Postcolonial Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

14 Families who experienced the disappearance of relatives suspected of organizing against the regime developed an organization to contest the suspected state-sanctioned killing of prisoners in Abu Salim Prison in 1996. The group they formed, the Association of Families of the Martyrs of the Abu Salim Prison Massacre, publicly protested the regime in Benghazi years prior to the 2011 uprising.

15 Benjamin Brower, *A Desert Named Peace: The Violence of France's Empire in the Algerian Sahara, 1844-1902* (New York Columbia University Press, 2009), 4.

Italian colonial authorities of approximately 83,000 Libyans amounts to over a third of the population in the short time frame of just over three decades. The scope of colonial violence in Libya has until recently been especially underexamined compared to the French colonized states of Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco.[16] Comparative frameworks and an approach to Libya that does not regard it as an exception or aberration offers us the opportunity to enrich our understandings of how critical historical moments, such as the era of colonialism, unfolded across different regions.

Lastly, a shift toward the micro-level invites a complementary transition in methodological approaches to Libyan studies. A common refrain to justify the exclusion of Libya from systematic study is that Libya has been physically inaccessible and, therefore, unsuitable for sustained study. Of the many lessons to be appreciated from the COVID-19 pandemic is the observation that we have the ability to be connected across geographies and time zones and our ability to physically travel can be interrupted at any time. This is not unique to Libya. This pandemic period might inspire us to reconsider how our standard methodologies could be expanded in new directions. For instance, there is a rich and vibrant digital culture among Libyans that can facilitate connections and serve as an avenue to cultivate meaningful relationships despite periods of physical distance and interruption. Libyans—in the country and in the diaspora[17]—are present on numerous platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Viber,

16 Ali Abdullatif Ahmida has rigorously detailed what he argues was a sustained genocide and internment of Libyans by Italian colonists in the twenty-year period following Italy's invasion of Tripoli in 1911. He draws on oral narratives among survivors to detail and reconstruct the scope of violence in Libya during the early twentieth century, offering a critical example of how micro-level analysis can offer macro-level insights about social life and politics. See Ali Abdullatif Ahmida, *Genocide in Libya: Shar, a Hidden Colonial History* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 3.

17 Libyan diasporas are a critical population to include in our development of Libyan studies as they can profoundly inform our understandings of nationalism and identity, among other research areas. Dana Moss's study of Libyan and Syrian diaspora activism during the Arab uprisings in 2011 offers an example of the potentials of this kind of work. See Dana Moss, "Transnational Repression, Diaspora Mobilization, and the Case of the Arab Spring," *Social Problems* 63/4 (2016), 480–498.

and Whatsapp, among many others. They could hardly be considered inaccessible or remote. We must challenge our disciplinary expectations to usher in methodologies that can privilege not only exclusively in-person interactions but also digital interactions. While there can be no substitute for immersing oneself in the interactional spaces and places of Libya, extending our methodologies to the digital realm also facilitates another important intervention in Libyan studies, which is to engage in more longitudinal research. Most studies about Libya concern discrete time frames or take the form of in-depth interviews at one point in time; a beneficial direction is to study social and political life over protracted periods. Longitudinal work helps us answer the pivotal "why" questions as we can observe change over time, a critical aspect of both qualitative and quantitative work, such as demography. In the case of research on violence and trauma, it is essential to engage in this work over extended periods to develop the rapport and demonstrate a sustained commitment to communities. These methodological approaches also challenge the broader rhythms of the academy, which has in recent decades accelerated publishing expectations in what are arguably unsustainable and intellectually deficient "publish or perish" paradigms at odds with the work required in many areas, including Libyan studies.

Collectively, these three critical interventions in Libyan studies—making Libya intellectually legible, undertaking micro-level analyses from sociological perspectives, and expanding methodological approaches—will not only serve in our knowledge and understanding of Libya but stand to challenge the broader Eurocentrism of contemporary academia more generally. All of the interventions outlined here, while specific to the Libyan context, inform also the marginalization of other geographies and societies within the academy. These inequalities are now inscribed not only in our canons but, increasingly, within the very algorithms—a contemporary manifestation of colonial frameworks—that digitally direct our attention to some contexts and not others. Thus, the interventions proposed here, in tandem with the insights of my colleagues, lean in to these challenges and invite Libyan specialists and non-specialists to do the same.