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978-1-107-00006-3 - Occupying Syria under the French Mandate: Insurgency, Space and State Formation

Daniel Neep

Excerpt

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Introduction

An uneasy silence has fallen over the violence of colonialism. Whereas the era of decolonisation was marked by fierce polemics over the scope and scale of colonial brutality, the post-independence period has seen the issue of colonial violence relegated to the margins of socio-historical inquiry. Historians of empire, it is true, have produced remarkable studies of small wars, counter-insurgencies and campaigns of pacification, but rarely has this rich vein of evidence been tapped by theoretically informed analysis in the social sciences more broadly.¹ This silence provides an eloquent indictment of the biases of social thought in the Western academy.

For many social theorists, colonial violence – like colonialism itself – is little more than an oddity of history, a strange and somewhat embarrassing episode that is peripheral to the main sweep of social development in the modern era. In most sociological accounts, the defining feature of ‘modernity’ is the West’s transformation from anarchy to order, religion to rationality, despotism to democracy, unregulated social strife to negotiated social pact. Colonialism sits uneasily alongside these narratives of modernity. Colonial domination is usually accounted for as a lingering remnant from a premodern age, a throwback to a bygone era, the survival of which tells us much about the past but little about the present. In this way, the history of colonialism is written as a wayward footnote to the history of Western modernity.

¹ Notable exceptions in Middle East Studies include Joseph A. Massad, *Colonial Effects: The Making of National Identity in Jordan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), and Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied* (London: Hurst, 2003). Massad’s interest in the instruments of state coercion is largely confined to their institutions and identities, rather than practices of violence *per se*.

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If the history of colonialism is but a footnote, then the history of the violence enacted by colonialism is a mere footnote to a footnote, twice removed from the master narrative of the rise of the modern West. This double distancing presents colonial violence as irrelevant to the broad sweep of human development: colonial violence is significant only for local histories, particularities that are eventually subsumed within the larger general narrative of the global diffusion of modernity. Thus, colonial violence is held to be a suitable subject for empirical research, but an area that contributes little to broader theoretical debates within the disciplinary social sciences. For many social theorists, colonialism and its violence are little more than anachronisms, puzzling exceptions to those broader trends that have collectively shaped our modern world.

This book argues that such a position is unwarranted. Using historical evidence from French Mandate Syria (1920–46), this book makes three arguments to support an intervention in wider debates in social theory. First, rather than seeing colonial violence as an anachronistic accompaniment to modernity exported from the West, this text proposes that it is, in part, in the perpetration of such violence that modernity is produced. ‘Colonial violence’ here refers not simply to the instrumental means by which the French secured their rule over Syria, but also to the manifold ways in which the social field of violence was colonised by those effects of power characteristic of the modern world. Second, this book contributes to debates on violence and state formation by suggesting that the specific case of French Mandate Syria conveys valuable insights not only into comparable colonial contexts, but also into non-colonial episodes of state-building more generally. Colonial states may be colonial, but they are also states. Third, although social theorists have relatively little interest in the gruesome operational details of armed force, this book proposes that the mundane micro-practices of violence contain insights into the workings of power that tend to be overlooked by more abstract or macro-level theorisations. These three conceptual arguments permeate the historical analysis that comprises Chapters 2 to 6 of this book.

Before turning to the case of French Mandate Syria, the text first establishes a theoretical space in which these conceptual propositions can be grounded. (Readers concerned primarily with the history of the French Mandate may prefer to proceed directly to Chapters 2 to 7.) Chapter 1 explores how colonial violence is studied in the two fields of scholarly inquiry which should, in principle, be most concerned with its analysis: Historical Sociology and Postcolonial Studies. Historical sociologists have long focused on the relationship between violence and state formation, but

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rarely have they lifted their gaze beyond the immediate vicinity of Europe. Postcolonial Studies scholars, on the other hand, take as axiomatic the notion that imperial structures of power have shaped, and continue to shape, global social relations in an array of different fields, from the family and education to political ideologies and party organisations, but – somewhat oddly – they rarely study colonial violence. This chapter analyses the reasons for these peculiar blind spots and proposes that these omissions may be rectified through a reconsideration of the relationship between violence and power. As Chapter 1 argues, rethinking violence through an ethnographically informed, post-Foucauldian perspective opens new avenues for a *postcolonial historical sociology*. The subsequent chapters seek to demonstrate what such an approach might look like in practice.

