

# SUDANWORKINGPAPER

## Borderland dynamics in the Horn of Africa – Some reflections

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The programme Assisting Regional Universities in Sudan and South Sudan (ARUSS) aims to build academic bridges between Sudan and South Sudan. The overall objective is to enhance the quality and relevance of teaching and research in regional universities.

As part of the program, research is carried out on a number of topics which are deemed important for lasting peace and development within and between the two countries. Efforts are also made to influence policy debates and improve the basis for decision making in both countries as well as among international actors. ARUSS is supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

## About the author

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## The Horn of Africa

In an interesting overview of the region on the Rift Valley Institute home page, Christopher Clapham (2013) argues with great eloquence that the Horn of Africa is an extremely complex region, in which layers of potential problems are piled one on top of another. Not only is much of the natural environment of the Horn extremely forbidding, says Clapham, but vast differences in its environmental endowment—ranging from the plateau lands of northern Ethiopia to the Somali scrub—create very different kinds of societies, some pastoralist and some based on agriculture, with dramatically contrasting values and ways of life. The region is on the frontier between two of the world’s major religions, Islam and Christianity, and encompasses a huge range of ethnic groups, languages, and cultures. These differences have in turn been intensified by patterns of colonial conquest (internal as well as external), the creation of highly artificial states, and the uneven incorporation of the region into the global economy, and into global conflicts. The Cold War affected the Horn far more directly and intensively than it did other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, and the region is now again on a global frontline in the so-called “global war on terror.” A profound awareness of all these factors, and of how they fit together, is needed before one can even start to understand the nature of its current problems. There are also historical continuities and patterns. Population movements and adaptations have forged links between groups, violent ones such as cattle rustling and raids, peaceful ones such as marriages, or reciprocal relationships built on sharing of animals or collaborative labour. Regional markets and trading centers as well as towns were important meeting places that further added to the development of relationships. The same can be said for the development of various power centres. Horn of Africa states can historically be viewed as an interaction between different ecological zones, and hence different adaptations (e.g., the highland-lowland dimension in Ethiopia and Eritrea, the Nile Valley-savannah dimension in the Sudan, etc.). The state centres were in the highlands and the Nile Valley, but the exploitation of lowlands and savannah areas were basic mechanisms in maintaining the viability of the states.

This general overview by Clapham gives us the sense of the existing crisis, and crisis is a common and recurrent characteristic of this region. To mention a few: legal and illegal trade, arms proliferation, intergroup conflict, security challenges, land conflicts, competition over oil and other resources, trafficking (human, children, women), spreading of drugs, presence of refugees and challenges of migration, cattle raiding, and spreading of epidemics. Many of these areas are also areas of environmental challenges, such as drought, overexploitation of meagre resources, climate change. The way such issues play out will certainly vary across the region, but it will also vary over time, thus making a historical perspective necessary.

Understanding this region generates a number of questions and answers. Is the situation of the Horn a “tribal warfare,” without any real aims? Is it a meaningless process of self-destruction? Or are we actually looking at processes that might be similar to the ones Europe went through, and analyzed so brilliantly by Charles Tilly (1990) as processes of violent state-making? The tensions of a state with incomplete control of its hinterland but full claims to sovereignty can certainly lead to the type of conflicts we see in that the situation unleashes the violent

potential of both the state and its opposing forces. As I write, it is worth considering the alarming possibility that Sudan's experience of division into Sudan and South Sudan actually conforms closely to the notion of war as the midwife of state formation. South Sudan, based on a violent war and accepted by the international community, represents this new state formation. We saw the same happen with Eritrea, after the war with Ethiopia. Somalia has also broken up in many entities, and we still do not know where the many conflicts will take the Somali region.

## Understanding the larger picture

To further understand these situations we need a conceptual frame. As an anthropologist I am of course used to pointing at the importance of local and micro-oriented studies, in order to capture what goes on among people and thus to see the larger processes as they affect them in their daily lives. But in this paper I shall not do that. Rather, my aim is to reflect on broader issues that might help us in understanding a region such as the Horn of Africa. To further explain what I mean, let me draw on Talal Asad. In his book, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (1993), Asad picks up on the recent anthropological and historical focus on history in the active voice. In this view, people are making their own history, contesting it, borrowing meanings from Western dominators, and reconstructing their own cultural existence with creativity and the hybridity of the cultural constructions. Talal Asad identifies Marshall Sahlins (1988) as a leading voice for this idea, arguing that local people should not be considered passive victims of the World System, and that systemic dynamics should be analysed as cultural processes, not economic ones. Sherry Ortner (1984) is also mentioned by Asad as arguing that a capitalist-centred anthropology should be avoided, and that agency should be given prominence. This requires, according to Ortner, that anthropologists continue doing fieldwork. Specifically, Ortner states that, "It is our location on the ground that puts us in a position to see people not simply as passive reactors to and enactors of some system, but as active agents and subjects in their own history" (1984:143). We may add Jean Comaroff to the list of masters of the trade identified by Asad. Comaroff writes about her South African people stating that, "The relationship of such a global system to local formations has to be viewed as a historical problem; it is a relationship which, while inherently contradictory and unequal, is not universally determining" (1985:155). Local and global processes should somehow be integrated.

Though fascinating arguments, Asad claims there is another side of the coin. The above authors, according to Asad, underplay the structural side of the argument—why actors do not achieve their aims, the structural condition of action and the unintended consequences of action. Should we emphasize agency over causality? Clearly many factors that are without agency influence historical processes. Should we say that only those that are pulled into the world of agency by the actors are relevant for any analysis? Is what is beyond conscious social action left out? Talal Asad expresses important reservations about the extent to which local people can shape their own destinies, and to what extent a perspective that privileges the local and the ground level of things can capture dynamics on other levels of social reality. Asad's concern is how "systematicity," as for instance the capitalist system, is "apprehended,

represented, and used in the contemporary world” (1993:7). This problem is not about understanding individual human action but understanding aggregates, distributions and trends that make up realities that shape people’s lives, but are not seen by the anthropologist who only wants to see “real people do real things,” shaping their own history in the process. Asad states new historical conditions emerge, shaped by new technologies and new rationalities, in which the old distinctions and old options fade away and become obsolete. And here Asad joins Foucault (e.g.1979)—modern power has been concerned precisely with systematically transforming the very conditions in which life as a whole is organized. Old analyses thus do not become false, but irrelevant to our analysis about contemporary relationships between action and its conditions. The issue is not the actual accommodation or resistance, but rather to understand the changing ground on which accommodation or resistance become possible solutions. That ground is characterized by modern power, with its focus on modern ideas about liberty, and other conceptual and ideological conditions in which subjects are constituted and new choices are constructed, and new futures become imaginable.

This is the challenge I want to deal with. What kind of “systematicities” can we point at in our attempt at making sense of the situation in the Horn of Africa region? Seen from the perspective of my anthropological lenses the situation is characterized by many contradictory processes. We need to see the dynamic interrelationships of Horn of Africa communities, and how varying external and internal circumstances may produce peaceful relationships as well as violent ones. We need to understand the complex distribution of groups, seeing the migration of the Nilotes, Bantus and Cushitic people around the region. This is related to how adaptive processes, such as coping with drought or shifting between agriculture and pastoralism, have been not only adaptive processes, but have also been characterized by shifts in identities (e.g., Nilotes becoming Bantus). We need to see how such links affect the boundaries between groups, making them fluid rather than fixed and how the groups, seen as “moral communities,” might not coincide with the boundaries of ethnic groups or eco zones. Furthermore, we need to understand how the development of contemporary states is part of wider colonial processes, and how local effects of state-making create complications, for instance how national boundaries have interfered with existing links between groups, how problems between groups on the borders become nation-state problems, and how commercialization and general modernization shape the adaptive responses of groups. In this we see innovative processes (e.g., smuggling) becoming important strategies for people living on the borderland, and we see the arming of the states as well as local groups give many problems an escalating character.

