

Ojeda-García, Raquel, Irene Fernández Molina and Victoria Veguilla, eds, *Global, Regional and Local Dimensions of Western Sahara's Protracted Decolonization: When a Conflict Gets Old* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 342 pp., ISBN 978-1-349-95034-8, US \$159 (hardback).

Western Sahara has been on the list of the United Nations' (UN) special committee for decolonisation as a non-self-governing territory since 1963. Although promises of self-determination date back to the 1960s, Spain controversially transferred its former colony in 1975 to neighbouring Morocco and Mauritania. Sahrawis in the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguía el-Hamra and Río de Oro (Polisario Front) had launched anti-colonial armed struggle against Spain, which continued when Morocco and Mauritania invaded. Polisario declared the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in 1976 and Mauritania abandoned claims in 1979, while Morocco promoted settlement and occupation. The struggle was combined with community and political organisation in the four-decade-old refuge in the Algerian desert and under Moroccan occupation, where Sahrawis were forced to remain after the 1991 cease-fire agreement in preparation for a referendum on self-determination never held. Western Sahara's case is insufficiently addressed in academic research and in international fora. To help mitigate this insufficiency, the book edited by Raquel Ojeda-García, Irene Fernández-Molina and Victoria Veguilla offers a comprehensive perspective. With 22 contributors coming from diverse backgrounds and 16 chapters coherently organised into five parts, it presents a multi-level analysis resulting from a four-year research project.

Fernández-Molina introduces the book's goal and conceptual approach by describing the case as 'a late, zigzagging and protracted decolonization procedure', degenerating into 'protracted annexation' and a 'protracted conflict', a 'protracted refugee situation' and a 'protracted conflict resolution process' (p. 1). Drawing from Conflict Analysis and Resolution, the book identifies elements behind 'the conflict's *intractability*' —its endurance against 'efforts to

resolve [it]' (p. 2)— through an empirical examination of interactions and 'causality links of any kind between agents, structures, events or processes located at different levels of analysis' (p. 16). Causality is generally employed in theory-driven or problem-solving research, which differs from research that produces practical knowledge —a distinction discussed since Robert Cox's 1981 *Millennium* article.

Considering Western Sahara's question an 'intractable conflict', the work aims to examine it by filling what Fernández-Molina describes as gaps 'in the knowledge of [...] *what is* as opposed *what ought to be*' (p. 5). She states that the project's focus is on 'the tangible dynamics and effects of the conflict's durability', and not on 'ethical and normative debates' regarding 'historic injustices' —although noting authors' 'awareness' of their 'connection to' and 'effects upon' the situation researched on (p. 3). Yet, one must question whether intractability's reasons and methods can be parted, from each other and from expectations. In other words, if the elements identified cause intractability, their examination requires analyses of failed 'efforts to resolve' the conflict, in which case structural conditions, power asymmetries and strategies also enter the framework. The book offers a contribution to the analysis of conjunctural dynamics. Its cross-levels approach helps understanding Western Sahara's 'protracted decolonization' and Saharawi strategy of combining an anti-colonial struggle and a social-political-cultural project, i.e., by building state-administrative institutions in refugee camps. Hence, whereas the book's parts are ordered from the global to regional and national/local levels, the fourth part, 'Saharawi Resistance and Identity', can be read as an exam of Sahrawi engagement in dynamics as an active party.

The "global" section is the first and the shortest. Anna Theofilopoulou examines the UN change in approach to the conflict and diplomatic attempts; Grande-Cascón and Ruiz-Seisdedos address the European Union's apparent 'reluctance' toward political engagement and preference for a 'humanitarian' role, depending on Parliamentary composition (p. 93); and

Jacob Mundy examines the world powers' interplays with the Moroccan occupation, its geopolitical functions, and the Sahrawis' responses. At the regional level, the second part discusses Western Sahara's place in the Arab Spring, Algeria's political role, the 'Sahel-Maghreb axis', and the Sahrawis' role in regional security, which Guindo and Bueno consider understudied by arguing that since the 9/11 attacks, this aspect won an attention now lost (p. 166). Though the book is not claimed to be exhaustive, further analysis must include a thorough examination of the African Union's (AU) role as an actor, a site and an object of dispute between Polisario and Morocco. With self-determination as a founding principle, the AU has been actively involved—previously as the Organization of African Unity, which admitted the SADR as a member in 1982—and is a partner of the UN in efforts for solution.

The third and fourth sections are both dedicated to national and local levels—one about Moroccan and the other about Saharawi strategy. The two thus conform the longest part of the book. The fourth section is generally grounded part about Saharawi engagement in all the previously analysed levels. For instance, contrasting to a global securitising discourse and the world powers' stances is Polisario's effort to integrate an 'international community'. Analyses also address the mobilization of national identity and elections. For instance, after her eight-year ethnographic fieldwork, Alice Wilson examines a 'work of elections' that allows refugees to experience community-belonging (p. 315). She examines the formation of a Saharawi *electorate* by addressing aspects of nationalism, which relate to one of the 'elements' behind *intractability*: the identification of voters for the implementation of a self-determination referendum. Although Spain conducted a census in preparation for that in 1974 (p. 313), and the UN identified voters in the 1990s (p. 40), postponement of the referendum is often attributed to disagreement in identification. Moreover, whereas Morocco claims to have had previous authority over the territory through what Konstantina Isidoros identifies as 'fictive kinship-making' and a 'thesis of preexisting "legal ties"' (p. 302), it also discredits Saharawi

nationalism as Algeria's antagonistic creation; on the other hand, Laurence Thieux considers how Algeria's support for Saharawi self-determination works to contain Morocco's expansionism (p. 123).

These sections help understanding aspects that must be considered in one 'never-ending debate on why', as Fernández-Molina puts it (p. 3): why it has been possible to indefinitely postpone self-determination. The rather Realist view in Francesco Cavatorta's conclusions is that international actors 'look at the conflict both through a set of assumptions about it and through the selfish interests they are promoting', whereas the conflict's absence from global political discussions makes it prone to manipulation (p. 336).

The contributors to this book offer indispensable elements for further examination. The case's historical process is widely discussed, but gathering interrelated views of its global, regional and local dimensions was a needed endeavour. However unexhausted, this historical and grounded contribution can thus integrate critical conjunctural analyses that add to the understanding of dialectics of negligence, complicity, oppression, resistance and resilience in the colonization, occupation, and liberation of Western Sahara.

Other references:

Cox, Robert W., 'Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 10.2 (1981), 126-155.

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