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EDITORIAL

Caught in the fishers' net? The colonial plunder of Western Sahara's natural resources

This Special Issue develops an analysis of the political economy of Western Sahara. It does so through the lens of its natural resources, with a particular focus on the fisheries sector. Bringing together contributions from different disciplines, the issue examines how resource exploitation has evolved from Spanish colonisation to the current Moroccan occupation and how this has shaped the political, economic and cultural dynamics of the region. Natural resources provide a crucial lens for understanding the complex dynamics of power and resistance in occupied territories. The issue argues that, far from being exceptional, the case of Western Sahara reflects the broader dynamics of global capitalism and neoliberalism. This editorial contributes to an understanding of how colonial and neocolonial exploitation are intertwined with global capitalist processes in Africa, and highlights the resilience and adaptability of Sahrawi nationalism in the face of occupation.

In October 2024, the European Court of Justice 'ruled … that fishing and farming deals struck between the EU [European Union] and Morocco in 2019 were invalid due to the lack of consent of the people of Western Sahara' and upheld the cancellation of those agreements (Euronews 2024). Despite numerous pushbacks, international law and the right of Sahrawis to their own resources prevailed. The EU, one of the biggest foreign actors in the region, and its companies can no longer fish in Western Sahara. This legal and political victory is of tremendous significance in the struggle for the independence of Western Sahara. It sheds light not only on the complicity and responsibilities of political institutions but also on the economic interests that they enable.

Two considerations, however, are cause for caution. First, today's complexity of global capitalism shows both how economic actors renegotiate their positions within value and production chains and how, sometimes, leaving the lower stages of resource extraction to periphery or semi-periphery actors does not alter the global structures of exploitation and accumulation. Second, imperialism in Africa is no longer solely a European issue, even though it is clear that racial capitalism

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was thoroughly set out by the avenues of colonialism and its postcolonial aftermath. Other global actors, from the global North or otherwise, seem ready to pick up the slack of potentially dwindling European powers.

Western Sahara is considered a non-self-governing territory by the United Nations (UN) and is under Moroccan occupation. Following Spanish colonisation (1884–1976), Morocco has managed and decided Western Sahara's politics and economy, and since 1975 it has pursued a policy of settler colonialism and framed Western Sahara as part of its own territory. Settler colonialism in the region has been driven by economic and fiscal incentives, attracting Moroccans to the territory through employment opportunities, often discriminating against indigenous Sahrawis (Ojeda-Garcia, Fernández-Molina and Veguilla 2017).

Along with occupied Western Sahara's well-known abundance in phosphates, discovered in 1947 and exploited since then, a multi-million-dollar fishing sector has flourished in the last four decades. The Atlantic waters that meet the Sahrawi coast are rich in fishing banks (Veguilla 2011; Smith 2015; CFB et al. 2019). The labour-intensive fishing sector has provided the resources for job creation and the development of related infrastructures along the Western Saharan coast. Hundreds of thousands of Moroccans (Mundy 2012) have been encouraged to settle in newly created fishing villages or in the growing port cities of Laayoune and Dakhla, shifting the demographic balance of the territory against the principles of international humanitarian law and the responsibilities of an occupying power.

In Western Saharan waters, Russian, Chinese and Moroccan vessels fish for mackerel, sardines, octopus and other species, valuable resources within the global chain of the food industry. Profitable as the sector is, its development has proved both a goal and a tool for the advancement of the Moroccan occupation. Fisheries as well as other natural resources are a goal of exploitation and plundering. They also constitute an integral element of political claims and cultural identities (Kingsbury 2015; Allan 2016; Ojeda-Garcia, Fernández-Molina and Veguilla 2017). This Special Issue reassesses the shifting role and growing centrality of natural resources in the different political projects in Western Sahara, from colonialism to occupation to the independence struggle.

Imperialism in Western Sahara: from colonial occupation to neoliberal dispossession

Western Sahara is characterised by a unique geographical context. The region experiences a convergence of desert and oceanic environments, with the Atlantic Ocean bordering its southernmost extent. The Senegal River and the Sahel act as geographical boundaries to the south, while the Draa River Valley in southern Morocco forms the northern border. This region has historically exhibited a high degree of connectivity (Lydon 2009), both with proximate political entities and with the global economy, as evidenced by its integration into global trade networks (Correale 2014). The region's societies have historically been defined by the practice of Islam, the use of Ḥassâniyya Arabic and a Bedouin culture organised around the frame of the *qabila* (tribe).