Also seen from within my anthropological gaze, it seems difficult to accept that the processes can be understood as showing the groups involved as static entities, captured within their “traditions.” There has always been differentiation, people who succeed and people who fail. Poor people are vulnerable during droughts, rich people might benefit from the same drought (see e.g., Manger et al. 1996). Similarly, I am less than convinced that what we see can be captured by simplistic evolutionary perspectives about the relationships between agriculture and pastoralism, and that pastoralists have to be settled in order to become modern citizens of states. Seeing them as part of dynamic processes within different contexts of systemic interdependencies and management seems to be closer to reality. Thus, in short, we need to



move beyond a “before and now” type of perspective based on arguments of “incomplete transition.” Rather, we need to regard the mentioned processes as happening along a “mobility-enclosure continuum,” as battles of many social and political forces represented in the region, some forces being local in character, others regional, national, international, and global.

But what then of Asad’s “systematicities”? To approach these, we need to look at our argument again, and include new factors that might seem less related to the empirical situation on the ground, but that nonetheless help shape what is going on, and, importantly, how we see what is going on. In the following I shall discuss some of the historical processes that I believe have contributed to such systematicities.

## The problem of the African state.

In comparative discussions on state-making, political scientists and historians often underline that African state-making, and, hence, the borders of contemporary African states, typically emerged as a consequence of colonialism, more than as a result of any organic process of state- and nation-building. According to such a view, in some areas, territories were vast, thinly populated and the centre, or the state, had problems reaching out to the peripheries. Groups were engaged in shifting forms of cultivation, with little investment in any particular place, and could easily shift to the peripheral areas of other political units. Hence, the pre-colonial states only reached so far. In other areas, not under colonial occupation, such as Ethiopia, we see a clearer state-building process, marked by centralization, increasing levels of bureaucratization and a standing army. In the period of colonialism, colonial states agreed on borders that were arbitrary, and contained territories that in many cases were larger than what pre-colonial states could control. The borders came because the colonial powers were successful in creating consensus around them. Thus the most remarkable things about the scramble for Africa was how late it appeared, how fast it occurred, and how little fighting occurred among the colonial powers. A major reason for African leaders to accept these borders at independence was that it helped protect the state from external interference, meaning both neighbours and the international system. This turned out to be a very viable decision. But at the same time the “African wars of state-making” came to be fought within the territories, between the state and peripheral opponents, testifying to the state’s failure in consolidating authority over its territory.

Given this situation, the quest for stateship in Africa did not lead to many wars over territory. Wars were fought, of course, but often to capture people, not land. Preferably people from outside the borders of state control. The aim not being to create links with people to tax them, but to exploit them directly as slaves, either as labour power or as a commodity in the slave trade. The violence of slave trade in Africa is therefore also the violence of state-making. Regional power centres could do pretty much what they liked, as long as they paid the tributes to the centre. In such a situation, if the centre wanted to intervene it could only do so through direct violent acts, there were no buffers apart from violence itself. Equating states with control of territory is thus too narrow a framework for understanding the African state.

What then about borders ? Borders created by the colonial powers might have been arbitrary but they were far from meaningless. Perhaps they were the most successful part of European colonialism. We see this when we compare the lack of violence in defining borders with the extensive violence employed in many countries in dealing with the nation, and with culture. What the independent African rulers did was to accept a single sovereignty within the colonial borders, establishing a nation-state according to the rules of the UN and the international community, but without being able to control the territory itself. Hence, it was the fact in itself of being a decolonized unit that granted status as a state, not the regime's ability to exercise control (United Nations 1970). Hence, small units like Lesotho or Gambia could become nation-states and enter the UN, while "Empires" such as the Ashanti could only enter as part of Nigeria. Independent African rulers ignored their own pre-colonial history and entered a game designed by the former colonial powers, in the name of modernity, perhaps, or as a tactical move in order to control and win over opponents, but by doing so they also defined what options were available to them in their own national state-making. Most of Africa's weak states were allowed to survive and any attempt at self-determination was stopped by collective African agreements, as happened with Biafra's attempt to secede from Nigeria. The same was the case with Eritrea, until a long civil war changed that situation. Now South Sudan is in the same position.

Under these circumstances, state coups became the common modality for challenging the leaders, not secession. Physical control of the capital city, as a seat of power, became the symbol of a coup's success, not control over territory, ability to collect taxes, wider political legitimacy, or any other means. The interests of African leaders were also served by international developments. A major factor was the Cold War in which superpowers helped presidents to quell attempts at rebellion for their own strategic interests. Economically, aid played a role in helping regimes that could not tax their own population. And as they could not collect taxes, exploitation through indirect taxes, such as tariffs and export duties, as well as exploitation of mineral resources and corruption, was important.

We can learn a lot from the above description, but at the same time we see that there is more to the history of these areas, both empirically and conceptually. We see that, empirically, there were indeed systematic types of relationships between centre and periphery. And conceptually, we see a pattern emerge that can be linked to processes of "inclusionary exclusion" (Hagmann and Kort 2012) which, according to Giorgio Agamben (1998), are constitutive of the "state of exception." The margins we are talking about are therefore not only places where the nation-states end (i.e., peripheries to the centres) but also areas where disorder is internalized into the body of the sovereign states through the state of exception. It is this continuous creation of disorder that haunts the contemporary rulers of these areas and of these states. The disorder becomes internalized by the central state through practices of emergency rule, counter-insurgency operations, and outright civil war. As the taming of these border areas is key to a contemporary state's demonstration of its sovereignty, they become in fundamental ways also a challenge to the state centre itself. The state of exception is thus no longer exceptional, but is just the way such (savage, disorderly) areas are being governed at the present time. A key element is territorialization, by settlements of groups from the outside, land grabbing, sedentarization of pastoralists, and so on, often in combination with bio-

political strategies, such as manipulation of food aid in drought periods. Exclusion and emergencies, and inclusion through violent state penetration, are processes that go hand in hand, giving the areas the characteristics of Agamben's "camp" (1998). Such policies and such effects are there, pretty much independent of regime ideology and regime type, in an ongoing clash between the state's territorializing policies and the transgressive movements of the border people, whether pastoralists or other. The form of these clashes varies through history. Conflicts are not only a peripheral phenomenon in the borderlands, but constitutive of the state centre itself. Borders in these areas are not a natural outcome of a natural or divine historical process in human history, but were created in the very constitution of the modern/colonial world (i.e., in the imaginary of Western and Atlantic capitalist empires formed in the past five hundred years). They have all been created from the perspective of European imperial/colonial expansion: massive appropriation of land accompanied by the constitution of international law that justified the massive appropriation (Grovogui 1996).

Border-making in our region could certainly be approached from the angle of the "government of exception" used by various regimes: in Ethiopia, the Imperial rule (1890-1974); the Derg dictatorship (1974-1991) and the current revolutionary democratic regime led by EPRDF (1991-today); the Turkia in Sudan (1821-1881 characterized by slavery); the Mahdia (1881-1898 characterized by slavery and jihad); Anglo-Egyptian Sudan (1998-1956, with the Closed Districts Ordinances); various democratic and military regimes (1956-2011, with land grabbing, Islamization, and Arabization); the division of Sudan in 2011 (with self-determination versus popular participation); Uganda with different regimes, and the links towards the north (Acholi) and northeast (Karamoja).

This does not mean an absence of the state but rather that a coercive state made its presence felt almost all the time and by doing so integrated these areas into a body of politics from which the population always felt estranged. The states' policies always considered the strategic position of trade routes, and always contained a view of the areas they integrated as empty and with no civilization, thus in need of civilizing missions, whether in their Islamic or Christian form, whether through the Arabic, Amharic or Swahili language as well as through historical relationships between pastoralists and cultivators, leading to a plurality of forms of territoriality.

