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CONGRESS

Middle East and Muslim Worlds
Studies

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Roundtable

An academic observatory on Western Sahara : challenges, uncertainties and perspectives

Five years after the creation of an observatory on Western Sahara (OUIISO), we propose a debate on the meaning and missions of this type of research network today. Covering a region crossed by the oldest conflict in contemporary Maghreb, our observatory regularly encounters difficulties in the academic field but also in politics. Indeed, this tool was initially designed to allow researchers to play a role, however small it may be, in conflict resolution both through the production and sharing of data and through public interventions.

Researchers know it well: carrying out investigations on a region in conflict and communicating its results constantly raise questions of ethical positioning, expose us to methodological pitfalls, even threats to our lives. Likewise, our observatory was immediately under fire from criticism, starting with those of our peers, too committed or complacent for some, not militant enough for others. Therefore, the only line that seemed to us to be sustainable was that of international law and human rights, a line which was not without its problems.

Today, is our observatory actually contributing to an improvement in the quality of our work in this region? Does it offer researchers a more substantial critical mass? Does it better identify aspects that are under-documented by research or, on the contrary, over-invested? Are researchers and their work more present in the media and political spheres today? These will be the questions we would like to address in this workshop.

Convenor : Meriem Naïli (University of Exeter)

Discussant: Sébastien Boulay (Université de Paris, on secondment to the CNRS, IMAF)

Haidar Atik Larosi (Universidad de Granada, Departamento de Traducción e Interpretación)

« *Western Sahara: what new research fields for OUIISO?* »

The work developed by the observatory appears necessary and very illustrative of the “Sahrawi question”, in particular in its humanitarian and cultural aspects. Of course, since this is an ongoing conflict, it is difficult to approach it with sufficient objectivity. The legal approach is generally the less thorny and the one that poses the fewest problems for researchers, due to its relative clarity. Likewise, there are many approaches from a human rights perspective. These two areas seem to be sufficiently covered and documented by the research. On the other hand, other questions would deserve a more important investment of researchers such as the war and its evolution during its 16 years, the position of the administering power, Spain, and its evolution during the 45 years, with a particular emphasis on the responsibility of certain politicians and personalities in this evolution, the essential role of France in the continuity of the occupation of the Saharawi territory and, consequently, its relevance for a just and lasting solution of the conflict. These are some of the areas that could garner more attention from the Observatory.

Mitatre Claire Cécile (Université de Montpellier 3)

Is "axiological neutrality" a method specific to the social sciences possible in a context of conflict? The case of Western Sahara

Can research on Western Sahara escape the extreme polarization of discourse characteristic of the conflict? Can an anthropologist make a description of the geopolitical situation «which upholds the points of view and the narratives» of the two parties disputing Western Sahara? My communication aims to question the possible interest of resorting to the posture of «axiological neutrality» to contribute to the numerous attempts aimed at the resolution of this conflict which has been under way for more than 40 years.

Meriem Naili (University of Exeter)

The conflict in Western Sahara in the media spotlight : what role for members of an international academic observatory?

Recent news concerning the situation in Western Sahara (resumption of the war in November 2020 and recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over this territory by D. Trump) has attracted the attention of part of the media and civil society around the world. Not necessarily having a great knowledge, or even a major interest in examining the elements that made up this four-decade-old conflict, they nonetheless intensively reached out to the academic community to understand the issues. As researchers, part of our role is to communicate about our work, which must constantly take into account developments in the field. This sudden highlight underlines the importance of this exercise in internal (between researchers) and external (with the public) communication. It therefore requires us to take a critical and forward-looking look at our network of researchers, as well as to renew our communication methods. The place we give to information networks is certainly changing in light of the interest in our work.

Victoria Veguilla (Université Pablo de Olavide de Séville)

Is it ethical to question public action when a process of decolonization remains unfinished? The case of Western Sahara

My intervention will question the relevance of studying themes that go beyond those constructed to explain the conflict in Western Sahara and its consequences in terms of violations of human rights (the repression of Saharawi nationalist militants) and (illegal) exploitation of resources. These latest approaches to the occupation situation in Western Sahara are built in direct relation to International Law and, in this sense, allow researchers to place their research in the cognitive universe where the Polisario Front frames its strategies (discourse, claims, names ...), promoting a better reconciliation of research and activist activities. The relevance of the work on Western Sahara is thus measured according to its contribution to the Sahrawi cause, which limits the quest for knowledge and obliges us to keep (and never lose) our eyes on disciplines such as International Relations, Geopolitics or International Law. However, understanding politics and politics in Western Sahara, based on an ethnographic survey, leads us to pose other interrogations that question the exercise of power (authoritarian, of Morocco) in this situation of occupation (of the Western Sahara).