



Dissident Spaces: A Failure of the States?

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The end of the 20th century¹ and the early 21st century were marked by a double political process, the erosion of the classical model of the state and its governance, first, which gave rise to a whole series of concepts such as the controversial but quite widely circulated notion of failed states,² and, second, the increased political instability due to the emergence of dissident actors and spaces. Several regions of the world have been affected by this double process of political readjustment, notably through the various conflicts and revolts that have occurred in the Middle East—Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and recently Afghanistan,³ to name but a few. Since the 1990s, sub-Saharan Africa has also seen an increased number of territories escaping state control, following Somalia's collapse, conflicts in the Central African Republic, in the eastern part of the DRC and northern Ethiopia, as well as the conflagration in the Sahelian strip. These dissident spaces have often been described—in the press or by certain analysts—as “gray areas,” i.e., territories that escape state control and are linked to alternative groups and parallel economies linked to various forms of trafficking appear.⁴ The scope of these “gray areas” could be even wider, if we add the digital domain, in which technological fits may correspond to this term (Darknet, cryptocurrencies, etc.). However, the use of this notion often presupposes the existence of a break in the links between the state and the groups that have become dissident, the former having lost control over parts of its territory to the latter as it tried to legitimize its control. One question remains, however. Apart from extreme situations of rupture, such as civil wars, are the state, its institutions, or its agents always absent from these areas? And how can the state be defined in these zones where competing state organizations can struggle for legitimacy⁵ (as in the case of de facto states)?

¹ Rufin, J-C. (1991), *L'empire et les nouveaux barbares. Ruptures Nord-Sud*, new edition in 2001, JC Lattes, 249 pages.

² Helman, G. and S. Ratner, "Saving failed states," *Foreign Policy*, vol. 89, Winter 1992-93, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/06/15/saving-failed-states/>

³ Considering the definition of the Greater Middle East see Anthony H. Cordesman, "The Greater Middle East: From the "Arab Spring" to the "Axis of Failed States", CSIS, Working draft, 2020.

⁴ Cattaruzza A. (2012), "'Grey areas', durable interstices of the political map? Critical rereading of a geopolitical concept," *Bulletin de l'Association de géographes français*, 89^e year, Vol.1, pages 104-120.

⁵ G. Toal, J. O'Loughlin, "Frozen Fragments, Simmering Spaces: Post-Soviet De Facto States." In *Questioning Post-Soviet*, E. Holland, M. Derrek, eds. Washington DC: Kennan Institute, Woodrow Wilson Press

Incidentally, the *margin* can be understood as a space where the system of values and norms of the central power fades faced with alternative local systems without completely disappearing, however.⁶ The margin thus represents a hybrid territory of coexisting systems of norms, leading the state and its institutions to renegotiate their presence and reinvent their way of governing, even if this means resorting to informal or criminal methods. As such, are northern Djibouti,⁷ eastern Algeria,⁸ the mountainous Beqaa region in Lebanon,⁹ or eastern Chad¹⁰ margins rather than gray areas?¹¹ These regions are experiencing an accumulation of demands for autonomy, independence, and sometimes civil war, and all have in common the presence of various forms of trafficking (drugs, migrants, arms, natural resources, and so on). However, through its civil service and agents, the state is present in each of these regions. This space is therefore composed of various actors who are at odds with the classic model of governance. The margin invites us to rethink how the state and its institutions reinvent themselves in contact with such territories.

These two concepts—gray areas and margins—are at the heart of the mechanisms of dissent. They hold up a critical mirror to the state and to the way it functions globally. The classical model of the state lies in a paradoxical situation in the 21st century. On the one hand, it seems to have expanded to all continents, making the classic nation-state the default political organization; on the other hand, globalization is constantly weakening its foundations and dissident spaces are emerging to challenge its hegemony through various demands. But is this really a paradox? If globalization undermines the foundations of the state, the latter also relies on it—with an influx of resources, capital, ideas, or manpower—to resist it, while integrating it into its development model. This porosity of state and non-state spaces, each based on an assembly of complex and multiform power practices,¹² can only be observed through meticulously detailed case studies. This requires a multiplication of the scales of analysis, from global to local, to understand the transformations and the emergence of new powers and to also integrate the digital domain in our study, as it has become a specific, sometimes consubstantial, space of contemporary dissidence.

This event wishes to question notions such as the crisis of the state, gray areas, margins, borders, areas of instability, and other such spaces, around a discussion that questions their differences along with their permanent intertwining under the focus of dissident spaces. Are these spaces *pharmakons*,¹³ both remedy and poison for the state? Can spatial logics and relevant scales be observed in their emergence? Are the spatial processes at work responding to the strategical

⁶ Lauret A. (2022), *L'âge d'or du trafic de migrants à Djibouti : marge, passeurs et intégration régionale dans la Corne de l'Afrique et la péninsule Arabique*, Thèse de doctorat. Université Paris 8. 513 pages.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Dahou T. (2015), "The transnational and local margins of the Algerian state," *Politique africaine*, (N°137), pages 7-25.