## Moving beyond the Weberian state.

A study of various systems of governmentality will make clear that the Horn of Africa state cannot be reduced to Western notions of what a state is supposed to be and how it is expected to operate. Such "Western" notions on what a state is clearly build on Weber's understanding of the state as based on bureaucratic and institutional organizations of power that, by virtue of their monopolization of violence in the territories they define, mediate and regulate the terms of social and public order. We have to move beyond this Weberian ideal type and recognize the fact that the state itself is embedded in a matrix of cultural and social relations that help shape a particular form of state organization. It is not a "Western-type" state, built on a neutral Weber-like bureaucracy, with nationalism built on horizontal ties of imagined

communities, as argued by Benedict Anderson (1983), nor is it possible to reduce its working to simple dichotomies like “modern-traditional,” “developed-underdeveloped.” A strict boundary between state and society is difficult to maintain. Trouillot (2001), among others, argues that we need to go beyond governmental or national institutions to focus on the multiple sites in which state processes and practices are recognizable through their effects, producing individualized subjects, creating new collectivities, producing a language and a knowledge of governance to classify and regulate collectivities, and producing boundaries and jurisdiction. The focus of study then should not be on society or individuals or groups as such. The state can never be taken as empirically given, it is constantly in the making. It is not only an empirical entity, it is also an ideological project, or an exercise in legitimization (Abrams 1988, 76). Our focus should be on the kinds of processes that produce specific kinds of power assemblages. The types of states we see in the region are based on coercion and on state autonomy, in the sense that the state is a foreign imposition always in tension with the traditional structures over which it seeks dominance. Most often it finds itself unable to control local-level social relations.

But the state is there, and cannot be imagined away. Hence, we also need to look for those entities that might be said to represent that state. In such a perspective the state can be said to mean the institutions of centralized national-level rule-making and rule-enforcing power, including the individuals who controlled those institutions when acting in their official capacities. This implies that there might also be other groups in a society that exercise judicial and administrative powers. A state breakdown is thus not necessarily a total institutional collapse but rather the collapse of the ability of the groups dominating the state to dominate other, competing groups. No longer in the form of military coups only such a breakdown may have several general dimensions: 1) widespread elite or popular belief that the state is ineffective, unjust or obsolete; 2) an elite revolt against the state; 3) popular revolts; 4) widespread violence or civil war; 5) a change in political institutions; 6) a change in the status and power of traditional elites; 7) a change in the basic forms of economic organization and property ownership; and 8) a change in the symbols and beliefs that justify the distributions of power, status, and wealth.

We should also tread carefully in applying an old modernization and nation-building perspective that echoes Weber’s tendency to see development as moving towards a de-personalized bureaucratic rationality. In that perspective the state was seen as a modernizing force, and “traditional society” as being backward, trapped in tribalism, lineage politics, etc. Hence, nation-building assumed the withering away of such traditional elements, as is evident for instance in Meyer Fortes and Evans-Prichard’s book, *African Political Systems* (1940). The central idea of that book was that a decline of lineages would be an essential factor in advancing the state. But things were going to work out differently. The contemporary African state is rarely a modernizing force, but rather a despotic, privatized, and undemocratic one. Hope is now placed on “civil society,” (the public sphere of Habermas); i.e., the popular field which is supposed to take us out of the grip of the state. No longer is the local “primordial,” but the focus is on voluntary associations, grassroots initiatives, etc., in which local people work for their own interests against the state. The issue is not how to build a state, but how to get rid of the existing one. The role of the international society has also changed. The

international community is now less of a supporter of the state, and more of a controller of the same state, through structural adjustment packages and through the interaction between NGOs and the civil society. Neither the modernization paradigm, nor the dependency paradigm can help us much further. What goes on is not represented by clear-cut structural processes, moving developments in one particular direction. Looking at the present situation, new configurations seem to appear and to affect the nature of citizenship in the states in profound ways. Many rights that are tied to the status of being a citizen are now no longer under the control of the nation-state, thus showing a shift in sovereignty. The challenge comes from two directions, from the international community of which the nation-states are part, and from local communities, from within the same nation-states, and the two levels are interlinked. The international community intervenes through defining “states of exception” because of which the nation-state is pushed aside for a greater cause; for instance, when regimes turn against their own people, as we saw in Libya, through humanitarian interventions, as we saw in Kosovo, but also through market mechanisms allowing international capital to operate, as we see in the current phases of globalization. Richard Rottenburg (2009), for instance, discusses such linkages in the context of the globalized biomedical field. He argues that, in HIV/AIDS programs, clinical testing of new medicines is being shifted towards populations in the South and carried out outside the control of any national health authorities. But this is just one example. What we are witnessing, according to Rottenburg, is a “politics of experimentality” in which various solutions are thrown in, in a trial-and-error type of way, summarized by the new mantra in donor circles of the “lessons learned,” referring to all types of results, positive and negative alike, on the account of “urgency.” This results in particular configurations of politics, and particular combinations of science and politics, and technologies and politics.

Just as in the period of colonialism, African territories are divided between different powers, colonial powers hiding behind a civilizing mission, current powers hiding between “crisis and urgency” to justify their right to carry out experiments on local populations and testing unproven technologies in various fields, both regular medical fields, but also extending into surveillance and political and military interventions. Foucault and the concept of bio- power are of course relevant here (1978), but not in the Foucaultian sense of a population being governed by a state. Rather, populations are not targeted on the basis of their rights as national citizens but on the basis of global principles of a general humanity and a list of human rights. People are not treated on the basis of a fan of citizen rights, but as victims of an extraordinary situation, thus eligible for international protection, which often is translated into a legitimizing principle for interventions. In the process the victims are transformed. Hence, in a major change from the Cold War era, Western states are now not supporting allied states against “hostile states,” but assisting “victim populations” against “failing states.”

## The challenge of local conflicts

But the problems and the challenges also come from the margins of nation-states. A key development in recent decades is the loss of control by nation-states in certain regions of their territories, particularly territories at the margins. This loss of control has been paralleled also by a loss of control and monopoly of access to weapons, and thus violence. Civil wars and

warlords represent the use of organized violence for political ends, the mixing of violence and crime for private aims, and also the violation of human rights by systematically attacking civilians, all creating humanitarian emergencies that call for interventions, turning zones of emergencies into zones of exception and exclusion. One characteristic of many conflicts is what some have termed “the new wars” (Kaldor 2012; Duffield 2002). Such conflicts are often about identity politics; i.e., the quest for power is couched in terms of exclusion and inclusion of people in various groups. Power holders, including state actors, use violence in order to rid themselves of problems, and the victims of such violence can be killed with impunity. Hence, it is a version both of Foucault’s notion of bio-politics and Agamben’s “zones of exception,” shaped in the context of the contemporary state systems. Here the human body and the territory come together, combined by the fact that the targets of violence often are the place of “ambivalence,” embodying contested social territories, or contested gender forms.

Although wars and violence can be explained with reference to ethnicity and gender, i.e. cultural factors, they must also be taken as a language with which other things, economic, material and political, are being addressed. Ethnicity is a relational concept that explains such relationships as ethnic. Although imagined, it is real in terms of mobilizing individual people on the basis of a history of common origin that people take to be true. Ethnicities are not remnants of the past but entities continuously being recreated and shaped within contemporary realities. Hence, colonialism helped pin down relationships, and thereby make them bases for continuous new elaborations about identities, ordering them in new systems of hierarchy, creating new elites based on ethnic belonging that play key roles in today’s developments. We should also note that in so-called “ethnic wars” civilians are targeted, because the aim is to clear areas of people who do not “belong.” We see this clearing of areas used as a strategy in order to control key resources. And as the war economy is no longer controlled by a state alone, but rather is decentralized and based on exploiting specific resources through outright plunder, black market trade and external support, even enemies, are not what they used to be. In contemporary wars, enemies are found to collaborate because they share many of the same interests in this kind of predatory economy of war. In this scenario, the distinction between “war” and “peace” is also diminished, as is the difference between “soldier” and “civilian.”

The result is not a state of anarchy. The new identity politics, and the new wars are not a retreat to anarchy, nor to tribalism or to historical tradition. The way the wars are developing is part of the dynamics of globalization and represents a new form of politics. This makes them very modern phenomena. We have to understand them in terms of how local communities are related to wider contexts of economy and politics and culture. Certainly local people are involved, with the militarization of local and regional elites engaging each other in mutual predatory action through which a local population is made to suffer. The failure of political elites has eroded confidence in politics, thus making people more inclined to listen to alternatives promising quick fixes. The emergence of new markets, putting weapons within reach of private people, opening up smuggling as an increasingly important form of trade, with groups of nouveaux riches becoming engaged both in the new economy and the new politics, also belong to this picture. The diaspora also plays a central role. The result is a

privatisation of the state and privatisation of the violence. Within the war, the economy witnesses the warring parties controlling markets and prices, and issuing “taxes.”