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During the nineteenth century, France and Spain endeavoured to advance their colonial ambitions in this region. France sought to consolidate its influence in Senegal and Morocco, while Spain aspired to establish a presence in the coastal territories adjacent to the Canary Islands, offering potential harbours for its fishing vessels. Despite their territorial dominance of the coastal area, it was not until after the first third of the twentieth century that the European powers began to exert control over the hinterland of the territory. This shift is evidenced by the establishment of Spanish settlements in Ifni on the coast and Smara in the interior in 1934.

The late colonisation of the territory was followed by the reluctance of the Spanish state, which had been in the hands of the Francoist dictatorship since 1939, to relinquish its hold on the territory while the neighbouring territories were achieving independence – Morocco in 1956, Mauritania in 1960 and Algeria in 1962. Consequently, the consolidation of Spanish colonisation was compounded by mounting international pressure to bring it to an end. In 1963, the territory was placed on the UN's list of Non-Self-Governing Territories, a designation that reflected the international community's stance. However, the process of achieving self-determination remained protracted. In response to the mounting pressure for self-determination, particularly from Morocco, Spain initiated a final modernisation effort, encompassing the utilisation of the region's phosphate reserves, the industrialisation of its fishing grounds and the development of tourism.

Concurrent with these developments, the late 1960s witnessed the emergence of the first Sahrawi nationalist organisation, the Harakat Tahrir, which was subsequently violently suppressed in 1970 (Ahmed Omar 2023, 15–20). In 1973, the Frente para la Liberación de Saguia el Hamra y Río de Oro (Polisario Front) emerged as a guerrilla group insisting on the immediate decolonisation of the territory. The group's actions, which included acts of sabotage and demonstrations in the streets of the colony, escalated and mounted pressure on the Francoist state. Confronted with increasing international pressure from the Moroccan regime, which asserted its claim to sovereignty over the territory, and from the Sahrawi populace itself, which demanded self-determination, the Francoist state was put under considerable strain.

In this context, a UN visiting mission took place in May 1975 to prepare for the self-determination referendum; along with the opinion of the International Court of Justice, delivered in October 1975 and denying Morocco's sovereignty claims over the territory, this prompted Morocco to raise the stakes. With Franco on his deathbed, in 1975 Hassan II, King of Morocco, launched the Green March, mobilising tens of thousands of soldiers and civilians demanding the annexation of the territory (San Martín 2010, 87–126). Faced with the choice of starting a colonial war with Morocco, which had gone very badly for Portugal, or repressing the Sahrawi population it had colonised, the Spanish state chose the latter.

Spain illegally ceded the territory to Morocco and Mauritania through the Madrid Tripartite Accords, a series of largely secret agreements that organised the transfer of the territory for 1976 and that also included a number of confidential clauses regarding the continuity of Spanish participation in the exploitation of the territory. Meanwhile, on the ground, violence erupted when Moroccan and Mauritanian troops entered the territory and were confronted by the Polisario Front. At that moment, tens of thousands of Sahrawis fled towards the interior of the territory, eventually

establishing refugee camps in Algeria, which supported the claims of Sahrawi nationalism (Zunes and Mundy 2022, 112–139). At the same moment that Spain ended its presence in the territory, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic was founded on 27 February 1976.

The situation from that moment on was one of total war, with the Sahrawi population divided between those displaced in the camps outside the territory and those in militarised cities under Moroccan control. Despite unfavourable circumstances,

Figure 1. United Nations MINURSO Deployment map no. 3691 R99, updated in 2025, showing the berm.
Source: UN Geospatial (United Nations 2025). (Map published with the kind permission of the United Nations).

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the Polisario Front managed to secure Mauritania's surrender in 1979, with the latter withdrawing its claims over the territory. The war continued, with Morocco constructing a series of walls beginning in the early 1980s to demarcate the areas controlled by its Alaouite kingdom. In 1991, in a stalemate situation, a ceasefire was signed between the combatants, allowing the introduction of an international mission, the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), with the mandate to monitor the ceasefire and organise and ensure 'a referendum for self-determination of the people of Western Sahara' (United Nations Security Council Resolution 690, 1991, point no. 2: see United Nations Security Council 1991).

Since then, however, Morocco has taken advantage of the ceasefire to strengthen its control over the territory. In 1987 Morocco completed construction of the berm – the separation barrier – that today still fractures the territory, running more than 3,000 kilometres and dominating the two-thirds closest to the coast. The Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic controls the interior third, keeping most of its population in five refugee camps in southwestern Algeria, as shown in the map in **Figure 1**. In this context, Morocco has strengthened its economic exploitation of the territory. This includes not only phosphates but also fishing, especially through treaties with the EU to fish in the territorial waters of the Sahara. At the same time, it maintains a settlement colonisation policy, facilitating the settlement of hundreds of thousands of people from Morocco.