Because the history of French Mandate Syria is little known beyond Middle East specialists, Chapter 2 provides a brief historical overview of the period. It discusses the circumstances in which the Mandates were introduced in the Levant after World War I, and the effects of this new colonial architecture for French rule in Syria. In particular, French colonial violence was shaped both by the forms, practices and institutions of the modern state through which it was now channelled, and by its encounter with Syrian armed resistance.

Chapter 3 looks at the political rationalities of colonial violence: that is, what made it possible for the Mandatory Authority to justify its use of military force against the Syrian population as not simply repressing rebellion, but as creating a new form of person. This chapter traces the French tradition of colonial warfare as it travelled from Algeria to Indochina to Morocco and then to Syria. It argues that the Mandatory Power's use of spectacular punitive violence was not a display of sovereign power, but a modern governmental strategy that interpellated the Syrian population to assume a subject position that was docile and pacified.

Chapters 4 to 7 move on from representations to consider colonial violence as practiced in different fields. Chapter 4 focuses on the Great Syrian Revolt of 1925–27, the most important armed uprising in Syria and the most serious challenge to French rule. An exploration of the military organisation, discipline and tactics of both the French army and Syrian rebels reveals the different logics by which colonial and anticolonial forces sought to order their acts of violence. These logics are most evident in French and Syrian micro-practices of violence, which embodied quite particular understandings of time, science and space.

Constructions of space provide an especially rich field for analysis. French and Syrian forces understood, employed and moved through

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Levantine geography in very different ways. Twists and changes in these modes of movement rippled through the wider social fields of vision, knowledge and control which the colonial state was in the process of constructing. Chapter 5 thus studies the rebel movements of the *ʿiṣābāt* (Syrian armed bands) and the intelligence gathered by the *Service des Renseignements* (French field officers) to provide a bridge between the micro-level logics and practices of violence and the macro-level processes of colonial state formation.

Chapter 6 approaches the relation between space and violence from another angle. Rather than looking at space as movement, this chapter examines how static, material space was reshaped for military purposes. Drawing on evidence from the towns of Aleppo, Palmyra, al-Qāmiṣhlī and the Ghūṭa oasis around Damascus, the chapter shows how the spatial order constructed by the Mandatory Power was characterised not by the smooth flows usually associated with modern governmentality, or even the harsh lines of discipline or premodern sovereignty, but by an order that was complex, variegated and uneven.

Building on this understanding of colonial state power is the argument that the uneven spread of colonial state-space is even more pronounced in its peripheries. The Syrian Desert, therefore, is the subject of Chapter 7. Here, too, the range of governmental strategies that the Mandatory Power used to manage the Bedouin tribes included tactics habitually characterised as components of sovereign rule. On the fringes of the colonial state, the conceptual boundaries between modern and non-modern, between nomad space and settled space, become even more fraught and entangled.

Tracing the genealogy of the Mandatory regime of space and violence reveals the extent to which the lines dividing such polar opposites as modernity and non-modernity, sovereignty and governmentality, violence and power are, in actuality, blurred and confused. Whereas this might be read as a product of the hybridity often held to characterise colonial contexts, such an interpretation is refuted in the Conclusion of this book. As suggested by snapshots of the Syrian armed forces in the 1920s and the late 1940s, a similar conceptual confusion reigned both before and after independence. An exploration of the everyday and mundane practices of colonial violence does not demonstrate the inapplicability of Foucauldian theories of power in colonial regimes. Instead, it allows productive insights into the phenomenon of modernity that extend well beyond the bounds of French Mandate Syria.