## Power and violence as productive forces

If there are structuring forces at play perhaps we can look at those in terms of the difference between “power” and “violence,” in which power is the ability not only to act, but to act in concert with others, meaning that power belongs to a group’s consensual decisions, and thus does not require violence. Violence, on the other hand is instrumental. In the absence of consensus violence is used to achieve certain goals, creating a situation in which violence takes over where power is not available. But through violence and wars a new power, a new consensus can be reached as a basis for a new socio-political organization, built on a new sovereignty. This is why we should see the new wars as political. Empirically, they can touch on a number of different aspects of society, economy, religion and so forth, but all the different factors are kept together by a political narrative that is focused on political aims. It is this link between war and politics that becomes such a challenge to an international community. When politics are carried out through war itself, ending the conflict is not a priority. On the contrary, violence and war become very creative forces, for instance on a road towards a new state. But their uses in the contemporary world also help transform the participants, and instead of the state winning over rebels, we see a transformed state that contains both the traditional, Weberian elements based on hierarchy, and post-colonial, neo-liberal elements that are the same as those of the rebel groups they fought. This is what Kapferer has termed “a new corporate state” (Kapferer and Bertelsen 2009), which, in its running, makes use of Agamben’s principle of getting rid of those who do not fit. The enemy is “sacrificed” in order to protect the old order, or create a new one. It is “necessary” and thus “sanitized” in order to achieve the objectives. The same actors talk about “law and order” to balance the above process with the rule by law. Both types of sacrifices are meant to clear the ground and end further violence, but as we see, they do not stop violence from happening. Rather the sphere of violent actions is enlarged. What I called “power” and “violence” are not two different principles but are intertwined into constantly new wholes. Bringing nation-states into phases of decay, and new ethnic sovereignties into being.

We can now go back to Talal Asad’s challenge, and ask questions about systematicity. How can we make use of these broad historical presentations to isolate factors that might indicate that the situation we are discussing contains structural elements we should keep in mind while trying to understand it? In the midst of the “chaos,” what we see is a structured game that certainly is different from what we saw a generation ago. Although problems are found in a certain local war zone, they are increasingly international and global. The game is structured nonetheless, and it is possible to analyse the way it is being structured. We should not fall into a “global jargon” telling us that everything is new under the sun, nor should we enter the field of unfounded geo-political prophecies, be they of the “clashes of civilizations” or “the end of history” type. I would rather engage in some “anthro-jargon” here—the actors, interests and networks involved can be studied as empirical phenomena, and we can make statements about interconnections. Certainly we need to look at the many places in which new systems of

sovereignty are being created, such as those embodied by warlords, drug cartels or other sorts of mafia-type organizations combining wealth and power. State actors may belong to the group of actors just mentioned, running their own schemes to enrich themselves. But, in spite of all the challenges of the nation-state in recent years, it is still given a privileged position in the global political order. A fact that might work both ways—it may lead to a strengthening of the state, or it may weaken it, through international sanctions. That said, we should not underestimate the nation-state's, even a weak one, ability to engage its army, its bureaucracy and its capital to penetrate the communities over which it claims control. Nor should we underestimate its ability to influence the cultural aspects of society, through categorization, regulation, and routinization of everyday life and encounters between subjects and state institutions. The state is certainly being challenged, there is no doubt about that. But the ways it is being challenged are not a given, and require empirical studies.

## Territorialization

As the borderland situation receives analytical attention, focus is not only on state centres but also on the activities and dynamics at the margins. We must however not focus only on the “local,” but keep the state level in mind as we look at the dynamics of different types of capitalist relations, locally, nationally and globally. To understand borderland processes we need to focus on transformations in the contemporary world in relation to state, capital, labour, consumption, and place. This historical reality has changed the spatial articulation of politics and economy, as capital is affecting the nation-state to operate on its behalf and protect its interests. We see governments making new accommodations with market forces, protecting their market interests in exploitative enclaves of free trade zones, privatizing their own government and state functions, subcontracting various tasks to the same market forces. All this undermines the nation-state and challenges traditional notions about who “we” are and who “the others” are. One result is the division of the world we see. It is also clear that the United States and the Western world play a major role in this. The effect of neoliberalism is globalization. Military force is used to shore up financial hegemony, and we are moving from a “hegemony of consent” to a “hegemony of force.” Globalization is thus the economic strategy, and US and Western (through NATO) militarism its political counterpart, the project being to make the world safe for capitalism. But there are variations, from the core countries and the peripheries, and globally as well as within separate countries. It is this variation we need to understand better.

Arrighi links such processes to territoriality and has the following to say: “Central to such an understanding is the definition of ‘capitalism’ and ‘territorialism’ as opposite modes of rule or logics of power. Territorialist rulers identify power with the extent and populousness of their domains, and conceive of wealth/capital as a means or a by-product of the pursuit of territorial expansion. Capitalist rulers, in contrast, identify power with the extent of their command over scarce resources and consider territorial acquisitions as a means and a by-product of the accumulation of capital” (1994, 33). This is what David Harvey (2001) in turn called the “logic of territory” and the “logic of capital.” The two logics operate in relation to each other within a specific spatio-temporal context. For instance, whereas territorial control was of



strategic importance during the period of colonial imperialism, it is only of tactical importance to the core countries in the contemporary world. Hence, the question of whether the United States, as the sole remaining superpower, is developing into an American empire is of less interest, if we think of empire in a more traditional sense. What remains interesting is, as Elden (2009) reminds us, the importance of territory, challenging us not only to focus on processes of globalization and de-territorialization, but also on understanding processes of re-territorialization.

Rather than look at processes of de-territorialization and re-territorialization in general, we shall focus on types of spaces, what Eileen Scully (2001), with reference to Western colonial concessions in China, called “anomalous zones” in which governments suspend fundamental norms. Such zones may be close to Giorgio Agamben’s (1998) notion of exception, referring to places in which national rules are suspended and human beings can be stripped of their rights and dignity. Agamben mentions Auschwitz and Guantanamo Bay as examples of such “zones of exception,” with conditions so extreme that, analytically speaking, they can be described as areas where normal limitations do not apply. Such zones are of key importance in the current neoliberal era, in which the colonization of the social by the economic has become hegemonic. In the absence of consensus, violence is used to achieve certain goals, taking over where power is not defined. But through violence and war, a new consensus can be reached as the basis for a new sociopolitical organization built on a new sovereignty. In this sense, violence and war are very creative forces. While many national leaders call for a return to an ordered state, based on respect for national institutions, the use of violence in the contemporary world also helps transform the participants, and instead of the state conquering rebels, restoring “order,” we see the emergence of a transformed state that contains both the traditional, Weberian elements based on hierarchy, and the more decentralized and Deleuzian “nomadic” elements that resonate with the rebel groups. Violent action is said to be “necessary” and the sphere of violent action is enlarged, bringing nation-states into phases of decay and new ethnic sovereignties into being. Such militarisms have often depended on older racialized forms of power. Drawing again on the works of Agamben (2005), we can for instance see how a notion of “necrocapitalism” could be useful, based on Achille Mbembe’s concept of “necropolitics” which he defined as “contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death” (Mbembe 2003:39). I believe we can argue that some contemporary capitalist practices contribute to “the subjugation of life to the power of death” in a variety of contexts, for example in the management of global violence and the increasing use of privatized military forces in the so-called war on terror. But we see it also in more marginal cases, such as in the Nuba Mountains, which I know rather well. Here, various groups already marginalized by an Arabic- and Islamic-dominated state as non-Arabic and non-Islamic, as former slaves, and as primitive “infidels,” experience further ethnic marginalization. This happens through a stigmatized identity, leaving them as second class citizens; through the loss of land to capitalist agricultural schemes, turning them into cheap labour power; and increased violence, by government forces as well as Arab pastoralist groups, as their areas are close to the oil fields in the border areas between Sudan and South Sudan. The result of all this is a violent civil war and a humanitarian disaster. The situation in the Nuba Mountains may

certainly be a case that may fill concepts such as necrocapitalism and necropolitics with ethnographic content.

