

The social sciences in the face of disorder

by Marielle Debos

How can social sciences think through the constitutive disorder of a society? When groups marked by “bad reputation” refuse to be an object of knowledge, how can we write about them? This is the challenge presented to researchers by the Tubu of Chad.

About: Julien Brachet, Judith Scheele, *The Value of Disorder: Autonomy, Prosperity, and Plunder in the Chadian Sahara* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

We know that the Sahara is no desert: in their previous work, Julien Brachet and Judith Scheele had already shown that the Sahara, far from being a barrier or a border, is marked by connectivity. In *The Value of Disorder*, the geographer and the anthropologist take us to Faya, an oasis located a thousand kilometres north of the Chadian capital, N’Djamena. The book combines exceptional ethnographic work with sophisticated theoretical reflection on the relationship to history and the value of disorder. The questions posed from the Chadian Sahara also constitute an invitation to reconsider our ways of working. How can we investigate groups that deliberately resist attempts to document their history? How can we think through disorder, when the social sciences have been shaped by the search for order or balance in any society? And lastly, how can we write about groups that have already paid the price of their “bad reputation”?

Unpredictable and unknowable

The value of Disorder is not a book that can be summed up in a formulaic way; it is a monograph on Faya that plunges us into its economy, its politics, the relationship of its inhabitants to the past and to the state, as well as into their conceptions of what constitutes a good life and a good person. Starting with its eventful history since the pre-colonial period (Chapters 1 and 2), the authors endeavour to show the unique place occupied by this oasis in the Saharan world. In particular, they highlight the apparent contradiction between the visible traces of the past in the city and its own inhabitants' disinterest in that history. The next chapters (3 and 4) focus on local modes of production, resource distribution, and livelihood. This commercial hub has few, if any, professional traders. To understand this, in addition to living in Faya, the authors followed respondents when they travelled within the country, or to Libya or northern Cameroon. Faya is indeed a "half-world", that is, one that can only be understood through its links with elsewhere. It is beyond the oasis that it becomes possible to invest, to acquire wealth and power. The final two chapters explore the principles and values underlying Faya's political economy. In the oasis, exchanges are marked by an absence of reciprocity and ostentatious forms of generosity. Predation and the dispersal of wealth are valued more highly than production and accumulation. The question of disorder and its value runs through the whole book. Disorder is understood as a form of instability fostered by its inhabitants, who choose unpredictability over stable social relations, and for whom autonomy is a key value.

Since the Chadian Sahara is a blind spot in Saharan studies, this book is already central to this field of study. Yet in addition to being an investigation of an unknown space, this is also a reflection on the status of knowledge and ignorance. Far from being an obstacle, the absence (or paucity) of sources is the very object of the research. The unknowability of Faya and the Tubu (that is, speakers of the Tedaga and Dazaga languages) is one enigma of the investigation. The Tubu are unknowable, and this unknowability is a defining characteristic of the Tubu as a historical category (p. 26). Specifically, there is a lack of interest in history among the Tubu. This disinterest, which is obviously not rooted in incompetence, is deliberate and associated with a refusal to be categorized and a certain talent for escaping analysis. This ignorance is both "internal" and "external". It is "internal" insofar as the Tubu do not cultivate a stabilized, centralized group memory. The history that counts is that of family genealogies: these are particularly important in a society that practices exogamy, since it would be shameful to marry a distant cousin. Above all, the Tubu value the

ignorance of outsiders (“external ignorance”): they do not want to be the object of others’ knowledge. Strategies aimed at circumventing the state and escaping externally-produced knowledge have been a hotly debated issue ever since the publication of James Scott’s *Zomia*¹. It is taken up again here through a fine-grained ethnography: readers discover multiple ways of escaping analysis alongside a conceptualization of the “absence of history” as a historical fact in its own right.

Faya through women’s eyes

One highly original and powerful aspect of this work is that it shows Faya from the perspectives of both women and men. The two researchers (a female anthropologist and a male geographer) explored the same field together, with one having access to female sociability, the other to male sociability. Entering through the world of women serves not only to complete knowledge of Faya and the Sahara by adding women to a story hitherto mostly told by men; inclusion of the women’s perspective also allows a radical redefinition of what we thought we knew about this space.

In a region marked by a series of rebellions and which has never known a moment of peace, violence is a structural element. The option of taking up arms, whether in the army or as part of the rebellion, is reserved for men. By studying women’s violence, the book goes beyond violence as a strategy or means to an end. Violence is thought of as central both to intimate definitions of self and to moral and political conceptions. The ability to fight, resistance to pain and insubordination are valued in women, too. Women’s violence (unlike that of men) is not a mode of political action and thus does not allow them to reach positions of power in a country in which weapons are the key to success in politics. Moreover, women’s use of violence tends to be against other women, rather than against men. The book does not, however, develop a fully-fledged gender perspective; this would have involved studying male violence against women, what the experience of such violence means for women, and more broadly the reproduction or destabilization of gender relations in this space.