⁹ Bennafla K. (2007), "La Bekaa, une zone libanaise stratégique au voisinage de la Syrie" [in] Mermier F. *et al*, *Liban, une guerre de 33 jours*. La Découverte, "Cahiers libres", pages 167 to 171.

¹⁰ Favre J. (2007), "Marginality of the State and Social Violence in the Far East (Eastern Chad)" [in] *Bulletin de l'association de géographes français*, Vol. 3, (84th year), pages 357-365.

¹¹ On the diversity of acceptance of gray areas see Minassian, G, (2018), *Gray areas when states lose control*, CNRS editions collection Biblis, 271 pages.

¹² Dahlman, Carl (2009), "Conceptualizing non-state space: geopolitically permeable zones", in *Penser l'espace politique*, Rosière, Stéphane et al. (dir.), Ellipses, pp. 179 - 193

¹³ The expression *pharmakon* is borrowed from Jacques Derrida in his work *La Dissémination* (1972, Seuil, 416 pages).

construction of “independent political territories,” local or regional “fiefdoms of illicit economies,” space conducive to the disengagement of existing elites or propitious to a “political turnover,” or networked places wanting the “demolitions” of existing political systems?¹⁴ This event on the spaces of dissidence as a matrix of transformation of the spaces of power proposes three axes of research.

Axis 1: The Failure of Institutions and the Transformation of the State.

The emergence of dissident spaces questions their link to power, and consequently, to its institutions, which are at the foundation of the modern construction of states. The development of dissident spaces would thus indicate the weakness or even the bankruptcy of institutions—as the notion of failed state indicates—even if, in some cases, it would be legitimate to know if they had previously “properly” functioned. Indeed, if institutions represent the guarantee of a certain state impartiality, we notice that they have often been captured by interest groups functioning in symbiosis with the political powers in place. As Jean-François Bayart notes, contemporary African state represents a complex structure, a veritable “rhizome,”¹⁵ where the colonial administrative heritage, the resurgence of pre-colonial or ethnic powers, the weight of the diaspora, the interference of humanitarian aid, political and religious circles, and clientelist circles are intertwined. Olivier de Sardan refers to what he calls the “four prisons of power,”¹⁶ for instance. These erode political institutions and the civil administration by limiting their room for maneuver and their capacity for transformation. Since the 1990s, reflections have emerged on the mechanisms of privatization and the phenomena of “unloading”¹⁷ of these different state institutions in a neoliberal global context. Does the increase in dissident spaces lead to an amplification of these delegations of authority, as in the case of interventions by foreign troops under their own banner or that of the United Nations, or more recently in the form of mercenary organizations? The possibilities of action in the digital space also seem to reinforce these games of competition for authority and privatization of power. Digital tools can thus allow private actors to replace or bypass the limits of traditional state powers, as shown with cryptocurrencies, and their uses by actors on both sides of the war in Ukraine to overcome existing constraints (calls for donations, support for the war effort, bypassing international sanctions, safe haven value, etc.).¹⁸

If the regalian functions of the state are gradually being taken over by private actors, how can we ensure the sustainability of institutions in the face of the growth of dissident spaces? Will institutions have to renegotiate their place in the territories in question and redeploy new forms

¹⁴ Bonnacase Vincent (2015) " Sur la chute de Blaise Compaoré. Authority and anger in the last days of a regime," *Politique africaine*, n°137, pages 151-168. See also the two issues of the journal *Confluences Méditerranée* dealing with revolutions in the Arab world: *Egypt, Tunisia: from the street to the ballot box* (2012/3, n°82) and *Revolutions and counter-revolutions in the Arab world* (2020/4, n°115).

¹⁵ Bayart J-F., Poudiougou I., Zanoletti G. (2019), *The distortion state in West Africa: from empires to the nation*, Karthala, page 11.

¹⁶ De Sardan O. (2021), *La revanche des contextes*, Karthala, pages 9 & 10.

¹⁷ Hibou B. (1999), " la 'décharge', nouvel interventionnisme ", *Politique africaine*, n°73, pages 6 to 15.