However, the concept has also been extended into more “normal” zones. Aihwa Ong (2000), for instance, has argued that one can look at other zones of exception—such as free trade areas, export manufacturing zones, or construction sites populated by foreign workers—in which prevalent labour and civil rights are suspended. Such zones are crucial for the functioning of flexible capitalism in the contemporary world and in contemporary Asia in particular, perhaps with China as a key example. Global and Chinese capitalism create new linkages and new dependencies in these areas, not only through an ideological hegemony, but also in their material consequences. Different forms of power—institutional, material, and discursive—operate in the political economy and produce radical changes in communities. Certainly less violent than what we see in many areas of the Horn of Africa (not historically, but today), but still a process generated by the same type of forces; the alliance between global and national capitalist groups, the workings of a developing state, and the attempt to use market and economic development as a basis for organizing society. The Chinese state plays a major economic and political role in the establishment and operation of these zones—the government initiating some of them, state banks providing credit, state construction companies building facilities, state resources companies exploiting them—just as Western powers did in the operation of concessions in China during the colonial era. In China, the post-1978 development crucially relied on the Special Economic Zones (SEZs), a form of “internal concession” within which foreign investors as well as their Chinese employees, in exchange for helping develop the nation, were given greater economic and social freedom than elsewhere. While these freedoms were significant for people’s everyday lives and the running of business, they were of course relative: the zones’ administration was firmly integrated into the national party and state bureaucracies, and state enterprises were some of their main beneficiaries.

Although our starting point is contemporary, we should note that the role of extraterritoriality and concessions was a mechanism also in the spread of global modernity in the era of colonialism and imperialism, and that this did not disappear in the era of decolonization. Rather, the zones come back in various forms, underpinned by the economic logic of flexible capitalism, the securitizing logic of the post-9/11, and the cosmopolitan logic that questions the absolute sovereignty of the nation-state. Sudan provides us with a weak state scenario, in which the so-called international community is intervening all the time, China is moving into a leadership position in global economic life, and commands the respect and attention of other nations. Still I will argue that we can compare the two borderland processes, and try to isolate some of the driving forces behind them. One key factor is what Aihwa Ong (2000) calls “graduated sovereignty ... whereby citizens in zones that are differently articulated to global production and financial circuits are subjected to different kinds of surveillance and in practice enjoy different sets of civil, political and economic rights.” Graduated sovereignty, she suggests, can strengthen state power and protections in certain areas, but not in others.

## Sovereignty and law

Linking state processes and territoriality of course leads us to the concept of “sovereignty.” This is so because the basis of a modern nation-state in the international order of states is based on territorial sovereignty, and sovereignty is the basis for the inclusion and exclusion of many types of rights, the most basic of which is the right to citizenship. According to Stephen D. Krasner (1999) there are four general types of sovereignty. *Domestic* sovereignty, which is about controlling one’s own territory; *interdependence* sovereignty, which is about the ability to control trans-border movements; *international* sovereignty, or being recognized by other states; and finally, *Westphalian* sovereignty, which is about the ability to exclude external actors from domestic authority configurations. For all four, a border and the ability to defend it are important. Borders thus have both territorial as well as human consequences.

The concept of sovereignty has evolved and its understanding can be problematic. I think this understanding must be challenged. A more fruitful approach sees sovereignty as a process and as a concept that has been worked and re-worked in different periods, and in which various understandings of what the concept entails have been a base of political conflicts and the definition of the political field itself. In one sense, sovereignty relates to absolute power and authority, over territory, over people, and vis-à-vis other similar units outside of the territory. Hence, the concept is closely linked to the historical emergence of the nation-state. But a weakness in such an evolutionary conception is that it reduces politics to the implementation of a law. We need to see the history of the concept of sovereignty as a series of re-conceptualizations, rather than a history of constant refinement towards a “perfect” end. Rather than linking it to a state-centric Western history, defined by realist and liberal International Relations (IR) type of conceptualizations, we need to take a look at how confused this history is, organized around clusters of key terms through which various theorists have approached the subject matter, drawing on a muddled empirical history. To quote Prokhovnik:

For instance, one of the keys to sovereignty for Bodin was the idea of absolute dominion, while sovereignty for Hobbes had to include the notion of supreme power. Central to Rousseau’s conception of sovereignty are the key terms of sovereignty itself, the act of association, government, the general and particular wills, general and particular laws, and the lawgiver. The important concepts in Kant’s theory of sovereignty are right, international relations, publicity, law and representation. The key concepts in Hegel’s notion of sovereignty are the state, the constitution, the Crown, sovereignty at home, sovereignty in relation to foreign states, and war. Foucault’s theory of sovereignty seeks to bring into the light of intellectual analysis what has previously been excluded and some of his key terms are the contrast between the covert and overt operations of power, the ways in which subjects are constructed, sovereignty as descending compared with disciplinary power as ascending, and the operation of sovereignty through concrete acts contrasted with the operation of disciplinary power through surveillance, normalizing sanctions and the panopticon. (2008, 4)

Rather than seeing these different definitions as an evolving understanding of sovereignty, it is more fruitful to see them as different conceptualizations of the term, leading to different empirical emphases in the analysis. They can be seen as a solution to a problem, by which stability is produced into a situation of social unrest, allowing for more stable national or international orders. Or they can be part of a problem, obscuring the use of power, through which these orders can operate to advance their own benefits. The rule of law may be applied criminally and arbitrarily, and may help victimize weaker subjects or international conventions (like the Geneva Convention). The Washington Consensus is pushing open markets and privatization processes on weaker partners in manners that look more like plunder than legality, indicating a continuity between colonial and post-colonial times. The idea that law is autonomous and separate from society and its institutions, something we have and not them, is problematic. Law in this particular meaning looks more like a technological framework for a more efficient market, or “a plunder-friendly legal system” (Mattei and Nader 2008). Remarkably, even Carl Schmitt, the great thinker of sovereignty, eventually came to have doubts about his early theory. In his late work, “The Nomos of the Earth” (2003, German original from 1950), Schmitt acknowledges something that had not been acknowledged since Bodin; that *sovereignty was a project*. If he believed that the period of the Westphalian peace based on state sovereignty and non-intervention—and frankly on colonialism—was the best solution the world had yet found to how it ought to be ordered, he nonetheless recognized that this was a culturally and historically specific institution, with invidious implications for many people outside Europe.

The issue here is the distinction between *constitutive power* and *constituted power*. In modern political and constitutional thought, this has come to represent the difference between (a) the inherent source of power that alone can authorize the creation of a political order (variously, the citizenry, the sovereign, the people, the nation), and (b) the sovereign constituted political body (especially the state) that represents that power.

The first relates to Hobbes’s novel idea of the “state of nature.” Hobbes pushes the constituent power of the people back entirely into an unrepeatable pre-history and makes it a relation among contracting individuals (i.e., not political citizens of a republic, residents of a town with historic rights, members of a feudal aristocracy with established and historically-specific rights, or members of the Church) precisely so that the new constituted political power—the sovereign—could be outside any obligation to any constituent power (especially to the people, tradition, or the laws). The concept of sovereignty replaced complex political and legal forms of authority (and established modes for interpreting them) with one single modern and rational concept for all power—sovereignty.

In this frame of mind, all properly modern political and legal thought is entirely presentist and rationalist—from the question of what to do in the state of nature, to analytic philosophy and now rational choice and game theory. Once this has been accomplished, the social contract (between history-less and culture-less individuals) can create a one-time consensus that could form the basis for a rationalist defence of a sovereign subjection. Against this the revolutionary tradition consisted in finding a popular basis for political power with which to contest absolutist monarchy. The genius of Rousseau was to accomplish this by turning on its

head, so to speak, the logic of the classical modern relationship between constituent and constituted power, in a way that strongly emphasized the former at the expense of the latter. In this new formulation, the new political question par excellence becomes: What pure ideal of constituent power—variously, the people, the popular will or the proletariat—can make a claim to representative legitimacy that trumps that of the sovereign constituted order of the Ancien Régime? Political thought then comes to be largely about an attempt to define what kinds of constituent powers (the nation, the proletariat) can create a legitimate kind of violence (revolution) that can permanently remove the stain of violence of constituted sovereign power.