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I

Rethinking Colonial Violence

The argument presented in *Occupying Syria under the French Mandate* is based on the historical experience of French Mandate Syria, reconstructed with evidence from archives, official publications, memoirs and contemporary observers. The interpretation of how to read this evidence, however, derives from a conscious engagement with broader theoretical concerns. Before we turn to particular episodes of violence under colonial rule, we must first consider why the general phenomenon of colonialism is so rarely studied by social scientists. Despite the global reach of colonial power, social scientists tend to neglect the role of colonialism in constituting the social, spatial and coercive structures that ushered in the world we now know as modern. This first chapter inquires why, and how, colonialism has been so often overlooked in many fields of the social sciences.

The empirical analysis at the heart of this book unfolds at the intersection of three distinct disciplinary domains: Historical Sociology, Postcolonial Studies and the anthropology of violence. Since the mid-1970s, violence and state formation have been particular concerns for Historical Sociology, and yet historical sociologists have focused largely on the development of states in the West. Perhaps because they assumed that colonial states would mimic the forms pioneered in Europe and would follow broadly similar trajectories, they have overlooked the specificity of the colonial experience. This position is problematic. This focus on the experience of the West not only represents an instance of ‘selection bias’ in the collection of empirical data, but also fosters a distortion of the conceptual categories by which that data is

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interpreted.¹ As the first section of this chapter will argue, Eurocentrism must be refuted on theoretical as well as empirical grounds.

In contrast, the field of Postcolonial Studies has much to say about the production of social power that undergirds the colonial project, but remains mute regarding practices of colonial violence. Given the centrality of violence in the colonial period, this is a curious oversight. The second part of this chapter asks why Postcolonial scholars have preferred to direct their critical scrutiny to areas such as sexuality, education, law, the family and urban planning, rather than military force.

Despite their many differences, Historical Sociology and Postcolonial Studies apparently share a common blind spot when it comes to theorising violence and power. The third part of the chapter outlines an alternative framework for understanding violence that draws on ethnographic sensibilities common to work in anthropology and governmentality studies. As the main body of this book demonstrates, a focus on the micro-practices of French and Syrian armed force can provide new insights both for Historical Sociology's project of understanding large-scale processes such as state formation and the construction of modernity, and for Postcolonial Studies' project of deconstructing colonial power and provincialising Eurocentric thought. This book, which stands at the intersection of these fields, embodies an effort to write a *postcolonial historical sociology*. Rethinking violence is a necessary first step in this direction.

EUROCENTRISM, VIOLENCE AND POWER IN HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY

The neglect of colonial state violence in Historical Sociology highlights the reluctance of the Western academy to take seriously the historical experience of the non-West. Whereas case studies from Africa, Asia and Latin America may supply new data leading to the modification of theoretical models derived from the historical experience of the West, non-Western locations rarely act as sites from which theory is pioneered.² Colonial states are similarly marginalised within social theory, classified as hybrid entities lodged conceptually and temporally between the 'traditional' and

¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

² Timothy Mitchell, 'The Middle East in the Past and Future of Social Science' in David L. Szanton, ed. *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines* (University of California Press/University of California International and Area Studies Digital Collection: Vol. 3, 2003), <http://repositories.cdlib.org/uciaspubs/editedvolumes/3/3>.

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the ‘modern’.³ These anachronistic chimeras are of limited interest to Historical Sociology. Colonial states are at best intriguing diversions, at worst irrelevant detours away from the main trajectory of historical development that inexorably leads to the state of the West, the modern state. As numerous postcolonial critics have pointed out, such Eurocentric provincialisms may offer the allure of a secure foundation upon which a historicist teleology may be anchored, but hardly provide a sound basis for an adequate understanding of global social reality.⁴

Although it might be tempting to dismiss the marginality of the colonial state in Historical Sociology as a by-product of Eurocentric bias, it would be wrong to assume that the root of the problem is simple disregard of the non-Western world. If this were true, correcting the error could be accomplished simply by introducing more empirical evidence from Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East into the analysis. Yet this solution overlooks the fact that it is less that the data is biased than that the lenses used to look at this data warp the field of vision in a particular direction. The non-West is not neglected simply because social scientists see it as an exotic alien ‘other’, because they see it as lagging behind on the scale of historical development, or even because they lack the linguistic skills, cultural knowledge and training to study an unfamiliar part of the world. Although these factors may play a part, the reason for this neglect goes above and beyond them: the specific historical experience of Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East is interpreted through pre-established, free-standing conceptual frameworks which enable insights from new cases to be dismissed not on the grounds of their *empirical* location – a criterion for disqualification that would itself be disallowed by the ostensibly universal structures of social scientific knowledge – but on the grounds of *theoretical* inconsequence. In other words, what is considered consequential for theory may appear to be location-free, but is nevertheless grounded in a particular, acceptable geography of knowledge.