¹⁸ Estecahandy, H. (2022), « Apports et limites des données numériques pour l'analyse géopolitique de l'infrastructure Bitcoin », *Hérodote*, La Découverte, 3, n°186.

of governability? Timothy Raeymaekers notes that the emergence of “unruly” border regions in Africa in the 1980s paradoxically allowed the central government to strengthen its presence on the borders and to mobilize the peripheries against undesirable neighbors.¹⁹ This is the dilemma: does the failure or misuse of institutions allow the development of dissident spaces? Or, conversely, does the development of such regions promote the failure or misuse of these institutions? Whatever the causal link, questioning institutions, power and spaces of dissent seems crucial to understanding the evolution of states.

This first session analyzes spaces of dissent as an area of potential transformation for the state. How does a space of dissent or a space that breaks with the classical model of the state paradoxically manage to transform the state and its institutions? Conversely, how does the state take advantage of these spaces to reinvent or strengthen itself in a tense political, regional, or international context? This first axis explores the responses and transformations that occur within institutions when they are in contact with hybrid spaces. This session explores the official and unofficial mechanisms of hybridization of the state and its institutions in the face of dissident spaces.

Axis 2: Authoritarianism and Oppositions to the State.

At first glance, the comparison between authoritarian regimes and spaces of dissent may seem paradoxical. Indeed, this type of regime is most often characterized by a strong control over its territory and population. Its political and security apparatus is at the heart of the state and becomes the central element in maintaining the regime. Spaces of protest are therefore often reduced to an underground presence, to cultural and artistic domains—in exile—and to a certain vision of the subaltern discourse of the population.²⁰ However, it is in the territorial groups subjected to authoritarianism that a multiform and often violent dissidence emerge. Thus, many authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, at the beginning of the 21st century, have experienced unstable political situations, revolutions, and even civil wars leading to the bankruptcy of the state, as in Yemen, Iraq, Libya, and Syria. There is therefore a link between authoritarianism and the collapse of power, potentially followed by the collapse of the state as two “historical moments” that can follow one another. The significant digitization of human activities has also led authoritarian powers to invest in cyberspace to monitor and control the flow of data consumed or created by the population. Thus, within these multidimensional infrastructures, composed of physical and virtual entities, spaces of contestation and resistance have appeared, due to actors holding privileged knowledge and technical-political power. In Russia, for instance, digital activism was born out of certain Internet service providers (ISPs) and dissident Internet users.²¹

¹⁹ Raeymaeker T. (2012), "African boundaries and the new capitalist frontier" [In] Wilson T. M. & Donnan H. (Dir.) *Companion to border studies*, Wiley-Blackwell, pages 318-331.

²⁰ Scott J. C. (2009), *Domination and the arts of resistance. Fragments of subaltern discourse*. Amsterdam Publishing, 432 pages.

²¹ Ermoshina K, Loveluck B. and Musiani F. (2022), "A market of black boxes: The political economy of Internet surveillance and censorship in Russia", *Journal of Information Technology and Politics*, 19 (1), 18-33.

In the Anglo-Saxon scientific literature, the “failed state”²² became a central geopolitical notion, particularly after the state’s collapse in Somalia in 1991. This term—like the more current one of “fragile state”—corresponds to the more or less total failure of state institutions, especially those in charge of protecting and administering the population. Failed states and gray areas merge in many contexts. The collapse of Somalia, for example, gave way to warlords, piracy in the Gulf of Aden and an emerging ransom economy. Paradoxically, this situation reinforced the geographical importance of Djibouti and, thus, of another authoritarian regime. In another context, the collapse of Afghanistan—the establishment of the Taliban’s authoritarian regime—from the 2020s onwards, led to its territory becoming an international gray area boosted by the poppy economy, which made it an international pariah state. Authoritarianism, bankruptcy, and the gray area seem to consistently feed each other. The question is not whether authoritarianism represents a form of state failure, but more generally, how this failure is embodied in everyday life and leads to the emergence of spaces of dissidence.

Violence seems to be a key in understanding the link between bankruptcy, authoritarianism, and dissent. An authoritarian regime is built around its organs of control, the reinforcement of its security apparatus, and therefore a regime that practically puts into practice a “thanatopolitics rather than a biopolitics.”²³ It is then a question of analyzing how this violence is deployed through a ruptured social contract and what the politico-spatial consequences are. Do the radical forms of authoritarian power build/maintain spaces of dissidence? Are the latter also crucibles of other authoritarianisms, be they of a political, cultural, or religious nature?

Axis 3: The Resources of Dissent.

The survival of a dissident power, whatever its form, depends on the resources necessary for its maintenance and proper functioning. The capture of resources thus becomes a central element of its survival mechanisms. The politics of this power will therefore evolve according to its strategies of access to, and even capture of, potential resources. In other words, whether they are rebel forces or illicit groups, these powers are led to actions that turn toward the predation of resources to direct their survival. This third session therefore questions the links between dissident power, control, and resources around the capture of the latter.