What is missing from this binary account of political power is precisely the possibility of a positive, constructive non-sovereign political power (which had traditionally been located in the republican notion of the inherent political power of the citizen of a republic; see Arendt [1958] 1998). The point of this is that even today we still largely remain locked within a political logic that is really meant for breaking down old systems and not for imagining new futures, and the reason for this rests largely in terms of this unitary account of power-as-sovereignty in which so much of our thought takes place. Unfortunately, the contemporary critiques of sovereignty merely repeat this earlier conceptual vocabulary and logic, and, thus, become part of the naturalization of the modernist self-description of political life.

Arendt's project ([1958] 1998) was about the construction of a constituted political order that does not destroy the constituent power that created it. Where that tradition went wrong, for Arendt, was that its critique of sovereign power became a critique of political power in general (*ibid.*, 147–8). Arendt, on the other hand, makes a clear distinction between political power and sovereign power. Constituent power, in this view, is never completely outside of some kind of constituted form—flesh and blood people and communities come already constituted (by history or culture, for example) (*ibid.*, 165), and spontaneous bodies politic and past traditions mean that we will never know what it would mean to begin from a pure constituent place. Political communities, then, must be understood to be always simultaneously constituted and capable of re-constitution. Arendt is less anxious about the potential for disorder and violence within communities that do not subject themselves to a sovereign. She does not begin from a suspicion of the pre-constituted people, as such, Arendt begins with the presumption not of liberal individual subjects pursuing their own interests, but of historically constituted communities and people desiring, for historically contingent reasons, the things we have come to call liberty, an equal share in public life, recognition, as well as a certain kind of order (*ibid.*, 248, 262).

In her discussion of these various “political societies,” Arendt attempts to create an alternative conceptual starting point for political thought—against the radical individualisms of both liberal and anarchist thought. What is at stake in this new “state of nature” is to show that—as a matter of actual historical fact—modern people, when their states collapse, not only do not regress to a state of all against all (or recede into some kind of “natural” collective allegiances), but rather tend (quite apart from any particular ideological commitments) towards the creation of political communities (*ibid.*, 265–6), though communities that are quite different from our modern states (*ibid.*, 278). What is at stake for Arendt in these

moments is that our theorizations of our possible political futures must begin not from theorizations of individual liberty, but rather from a shared and deeply held, but historically contingent, desire for community. This is a very particular kind of community, however, quite distinct from both the nationalist and Marxist assumptions of a thick social unity. It is, instead, the product of real people coming together, for historically specific reasons, to create the kind of community which might best ensure and protect their historically contingent conception of republican political liberty (ibid.). This Arendt calls ordered community (and ordered liberty), an idea which must be understood as a response to both anarchism and liberalism. The point is that these spontaneous bodies are organs of a certain kind of ordered action (ibid., 263), and this, at its heart, is a dual claim that people can be trusted to order themselves without sovereign leaders and that, at least in our late modern context, there is some kind of spontaneously recognized necessity of political order. Of course, this means that such a political community must by definition be *non-sovereign*, to which Arendt opposed the sovereign political communities in which we live.

## Power, discipline, control

Having disclosed the link between sovereignty and law, we see that our modern way of thinking about political community can be challenged. Rather than law, we should focus on power and power relations as a basis for the battle over sovereignties. Which then also brings us to colonialism as a form of power. We know this from Foucault's work on governmentality. The power of the state, in his view, is everywhere, in subjects, in institutions, in the knowledge that is produced and so on. Following Foucault then, we can focus on "events," moments when a system of practices is reconfigured and redeployed by new social forces and new governmental rationalities. Thus by situating sovereignty and bio-power in the context of a neoliberal economic event, we can disclose that in a neoliberal economy, "the colony," such as the zones we are discussing, represents a greater potential for profit especially as it is this space that, as Mbembe suggests, represents a permanent state of exception where sovereignty is the exercise of power outside the law, where "peace was more likely to take on the face of a war without end" (2003:14) and where violence could operate in the name of civilization. But these forms of necropolitical power, (as Mbembe reads it in the context of the occupation of Palestine), literally create "death worlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of the living dead" (ibid., 40). The state of endless war is precisely the space where profits accrue whether it is through the extraction of resources or the use of privatized militias or through contracts for reconstruction. Sovereignty over death worlds results in the application of necropower either literally as the right to kill or as the right to "civilize," a supposedly "benevolent" form of power that requires the destruction of a culture in order to "save the people from themselves" (ibid., 22).

Such a focus on power, and the way it affects the production of territories, shows us clearly that instead of totalizing assumptions we need a more historicized form of inquiry that shows complexity and variation within different geographical areas. It is important to historicize processes, and to place them in specific regional contexts and dynamics, within institutional

configurations and cultural expressions. This is so because structural forces, violent and non-violent, and local reactions to them, operate in different ways in different places. More than assuming dynamics we need to deal with new geographic frontiers, changing subjectivities and territorial epistemologies. Simon Springer argues that place should be considered as a “relational assemblage.” In Springer’s words:

What this re-theorization does is open up the supposed fixity, separation, and immutability of place to instead recognize it as always co-constituted by, mediated through, and integrated within the wider experiences of space. Such a radical rethinking of place fundamentally transforms the way we understand violence. No longer confined to its material expression as an isolated and localized event, violence can more appropriately be understood as an unfolding process, derived from the broader geographical phenomena and temporal patterns of the social world. (2011, 90)

So, instead of totalizing assumptions we need to challenge those assumptions, for instance, that certain spaces, spaces in the South, are violent by nature, and that other spaces, our spaces, are defined by peace, democracy, and rationality. The social world is no longer the locality, the region, or the nation, it is a global theatre, with global patterns of power. Thus we also need to broaden our story into one of globalization, with new centres and new peripheries emerging, not only with nation-states but on a global scale. In this perspective, changing “our” political focus, not least in the security sector, from “our” spaces towards “their” spaces seems the logical thing to do. Our security is linked to the problems of failed states, the problem of displacement and human rights abuses, thus changing our focus from economic and social problems, as in traditional humanitarian aid, towards civil and political problems in which the two dynamics are linked, for instance through the concept of “transitional justice” (Duthie 2012).

## The force of historical narratives

The next level of systematicity is focused on the historiographical relation between past, present, and future. This is a matter of narrative and the kind of plot we use in order to present the history or histories we are dealing with. The figurative constructedness or story-form we use will also affect our understanding of the phenomenon under discussion. In pursuing this point we need the help of Hayden White’s *Metahistory* (1973), in which he discusses the relationship between the formal features of plot and the historical representation. White draws on Northrop Frye who talks about four basic narrative structures—romance, satire, comedy, and tragedy. Romance is the story of a hero conquering challenges, the triumph of good over evil, in short a story of redemption. Satire is a contrast in which the hero ends up as a captive of the world, not its master. Comedy and tragedy are different again, with comedy ending in a festive occasion signalling a temporary triumph over problems, and tragedy having no festive occasion, only more and more tragic endings to the story. But there is also an element of hope as the spectators gain insights by watching the drama. White’s original point was that no one plot is better than the other; the choice between them is aesthetic and moral, rather than epistemological. A view he later left, opening for a connection between the preferred modes

of historical representation and the historical moment being represented, thus narrowing choices. In our discussion on the Horn of Africa, we can indeed limit the choices, and follow the differences between what White calls “romance” and “tragedy,” the former seeing history as riding a triumphant and seamless progressive rhythm, the latter leading to eternal doubt in a world of contingencies and insecurities. But to White this is not only about understanding history, it is also about redirecting the future and producing a better future. This opens for interesting possibilities, I think.