In the case in question, the predisposition of Historical Sociology to neglect the colonial state is engendered by deeply rooted assumptions

³ Sudipta Kaviraj, ‘On the Construction of Colonial Power: Structure, Discourse, Hegemony’ in Dagmar Engels and Shula Marks, eds. *Contesting Colonial Hegemony: State and Society in Africa and India* (London: British Academic Press, 1994), p. 19.

⁴ See, *inter alia*, Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Fernando Coronil, ‘Beyond Occidentalism: Towards Nonimperial Geohistorical Categories’ in *Cultural Anthropology* 11,1 (1996), pp. 51–87; Chakrabarty, *Provincialising Europe*; Timothy Mitchell, ed. *Questions of Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

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about the nature of power. Barry Hindess has usefully outlined how modern social theory is traversed by two conflicting conceptions of power, which he identifies with Hobbes and Locke.⁵ These poles delineate the intellectual space within which research into violence and state formation has unfolded in the last forty years. Building on Charles Tilly's path-breaking work on state formation in Europe, the neo-Weberian, neo-Hintzean paradigm which 'brought the state back in' to Historical Sociology brought with it quite particular assumptions about the nature of power.⁶ Although historical sociologists typically write under the sign of either Hobbes or Locke, both understandings of power converge upon a similar conceptualisation of the relationship between power and violence.

The first understanding, identified with Hobbes, sees power as a measurable resource to which social actors have access in varying amounts; this quantitative differential indicates unequal political resources.⁷ Arguably the archetypal quantifiable resource of this kind, violence is frequently seen as laying the foundations for other, more sophisticated forms of political organisation.

Neo-Weberian Historical Sociology clearly espouses a Hobbesian sensibility in its recurrent emphasis on war-making as the bedrock of both despotic and infrastructural power.⁸ Whereas state violence is thought to have consolidated state strength in medieval Europe, a negative correlation exists outside the West. Here, violence is explained as a consequence of weak institutional capacity and the state's incomplete penetration of society. Jeffrey Herbst, for example, notes that colonial violence was not synonymous with European control in Africa, but symptomatic of limited

⁵ Barry Hindess, *Discourses of Power: From Hobbes to Foucault* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996). See also Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

⁶ Charles Tilly, ed. *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975); Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and European States, AD 990–1990* (Oxford and Malden: Blackwell, 1990); Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschmeyer and Theda Skocpol, eds. *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Thomas Ertman, *Birth of the Leviathan: Building States and Regimes in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Karen A. Rasler and William R. Thompson, *War and State Making: The Shaping of the Global Powers* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989). This research agenda is represented in Middle East Studies by works including Steven Heydemann, ed. *War, Institutions, and Social Change in the Middle East* (Berkeley: California University Press, 2000); Ian S. Lustick, 'The Absence of Middle Eastern Great Powers: Political "Backwardness" in Historical Perspective' in *International Organization* 51.4 (1997), pp. 653–83; Thierry Gongora, 'War-Making and State Power in the Contemporary Middle East' in *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 29 (1997), pp. 323–40.

⁷ Barry Hindess, *Discourses of Power*, pp. 2–8, 25–39.

⁸ Mann, Michael. *States, War and Capitalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

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state infrastructural reach into rural areas. For Herbst, the root cause of colonial violence is the incomplete, unfinished nature of European control.⁹ In a different context, Lisa Anderson notes that the weakness of state institutions in the Middle East may have precipitated military coups in the 1950s and 1960s: the inadequate institutionalisation of the state places a premium on controlling the arms of organised force.¹⁰ In a situation of ineffective institutions and failing state infrastructure, the Hobbesian resort to violence lays the foundations of political power. In the long term, violence is an essentially *constructive* phenomenon.

