

Book Reviews

Hérodote: Revue de géographie et de géopolitique, 2011/3, no. 142: Géopolitique du Sahara, Paris: La Découverte.

This issue of *Hérodote* takes stock of the geo-political situation in the Saharo-Sahelian area. Security considerations have made governments of the global North, France's in particular, very reluctant to authorise research work in this area, with the result that travel to the region and the first-hand assessment of developments there have become extremely difficult. Despite these difficulties, the review deals with issues which are at the very root of the current insecurity and its consequences, and it is based on fieldwork carried out in recent years and months.

The aim of the issue is to study the upheavals which have been taking place since the 1990s. Although it was planned before the Arab Spring and the war in Libya, the authors have included these dramatic developments in their thinking and analysis.

In the introduction, the authors (Bourgeot and Grégoire) portray the Saharo-Sahelian situation primarily in terms of the local populations without, at this stage, making new contributions; they employ the customary distinction between nomadic and sedentary groups to categorise these populations, although much current research tends to deconstruct the notion of "sedentary" and to use different criteria to define Sahelian groups referred to as sedentary, on the grounds that mobility is in fact one of their essential characteristics. Next, they ground the movements of goods and people within the Saharan area in international politics and economics, presenting the continuous adaptations made by local actors, nomads and traders since the pre-colonial era and introducing us to the new actors on the scene: tourists and migrants. Finally, the authors deal with the role of state borders, and go some way toward explaining their porous quality and the consequences of that fact. From this factual basis, they move on to an exposition of (a) oil and mining interests and their interactions with the security issues relating to the development of Islamic terrorist movements, and (b) trafficking of all types – in arms, drugs and people. The authors also examine the involvement of Western powers – who are unable to stand idly by and see their interests threatened – in all these areas.

The articles make substantial contributions to four themes; these present in detail the ins and outs of the ongoing upheavals we are now witnessing and which, precisely because of the difficulties of the current situation, researchers are struggling to analyse: In this lies the importance of this

volume of *Hérodote*. The first theme is human and commercial circulation, licit, illicit or even criminal; the second is the porousness of borders and the weakness of state controls, thanks to which fraud, trafficking and hostage-taking are able to develop. The third is the rent captures made possible by this context and also through the exploitation of oil and mineral wealth by foreign companies; these give rise to geo-political transformations, the fourth theme.

Another significant point of interest of this volume is its analysis of the consequences of this situation – which extend beyond the area directly concerned – for local people. This aspect is rarely considered in reports and studies, and their omission aids a Eurocentrist perception generally ignorant of the fact that this area is inhabited by people who wish to live and work in peace, and who desire conditions that will favour their economic development and enable them to become part of present-day changes and exchanges.

The first part of the volume is made up of five articles whose subject is the current geo-political state of play in the Sahara: One recasts the region's map and views it in a global context by measuring it against other desert spaces (Lacoste). Two other articles examine new challenges in security and developments in security and military cooperation, considering the resulting controls on local people, the hegemonic role of leading states such as Algeria (Chena), and the consequences of the war and change of political situation in Libya (Daguzan and Moisseron). Terrorism is approached in two ways: on the one hand through a consideration of the states in the area as impotent in the face of the phenomenon, not only because of their military inadequacies and the size and extent of the zone needing to be controlled, but also because of the role played by local people who do not recognise themselves as part of state systems (Tisseron); and on the other hand through an examination of the problem of the proliferation of arms, which benefits Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) (Bourgeot). This topic is of great current interest in light of the Arab Spring and the war in Libya and their implications for the region, however difficult it may yet be to measure these precisely.

The articles that follow are on the subject of states and their judicial and law enforcement systems – which allow for cross-border traffic and trafficking of all kinds, whether of migrants (Brachet, Choplin, Pliez) or of drugs (Julien) – and their strengths and weaknesses. Just as they were in the colonial period, local people are practised in the skills and techniques of using borders to their advantage by playing on the policies of the different states (Scheele).

The final two articles deal with the exploitation of natural resources indispensable to the global economy (uranium and oil), the new geo-political

control measures they entail, the sources of rent they generate for the states concerned, and the forms of corruption they breed (Grégoire, Augé).

The authors make continual movements between micro–socio-economic conditions, demonstrating continuities in circulation and mobility and their adaptation by local actors, and their interactions with the behaviours and the specificities of state actors.

All this research and analysis, though concentrated on the Saharo-Sahelian area, is linked with and integrated into continental and global issues along with international politics. Despite the difficulty of studying the phenomena analysed here – which are obscure by definition – because of the problem (referred to by several of the authors) of access to reliable sources, the issue of *Hérodote* succeeds in rising to a double challenge: that of illuminating for us the situation in this area despite the aforementioned limitations on access. Every article is witness to the authors' determination to continue working and remaining in contact with local researchers and interlocutors, who understandably feel marginalised due to the current political conditions.

- Laurence Marfaing