How can we think about the future? Koselleck (2006), in his discussion on his famous “futures past,” makes a distinction between what he calls “the space of experience” and “the horizon of expectation” in the generation of historical time, and indeed in the narration of history. It is this White is concerned with—how the way we narrate history is fashioned by the basic content of the form we use. The choice of story-form thus determines the historical narrative, and the presentation of history itself. The choice of plot also determines what “job” the narrative will do, because, and here I follow the British historian Collingwood (1939), any historical text also performs a linguistic action, by being an answer to a question or by the move it makes in an argument.

What this means is that the positivist and optimistic tone in earlier analyses of de-colonization and independence depended on the certain space of experience and horizon of expectations held by the narrator. David Scott (1999, 2004), for instance, calls this a “Bandung view” in which the optimism of the Bandung conference of non-aligned states, dreaming of a national independence freed from the cold war power structures, was characteristic of such a space. When that space is no longer there, argues Scott, we should expect the stories to change as well as our questions, compared to what earlier writers were concerned with. Again, referring to our case, the value of de-colonization in solving problems for inhabitants in our countries is drastically reduced, and new problems have emerged that require us to ask new types of questions.

Rather than “national independence” as a basis for “liberty” the problem now must be framed in relation to “modernity” in the way proposed by Foucault, in that modernity is a type of power that shapes people’s bodies also within independent nations, and that independence, by no means, means liberty. Authoritarian regimes within independent nations are common, and it is this aspect Scott wants us to take as a point of departure. Within such new contexts, the Foucaultean governmentality takes ever new forms, and new issues of resistance also appear, linked together as a response to structures of negative repressive power. Power is constantly shaping the field of possible action, and in our case, the new national independent power-holders do not change the conditions of life in the margins. Certainly, modern power destroyed slavery and other forms of power relations, but the new nation-states operated in ways similar to the earlier colonial power structures. But now the historical reality must play out in the context of a nation-state, of new forms of citizenship rights, whether individual or group-based, whether political, economic, religious, or sexual. This opens up for new types of actors and new ways of acting.



In a colonial discourse, independence and liberation became key, while after independence the issue of freedom is not solved. Hence, the enthusiasm of ending colonialism is replaced with the depressive observance of, for instance, the situation in South Sudan and the sad realization that yet another revolution has failed to give freedom an appropriate and durable political/institutional form.

## What is “normal” and what is “crisis”?

The situation in the Horn of Africa is certainly conceptualized as a “crisis.” But Asad’s challenge forces us to look for broader ways of thinking about it. Important to such an alternative perspective is that the crisis not be reduced to an exceptional “event,” to be analyzed empirically and statistically, prompting “solutions” by scholars engaged in the so-called applied sciences or politicians and bureaucrats engaged in reforms, such as introducing structural adjustment packages. The crisis is there as lived experience, thus forming subjectivities. In the everyday life a “crisis” becomes “normal,” and thus stops being a crisis. What is crisis to “us” is everyday life to “them”. The crisis thus moves from being the focus, to becoming a context. It becomes a structuring idiom within which action and responses unfold. Local people thus end up participating in the very process of the production of what we outsiders call crisis. But local people are not alone in this. National, regional and international forces are also involved. But again, the point is not to measure the influence of such forces, for instance the success or failure of reforms. The answer is not to deal with the crisis as a system to which people adapt, but rather to see the series of improvisations carried out by local people, as well as actors higher up, not as “adaptations to the crisis” but as “actions shaping the crisis itself.”

I would argue that such an understanding of crisis helps us move our focus from one fixed on the Horn of Africa region, with failing states unable to help, or uninterested in helping, and an international community and humanitarian world attempting to help but finding obstacles in corruption and institutional weaknesses (e.g., Fassin 2012). We can move our discussion into a broader field of processes, which includes our perspectives, ultimately with a connection to what we call “modernity.” How can this be ?

First, we must stop thinking about crisis as something that is only found in Third World countries, within failed states and in marginal areas. Something we can isolate and deal with. Crisis in this new perspective is everywhere, as a defining characteristic of our time—crisis in Darfur, crisis in Iran, crisis in Iraq, crisis in Syria, crisis in Congo, crisis in Cairo, crisis in the Middle East, crisis on Wall Street, just to mention what we hear in the news. Then we hear about humanitarian crisis, environmental crisis, energy crisis, debt crisis, financial crisis and so on, to mention some of the themes. What is interesting here is that the word “crisis” is supposed to describe something, but it does not. Rather, it is part of a narrative that puts a focus on historical change. In the context of our discussion here, crisis is the mark that opens up for a new historical situation, through development, through democratization and so on. Hence, rather than dig into the crisis itself, we also need to ask about the historical role of the concept (e.g. Roitman 2013).

The German historian Reinhart Koselleck (2006) argues that the understanding of crisis belongs to the end of the eighteenth century, in which period a particular historical consciousness appeared, that posits history as a temporality upon which one can act. In this new historical understanding “crisis” signifies “change,” turning “crisis” into “history” and linking it to “critique.” Critique and crisis are cognates, says Koselleck, as crisis represents a disclosure of epistemological limits, something we don’t understand, which again opens for critique and questions about “what went wrong.” In a pre-modern context the answer was obvious—it was divine intervention. In modern times, Koselleck argues, history is characterized by a lack of certainty, everything is contingent. Crisis becomes a narrative means to signify contingency. The world is as it is, but it could have been different. In this logic, crisis is not an empirical situation but rather a logical observation that generates meaning about small and great turning points, energizing a politics of crisis.

Crisis, then, is not a situation, it is a point of view. It tells us that something is in demise, and that something new may come, but we don’t know what that “new” is. This requires a context of a history in which we act, in short “modernity” replacing the “Middle Ages,” or what Koselleck calls an “epochal consciousness.” Thus, crisis generates history. This is a secular understanding of history, in which crisis in a way replaces God as a driver of time and events, we need not wait for God’s intervention into the world to see change—we see it through crises. Crisis is not a condition to be observed, it is an observation that produces meaning.

What about the situation in the Horn of Africa? Is it not real? It is indeed, but as we said, how we see it and what we might decide to do about it depends on our mind-set. Are these areas ridden with crises, proving that humanitarian efforts are imperative, or that democratic states must intervene? If we follow the logic above, the question then becomes: What is the aim and purpose of such interventions? Over the last couple of decades, the emergence of neoliberalism as the dominant organizing imperative across social and public spaces and institutions, coupled with the exceptionalism of imperial, and often violent, authoritarian forms of “democracy,” has fostered a rethinking of politics across a wide range of contexts. One effect this has had, is that it brought back a feeling that colonialism is far from over, and that both humanitarianisms and democratic interventions, in their neoliberal forms, show elements of a colonial past. Obviously, the decolonization and establishment of independent nation-states did not solve problems, and the nation-states that emerged did not develop in positive ways. And calling this situation “crisis” will not help either. Here, I want to point to our lack of understanding, which is a very bad starting point for practical interventions. What we do not understand is what it takes to envisage a society as breaking down when the “chaos” we see is the everyday reality and the rule. What then is “order,” and what is “society” when reality cannot be tied down to constant processes, but everything moves between chaos and order? People balance between the two, sometimes in peace, at other times with violence, terror, and upheavals, producing a doubleness of being, representing what Taussig called “the normalcy of the emergency” (Taussig 1992) and Ferguson called “decay” (2006).

Again, a necessary part of an answer is in the understanding of our concepts. In this case I refer how the concept of agency has been developed within a modernist discourse, a discourse

still influenced by a colonialist tendency. Local adaptations are shaped by the structures of modernity within the modern nation-state; i.e., its dominant ideology, whether secular or religious, and the way in which it develops particular identity categories of insiders/outsideers with respect to citizenship and nationhood. Such a nation-state context presupposes the new kinds of social spaces that have been created by modern institutions (administrative, economic, ideological, and educational), international migration and globalization. They are also “modern” in the use of modern techniques (e.g., new communication technologies, modern scientific forms of knowledge), and in being subjected to particular models of the self and technologies of individualization. The problem of how people and groups adapt to such circumstances is in the literature often referred to as discussions about cultural and religious revival and focus on recovering of a cultural authenticity. And it is here the concept of “resistance” come in. This has been theorized as traditionalism, re-traditionalization, modernization, a “post-modern refusal of modernity” and an “alternative modernity.” However, there are also continuities. As modernizing processes are playing out, local people draw on traditions of interpretation, authority and reform within their own discursive traditions, part of an old history—a history of disagreement, dispute, and physical conflict with other people around them. Both modernity and the linkages to other traditions stimulate reforms of the traditions in question and further their self-reflexivity.