The second approach highlighted by Hindess understands power as a function of consent. This tradition can be traced back to Locke. Scholars taking this approach see violence not as the basis of power, but as the sign of its absence. In this tradition, Hannah Arendt notes that although violence might be mistaken as the prerequisite of power, for it frequently manifests as authority's last resort to save itself, power is only ever bestowed by consent.¹¹ As Arendt says, 'Violence can always destroy power; out of the barrel of a gun grows the most effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience. What can never grow out of it is obedience . . . Power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent'.¹² This Lockean sensibility is evident in works that see violence as a *destructive* phenomenon.

For those historical sociologists who focus on the Middle East, state violence is a failure not of its institutions, but of its efforts to achieve legitimacy. Nazih Ayubi's definition of the 'ferce' Arab state, for example, hinges on its employment of despotic power in the absence of hegemony: 'The practice of such arbitrary power, as is still possessed by many an Arab ruler, can be cruel, but quite often the sound and fury of command would mean little when it comes to translating these orders into a sound political or social reality. The Arab state is therefore often violent *because it is weak*'.¹³ 'Abdullah al-'Arawī argues that state strength or weakness must be deduced from its ideological and hegemonic standing, not its institutions; again, the violence of the Arab state results from

⁹ Jeffrey Herbst, *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 91.

¹⁰ Lisa Anderson, 'The State in the Middle East and North Africa' in *Comparative Politics* 20,1 (1987), p. 8.

¹¹ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (London: Allen Lane, Penguin Press, 1967), p. 44.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 53–56.

¹³ Nazih N. Ayubi, *Over-Stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 1995), p. 450.

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its weakness.¹⁴ Syrian political sociologist Burhān Ghalyūn sees the state's resort to violence as the consequence of its illegitimacy.¹⁵ In a situation of ideational inadequacy, the resort to violence only erodes the foundations of power.

Whereas the Hobbesian perspective of infrastructural approaches characterises the violence–power relationship as hierarchical, the Lockean vision inherent to ideational arguments sees it instead as a relationship of antithesis. Despite this difference, the two conceptualisations share a common understanding of violence as ontologically related to power. Although power is coded as a presence by Hobbesian notions of 'power as capacity' and is coded as an absence by Lockean ideas of 'power as legitimacy', in both cases violence is seen to be a physical manifestation of some abstract metaphysical force which is given the name of power. Power precedes violence ontologically: violence depends on the presence or the absence of power for its existence, but has no independent meaning in its own right.

This line of thinking has two consequences. First, it leads to the neglect of violence as a *social* phenomenon – that is, as a distinct set of practices in a historically contingent context. Acts of coercion are essentially interchangeable: the specific weapon used to perpetrate violence is irrelevant; the boundary between act of war and atrocity is incidental; the cultural inflections of armed force are superfluous to explanation. The implications of this point are explored later in this introduction. Before that, I focus on the second consequence of Hobbesian and Lockean notions of power: their peculiar conceptual Eurocentrism.

EUROCENTRISM, MODERNITY AND POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES

Thinking of violence as a hollow container for power might appear to be a fairly innocuous position, but it maps onto an imaginary that derives from an implicitly Eurocentric account of social power. As Margaret R. Somers has argued, social scientists often overlook the extent to which their categories of historical analysis are themselves part of

¹⁴ 'Abdullah al-'Arawī, *Mafhūm al-Dawla* [The Concept of the State] (Casablanca: al-Markaz al-Thāqafī al-'Arabī, 1981), p. 148.

¹⁵ Burhān Ghalyūn, *Al-'Arab wa-Taḥawwulāt al-'Ālam min Suqūt Jidār Birlīn ilā Suqūt Baghdād* [The Arabs and Global Transformation from the Fall of the Berlin Wall to the Fall of Baghdad] (Casablanca: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-'Arabī, 2005), p. 193.