The state has long been the main actor in the privileged access to resources because it is considered the “impartial” guarantor of their control and management, particularly through the implementation of systems to protect producing areas through land-use planning. The twentieth century was thus the century of the proliferation of rentier regimes in the South, the latter being defined as “economies that can reproduce themselves without accumulation.”²⁴ In many respects, the state provoked territorial inequalities, setting a distinction between the developed areas, on which it relies—and which bring revenue in—and areas considered peripheral or

²² Di John J. (2008), "Conceptualising the causes and consequences of failed states: a critical review of the literature", Crisis States Working Papers Series No.2, Crisis States Research Centre, LSE, Destin, 52 pages.

²³ Agamben G (1997), *Homo Sacer. The sovereign power and the naked life*, Paris, Seuil, 216 pages.

²⁴ Magrin G. (2013), *Voyage en Afrique rentière : une lecture géographique des trajectoires du développement*, Editions de la Sorbonne, page 20.

marginalized, which are not necessarily confined to.²⁵ The zones of extraction or production of resources are often included in spaces of prioritized territorial control.

However, two observations should be made. First, the different contexts have shown that the strong dependence on unprocessed resources is far from bringing sustainable enrichment to states, which has sometimes been described in the past as “Dutch disease,” i.e., the negative effects of a rent that weakens economies in the long term. Secondly, these spaces often end up being spaces of competition between different powers, as shown in 2015 by the capture of certain oil terminals in Yemen by tribes, as when al-Qaeda took control of the port city of Al-Moukalla and its region. Resources can thus represent both the cause of the emergence of dissident powers and the possibility for these powers to maintain and grow. But beyond their emergence, resources also influence the very nature of these powers and their actions around the margins of maneuvers and the inadequacies of the state, as in the case of oil piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, which points to the maritime incapacity of the states of the subregion to fight this phenomenon.²⁶ In this confrontation between the local and the national, between gray areas and political centers, capturing these territories offers spaces for a neo-power. Moreover, this territorial dissidence now benefits from the use of digital tools, such as social networks, which make it possible to instantly make demands at the international level, or cryptocurrencies, which can be used to finance anti-state actions.

In this session, we will try to understand the actions of these new actors. Are they only challenging existing powers? Do they develop new economic logics and new interactions at different scales: between the local and the international, or do they remain in the classical link between the local, a place of extraction or production, and the global, a space of valorization? What are the games and stakes of the actors in these spaces that lead to the conception of new geographies of a non-sovereign power?²⁷ Is a space of dissidence “inserted” into global trade networks a greater challenge to the state?

²⁵ Bennafla K (1999), "La fin des territoires nationaux? État et commerce frontalier en Afrique centrale", *Politique africaine*, Vol 1, n°73, pages 25 to 49.

²⁶ Augé B. (2016), "Oil in the Niger Delta, a resource vector of conflict" [In] Giblin B., *Conflicts in the world: a geopolitical approach*, Armand Colin, pages 277 to 287.

²⁷ Roitman J., Guyet R., Hibou B. (1999), " Le pouvoir n'est pas souverain ", [In] Hibou B., *La privatisation des Etats*, Karthala, pages. 163 à 196.

Submission Modality:

Proposals for a communication must fall under one of the three headings presented above.

Submission deadline: May 21, 2023

Proposals for papers may be submitted in English or French and must include the title, abstract, keywords and a biographical note specifying the institutional affiliation (500 words maximum). They must be deposited on the platform Scienceconf: <https://dissidence.sciencesconf.org>
Particular attention will be paid to the work of doctoral students.

Proposals will be reviewed by the Scientific Committee and responses will be provided from **mid-June**.

The symposium will be held at the Condorcet Campus on November 21 and 22, 2023

Contact : dissidence2023@gmail.com

The Scientific Committee

- Anne-Laure AMILHAT-SZARY (Professeure des Universités, Université Grenoble-Alpes)
- Olivier ARCHAMBEAU (Professeur des Universités, Université Paris 8)
- Karine BENNAFLA (Professeure des Universités, Université Lyon III)
- Ali BENSAD (Professeur des Universités, Institut Français de Géopolitique)
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- Gerard TOAL (Professeur des Universités, Virginia Tech)
- Leïla VIGNAL (Professeure de Universités, Ecole Normale Supérieure – Université PSL)

The Organizing Committee

- Amaël CATTARUZZA (Professeur des Universités, Institut Français de Géopolitique).
- Hugo ESTECAHANDY (Doctorant à l'Institut Français de Géopolitique)
- Alexandre LAURET (Chercheur affilié au LADYSS UMR 7533)
- Bezunesh TAMRU (Professeure de Géographie, Université Paris 8)