When these traditions meet modernity they also meet liberal presuppositions about freedom and individual autonomy which have become naturalized in the Western scholarship (for instance, on gender) shaping the way in which “agency” is understood in such studies. Common to some of these studies is that agency is understood as an attribute or trait inherent to individual subjects, and that it is primarily circumscribed by external factors. Such “external circumstances” are often connected with “tradition,” where people’s autonomy is shaped by religion, their ethnic groups and families. Within such a framework, people are generally perceived to become more autonomous, thus increasing their capabilities of agency, through individualization, “de-traditionalization” and integration into “modernity.” Here, the community, tradition and the family seem to operate as external constraints, and when these external constraints disappear, people are “free” to “choose” their identities and ways of life. In this process lies also the way out of the crisis, at least in the modernist script.

As an alternative I turn again to Talal Asad, and this time to his way of linking power and historical change. Generally, Asad argues that consciousness, in the everyday psychological sense of awareness, is inadequate to account for agency. Social actors inherit an ongoing ensemble of social practices and concepts and categories. It is important to consider factors that form the structures of possible actions, allowing and precluding certain possibilities and choices. These factors include such things as habit, the docile body, the objective distribution of goods, the existence of specific institutions, and relations of dominance. The notion of “choice,” argues Asad, should thus be read primarily as an indication of a particular form of modern subjectivity and not as a sociological explanation of how people come to act as they do. Individual choices are subject to many influences, and the high value placed on individual choices can in itself be seen as a result of social influences and particular historical modes of subjectivation. Following Asad, we can shift our definition of agency away from the capacity of autonomous individuals who “freely choose,” towards “the socio-culturally mediated

capacity to act.” Agency, thus, should not be seen as a metaphysical capability but as constituted within historical regimes of power/discourse formations: “[...] ‘agency’ is a complex term whose senses emerge within semantic and institutional networks that define and make possible particular ways of relating to people, things and oneself” (Asad 2003, 78).

But does this mean that local people disappear from our analysis ? Not at all. Local people live in communities that have been “knocked about” by a series of instabilities, shortages, constraints and blockages, some external in origin, others from within, but all promoting incoherence to an extent in which it is difficult to know what is “normal” and what is part of the “crisis.” To them it is a game about life and death, for themselves and for their families. Hence, people’s reactions are no longer part of extraordinary survival strategies but rather regular ways of doing things. Take cross border trade as an example. Soldiers, policemen, militias at checkpoints or elsewhere, commodities of legal or illegal types, all require dealings with relevant individuals, some public others non-public, some subject to laws, others not. The whole notion of public power changes in the process and daily transactions become a constant dealing in which the threat of transgressions of rights or physical abuse have to be dealt with in various ways, mostly characterized by corruption (“buying” the stamps necessary for public documents), paying for rights that should be available in public services and establishing so-called “do-it-yourself bureaucracies.” And the civil servants are also part of the game. The lack of regular payment in the public sector represents an insecure context for civil servants, obliging people to negotiate solutions to their uncertainties and instabilities. In sum, a situation of extraordinary tension and nervousness prevails, forming subjectivities. We can thus not “save” the people from the crisis because they are the crisis.

## **We need to change “the rules of the game” not “the content of the game.”**

In conclusion we may ask where an analysis like this will lead us ? I think it points towards a need for new solutions at a level we are yet to explore. The issue is how to get out of the grip of continuing colonialism, nothing less. Let me draw on Walter Dignolo and Madina Tlostanova’s (2006) to further explore what I mean. The authors make the obvious point that the creating of “difference” puts certain groups into a dominant position through which they can make use of their hegemonic discourse to classify others as inferiors. But some of these people have refused to be geographically caged, subjectively humiliated and denigrated, and epistemically disregarded. Dignolo and Tlostanova call this a de-colonial epistemic shift that proposes to change the rule of the game, not only the content of the game. This can only be realized through de-colonization, it cannot happen through the accumulation of knowledge, political or academic, which only tends to increase and make more effective the imperial management of hegemonic forces. Real de-colonization works toward the empowerment and liberation of different layers of reality (race, sex, gender, class, language, epistemic factors, religion, etc.) from oppression, and points toward the undermining of the assumption upon which imperial power is naturalized, enacted, and corrupted.

Whether at the margins or at the state level, what we see is a “colonial dynamic.” And this dynamic continues in our modern times, no longer singularly dominated by European colonialism but now in a world that may be called “polycentric.” A diversified or polycentric world order means that, in contrast with the world order that existed thirty years ago, the economic nodes, which are no longer following the instructions and recommendations of the World Bank and the IMF, are already unfolding globally. Yet, in spite of such changes, the colonial matrix of power has not gone away.

Our authors, Mignolo and Tlostanova, are certain about the cause of this. Coloniality will remain as long as the final horizon of human life is guided by the desire to accumulate capital. The control of authority will continue, disguised by a rhetoric of progress, happiness, development and the end of poverty, and will justify the huge amounts of energy and money spent on the conflicts between the centres ruled by the capitalist economy. The actors now may be global capitalist powers, but we also see a national colonialism that defines the areas as marginal peripheries, linking up with global forces. What we see are different kinds of anti-colonial, anti-imperial and anti-epistemic reactions from those very margins, when meeting with the dominant powers.

Conceptually, the colonial matrix of power operates in four interconnected spheres of life. In each sphere there are struggles; conflicts over control and domination in which the imposition of a particular lifestyle, moral, economy, structure of authority, etc., implies the overcoming, destruction, and marginalization of the existing pre-colonial order. The four interconnected spheres in which the colonial matrix was constituted (in the sixteenth century), and in which it has operated since, are the following, still according to Mignolo and Tlostanova:

- 1) The struggle for economic control (i.e., the appropriation of land, natural resources and exploitation of labour);
- 2) The struggle for the control of authority (setting up political organizations, different forms of governmental, financial and legal systems, or the installation of military bases);
- 3) The control of the public sphere—through, for instance, the nuclear family (Christian or bourgeois), the enforcing of normative sexuality and the naturalization of gender roles in relation to the system of authority and principles regulating economic practices;
- 4) The control of knowledge and subjectivity through education and colonizing the existing knowledges, which is the key and fundamental sphere of control that makes domination.

All seem to fit well with what Talal Asad termed “systematicity” and with what we are arguing in this paper. The challenge is how we as academics and political actors deal with the challenge.

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This paper is a broad ranging reflection of the general situation of crisis in the Horn of Africa region. Rather than carry out a conventional anthropological analysis in which local people and communities emerge as “heroes” and in charge of their own destinies, the analysis here paints a darker picture. The starting point is Talal Asad’s notion of “systematicity” by which structural forces beyond local agency are operating, thus reducing the local possibilities of affecting future life-worlds. The paper focuses on several examples of such “systematicities”, from the problem of the African state, as it grew out of a colonial situation; the contemporary re-emergence of power and violence as productive political forces in forming new territorial realities and creating new forms of sovereignties; as well as the force of historical narrative in forming the way we understand what is going on, moving from the optimism of “national independence” to the pessimistic “lack of freedom” characterizing current understanding of the situation in the Horn of Africa. The paper concludes by pointing at the concept of “crisis” as an example of how embedded our modernist conceptualizations are in preconceived notions of necessary change, changes brought about by external forces, the so-called “International Community,” sometime through processes of institution building, at other times through direct military and violent interventions. The paper ends on a dark note – that the current development is based in a long history of colonial and imperial relationships, producing continuous violence and inequality among and within independent nation-states. Such global power structures require political changes of a type not available in the current global political system, and in the short run current “global systematicities” will dominate and put down attempts at “resistance” and “local agency.” On the ideological level this situation is justified by a need and a duty to deal with the different types of “crises” that exist in the region.