From the 2000s onwards, a new wave of Sahrawi nationalist activism emerged, focusing on the Sahrawi territory occupied by Morocco. In this context, civil activism highlighted the difficulties of daily life suffered by Sahrawis under Moroccan occupation, the attacks on their human rights (which MINURSO is not mandated to monitor) and the plundering of natural resources.

The situation has been especially disrupted in recent years by a series of circumstances. The first of these followed Morocco's move to circumvent the referendum proposed by the UN: in 2007 Morocco proposed to grant special 'autonomous' status to Western Sahara and incorporate the territory within the kingdom of Morocco, effectively seeking to prevent a self-determination referendum from being held. The status quo was thus fundamentally changed when the administrations of Trump in 2020 (for the USA), Sanchez in 2022 (Spain) and Macron in 2024 (France) accepted the Moroccan autonomous status proposal. The second circumstance, on 14 November 2020, was the end of the ceasefire and resumption of hostilities after the Guerguerat incident, in which Morocco tried to seize the strip separating the Sahara from Mauritania that had remained a demilitarised space under Polisario control following the 1991 ceasefire. The final important recent circumstance has been the judicial disputes in the EU, which recognise that agreements in relation to Western Sahara need to have the support of the Sahrawi people, and that they should be able to take decisions regarding the care and management of their own natural resources and those of their future generations.

Articles in this issue

Given the complicated geopolitical situation of Western Sahara and the prolonged conflict in which it is immersed, most studies conducted on the natural resources

of the territory have predominantly focused on its legal and political dimensions (Kingsbury 2016; Ojeda-Garcia, Fernández-Molina and Veguilla 2017; Naïli 2019). This type of analysis emphasises the importance of plunder in the Moroccan occupation of the territory in a context of prolonged conflict. Other bibliographies, produced by non-academic actors, reach similar conclusions, involving a range of global commercial networks that facilitate the plunder of the territory in the legitimisation of occupation (Hagen and Pfeifer 2018).

To fully grasp the current nature of the conflict, its colonial roots need to be considered (Morillas 1988). Exploitation of the main natural resources, such as phosphate mines, can be traced back to the Spanish colonial period, a time that highlighted the geostrategic importance of the territory (Camprubí 2015). A number of initiatives aimed at creating industrial development around the fishing bank were also launched at that time (Martínez Milán 2014, 2021; Andreu Mediero 2017), always seeking to justify the Spanish permanence in the territory (Martínez Milán and Barona Castañeda 2021).

Spanish colonisation gave way, not without resistance, to the Moroccan occupation, keeping the territory on the list of Non-Self-Governing Territories. In this sense, Western Sahara's situation has been compared to that of Palestine or New Caledonia due to its character as a settler colony (Barreñada-Bajo 2022). In Western Sahara, natural resource extraction is an integral part of the Moroccan project, and the development of infrastructures designed to maximise the profits from their exploitation has prompted more research in recent years (Allan and Ojeda-García 2022). In this new research interest, fisheries are usually only addressed within the legal aspects of trade agreements (Prickartz 2019; Suárez-Collado and Contini 2021) or in relation to controversies around consent to exploitation in a non-self-governing territory and potential benefit for the population of Western Sahara (Torrejón Rodríguez 2023), following the UN Legal Counsel Hans Corell.

As Allan and Ojeda-García (2022) point out, this renewed academic interest in the natural resources of Western Sahara has been approached from very diverse angles, both from different disciplines and from activism, especially through the work of the NGO Western Sahara Resource Watch and its investigative reports. In parallel, the independence and activist struggle from the camps or the occupied territories has focused increasingly on the protection and critique of the people's sovereign resources, as opposed to the past emphasis on the political struggle for independence. Western Sahara stands as a case where colonial and neocolonial exploitation and dispossession intertwine with global capitalism. This is why the political economy of the territory is of special interest, integrating analysis and reflecting on how the political framework of exploitation and conflict determines the mobilisation of productive structures and the very definition of what a resource is in the territory.

This Special Issue has five articles that analyse the political economy of the fisheries sector of Western Sahara from the perspective of the actors that have historically benefited from its exploitation and from the resistance of its population to plunder. These articles present a variety of historical contexts, methodologies and actors, intertwining them around the articulation and conflict over the fishing resources of Western Sahara. This Special Issue proposes a dialogue between

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different fields of expertise that do not usually speak to each other. Such a dialogue is crucial for comprehending both the intricacies of economic exploitation in a territory under occupation and the resilience of a population that has been resisting it for decades.