¹ James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, Yale University Press, (2009). Also see the review by Nicolas Delalande, “Zomia, Land Without State,” Books and ideas, 20 March 2013. <https://booksandideas.net/Zomia-Land-Without-State.html>

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The various chapters of the book are united in their constant effort to provide a positive rereading of what have, up until now, been analysed as absences or failures. The authors have developed “a conceptual vocabulary that makes it possible to describe Tubu sociality in positive rather than negative terms” (p. 33). Combined with a critique of functionalist bias, this approach reflects an underlying trend in the social sciences to go beyond supposed shortcomings to define and study what *is*—rather than what is not. From this perspective, order is not the default social situation, and neither is disorder a parenthetical interruption to the order of things: rather, it is integral to society.

Though criticism of functionalism is nothing new, Julien Brachet and Judith Scheele take it further: in addition to studying the place of disorder in the social order, they study the absence of order. In engaging with Marilyn Strathern’s reflections², they invite us to consider the idea that there may not be a social order after all (Chapter 6). In so doing they are attacking a foundation of the social sciences: the idea that every society has a certain order that can be described and analysed. Historically, anthropology has endeavoured to make sense of societies that seem difficult for outsiders to read. By studying the resolutely disordered life of Faya, the authors are not settling for merely refreshing the body of work on the Tubu (until now the only monograph on the Tubu, published by Catherine Baroin who worked in south-eastern Niger, questions the relationship between anarchy and social cohesion)³. They also question the very *raison d’être* of the social sciences, as well as the temptation to systematically seek out the regularity and predictability of any society.

Writing in a minefield

The book poses another central question for the social sciences: how can we write about a society that has a “bad reputation”? The authors were working in a minefield: the Tubu have been described since the colonial period as thieving, violent

² Marilyn Strathern, “Discovering ‘social control’”, *Journal of Law and Society*, Vol. 12, °2, 1985, p. 111-134.

³ Catherine Baroin, *Anarchie et cohésion sociale chez les Tubu : Les Daza Kécherda (Niger)*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press/Paris, Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l’homme, 1985.

and too lazy to work. These stereotypical clichés can be found in the colonial archives and their traces remain discernible today in the mixture of fascination and apprehension evoked by the Tubu among foreigners (especially the French military). However, this issue stretches beyond the (post)colonial question: the Tubu also have a bad reputation in their own country, and face hostility from Chadians of other regions and ethnic groups. Since 1979, all presidents of Chad have come from Northern Chad: Goukouni Oueddeye, Hissène Habré, Idriss Déby, and now his son Mahamat Idriss Déby. The stereotypes associated with northern populations have powerful political undertones; to write about thieving or violence among the Tubu is to risk reactivating a colonial cliché and adopting a politicized narrative.

For those who write about stigmatized groups, there are at least two ways to do it. The first involves analysing the historical and social construction of the “bad reputation” and the conditions of its dissemination. It therefore has less to do with studying those practices that give rise to rejection and more to do with grasping the social and political rationales underpinning stigmatization (writing against the bad reputation). This is the perspective I adopted in my own work on men in arms in Chad⁴. The other way involves studying the most stigmatized practices for themselves (writing on the bad reputation). Julien Brachet and Judith Scheele took this second path – which is steeper, but perhaps more interesting. They examine the most stigmatized practices, such as theft and violence—though remaining very cautious about discussing “marriage by capture” (p. 239). By combining this analysis with a reflection on what people think and do with their reputation, they show that the region’s inhabitants have come to endorse the stereotypes produced about them.

Though a refusal to work is commonplace in Saharan societies, it remains a significant element of the Tubu’s “bad reputation”. In studying the refusal to do agricultural work in the palm groves (p. 148-157), the authors turn to reports written by colonial administrators and note the same observation: the Tubu do not want agricultural work, which they do not consider a respectable activity. The researchers share this observation, but not, of course, the judgments made of the Tubus—and this changes everything. Writing about the relationship to theft is a more delicate matter. The authors are less interested in the social and political conditions that make theft commonplace than they are in the meanings conferred upon it by the people of Faya. Behind the social acceptance of theft lies an appreciation of cunning and the kind of intelligence capable of pulling off a clever move and getting by in a world full of

⁴ *Living by the Gun in Chad: Combatants, Impunity and State Formation*, London, Zed Books, 2016.

uncertainties. As anthropologists, they reposition anarchy, individualism and disorder within the Tubu's affirmation of moral and political autonomy and their own debates on what constitutes a rightful circulation of goods or worthwhile personhood.

In the concluding pages, the authors move away from this "writing on the bad reputation" approach to investigate the supposed exceptionality of the thieving and violent practices for which Faya is renowned, showing that these practices are in fact widespread in the world. Far from being unique to the Tubu, the predatory economy lies at the very heart of imperialism, while violence and war made the state in Europe. This journey to Faya ultimately offers a fresh take on the Euro-Atlantic world.

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