The Special Issue opens with an article by Francesco Correale. It is constructed from an anthropologically informed history and proposes an ontological redefinition of the concept 'resource' from the perspective of the population of Western Sahara and how it has changed over time. Correale's exploration encompasses the historical formation of Saharan nomadic society and its interaction with global trade, particularly from the late nineteenth century, a period marked by profound transformations in the region brought about by European colonisation (particularly by France and Spain). This methodological approach enables a comprehensive understanding of how local socioeconomic dynamics intertwined with the colonial and global context.

The author highlights the pivotal role of natural resources in the Spanish colonial narrative, while also drawing attention to a relatively obscure aspect: the Spanish presence was regarded as a resource by the Sahrawi tribes, particularly in their resistance against France during the early twentieth century. Examining the shifting relationship of the population of Western Sahara with the territory from a political perspective, Correale emphasises that the conception of what constitutes a resource underwent a radical transformation with the emergence of nationalist and anticolonial formulations in the late 1960s, culminating in the formation of the Polisario Front.

This conclusion engages with the second article of the issue, by Enrique Bengochea Tirado. Bengochea Tirado employs a meticulous archival approach, integrating commercial and political reports with documents of a more intimate nature. Through this methodological approach, the author delineates the intricate tapestry of alliances and tensions, both political and personal, that underpinned the political economy of the Sahara during the final phase of Spanish colonial rule.

The focus of Bengochea Tirado's analysis is the colonial state. He highlights how the project of economic 'modernisation' is linked to the colonial presence arising from the negotiation between different political families of the Spanish regime. This project had to address the economic interests of the companies that invested in the territory, which perceived a growing threat due to the potential decolonisation of the region. The article elucidates the intricate relationship of political and economic factors in the exploitation of the territory, particularly in a region so recently colonised by a European power.

In the third article Victoria Veguilla and Blanca Camps-Febrer examine the political economy of the exploitation of fisheries during the Moroccan occupation. They present the theoretical and analytical framework of the study of value chains, highlighting the relevance of this case in offering a nuanced perspective on the evolution and transformation of actors, practices and processes that operate between the centre, the periphery and the semi-periphery within the global fishing sector.

In this sense, the second and third articles of this issue address similar themes, using different methodological tools to examine the constitution of the political economy of the territory in consecutive periods: Spanish colonisation and Moroccan occupation. The results of these analyses are somewhat similar, seeing the important

role played by the occupying states, first Spain, then Morocco, in ensuring the benefits of colonisation to certain economic actors close to the colonial or occupying powers. From a discursive perspective, Veguilla and Camps-Febrer examine how, after the period 1975–91, a fishing sector was established under Moroccan control, reinforcing and legitimising the tropes of modernisation in the occupied region.

Confronted with the dynamics of plunder, critical discourses have been constructed and expressed through artistic mediums such as hip hop music and poetry. These manifestations are analysed in the article by Sébastien Boulay. Boulay offers a regional perspective that connects traditional and modern art forms, demonstrating how these expressions have become tools of denunciation against extractivism and injustice.

To illustrate this point, Boulay compares two satirical creations by politically engaged artists: one in the form of poetry in the Ḥassâniyya language and the other in the form of a hip hop video clip. These two creations, despite sharing a cultural sphere, emerge from divergent political contexts. The poetry, by a poet affiliated with the Sahrawi state, articulates criticism of the Moroccan occupation. In contrast, the hip hop group has endured exile from Mauritania, with their criticism directed towards that country's elites. Through this insightful exercise, Boulay delves into the intricate relationship between Western Saharan societies and politics, underlining the allure of the plunder of natural resources.

The final article of this issue explores how Sahrawi nationalism politically articulates the denunciation of the plunder of natural resources. Victoria Veguilla and Carmen Gómez Martín develop their analysis based on the frames of reference for political action. Their study underlines the territorial fragmentation of the Sahrawi people, who are divided between the region occupied by Morocco, the refugee camps and international exile.

The authors emphasise the escalating prominence of claims relating to survival, claims that include condemnation of economic plunder and denunciations of human rights violations. These claims are consistently situated within the overarching framework of the struggle for the right to self-determination. Through this analysis, the authors emphasise how these claims engage with the global context, adapting and transforming over time according to changing circumstances. The articulation of these demands underlines the resilience of the Sahrawi people in their ongoing resistance to colonial plunder.

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