

Iocchi, Alessio. 2022. *Living Through Crisis by Lake Chad: Violence, Labor and Resources*. London: Routledge. 224 pp. ISBN: 9781032155296

The global media, as well as researchers and policymakers, often describe Lake Chad as an area in “crisis.” The lake has shrunk over the last century, droughts have been frequent since the 1970s, and political and social crises have followed each other across the region since the first Boko Haram insurgencies in the early 2000s. Surrounded by hotbeds of war and insurgency, armed insurgency and terrorism, and one of the poorest regions in the world, this region is rarely analysed outside the prism of “crisis.” Alessio Iocchi's book has the merit of confronting the very idea of “crisis” and going beyond its humanitarian use, often reproduced by the mainstream media. The representation of the Lake Chad region as an area of “crisis” is rooted in its history as a natural frontier between the two sides of the Sahara. This historical representation has legitimised a form of domination – past and present – whose effects are long-lasting, as the authoritarian and extractive policies of pre-colonial and colonial institutions intersect with contemporary neoliberal forms of governance. The book combines a critical examination of the contemporary use of “crisis” with a historical analysis of what has traditionally been presented as a “crisis zone.” By assessing and triangulating grassroots and elite perspectives, the book shows that we are dealing with a problematic and multifaceted concept. On the one hand, the people living in what is defined as a “crisis area” try to cope with all the consequences this entails in terms of security measures and humanitarian aid; on the other hand, the political elites in charge of declaring and managing a “crisis” use this condition and the dispositive of power it unleashes to deploy and exploit specific forms of governance. Indeed, the concept of “crisis” is not only an unexpected external event, but more importantly a tool that can play different roles: an engine for change, an opportunity to implement tighter security measures, to release resources for some groups and to marginalise or suppress others.

The book is articulated in seven chapters and a concluding epilogue. Chapter 1, the introduction, sets the general context by exploring the contemporary situation of power and labour in the Lake Chad region, focusing on the impact of neoliberal policies, informality and the urban-rural nexus. Chapter 2 is a historical analysis of the region, which has traditionally been framed as a “borderland” between the two sides of the Sahara, and as such has been harshly treated by neighbouring powers, who have often seen its inhabitants

as a potential threat. Chapter 3 moves from contextual description to analysis by examining the incorporation of Lake Chad into the capitalist system at the beginning of the colonial period through networks of exploitation and predation. It argues that these practices have long been accepted because of their continuity with pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial eras, although the transformations associated with neoliberal reforms have led to a degree of dispossession that has exacerbated tensions. The results of these tensions are analysed in Chapter 4 through a detailed account of the expansion of the Salafi faith in response to growing inequalities and the tensions generated by the political competition for control of local authorities, exacerbated by Nigeria's formal transition to democracy in the 1990s. These are the events that fostered the creation of Boko Haram and the escalation of violence across the region, leading to the subsequent declaration of a "state of emergency" in the riverine states to deal with the "crisis." Chapter 5 explores everyday life under the crisis, analysing in depth different individual trajectories in the effort to "navigate" the violence of the jihadist insurgents, the violence of the army fighting them, and the humanitarian structures deployed around the lake. Chapter 6 continues a similar analysis by moving from the Lake Zone to Ngueli, the neighbourhood of the Chadian capital N'Djamena on the border with northern Cameroon. Ngueli is a different kind of "borderland," where other extractive practices – mainly related to the control of trade between Chad and northern Cameroon – are also being transformed by the crisis. Chapter 7 shows how the declaration and acceptance of a state of crisis in both the Lake Chad region and Ngueli has allowed powerful actors to manipulate categories of governance to increase their power and wealth, building on entrenched hierarchies and inequalities. The corruption of border guards through tighter controls and the forced eviction of people from some neighbourhoods of N'Djamena in the name of security are the main expressions of this power. There is then a nice epilogue that clearly summarises all the main points of the book and explains how important it is to take an emic perspective to fully grasp the social and political reality of the Lake Chad "crisis."

There are three broader themes that the book nicely connects. First, it tells the story of a region that has traditionally been on the periphery of other major powers and therefore has its own particular dynamics that often lead to instability. Second, it presents an ethnographic exploration of how local people of different status navigate this condition and develop strategies and connections according to their social position and resources. And third, it shows, starting from recent ethnographic observation, how the idea of crisis

is inglobated in these strategies of survival, and thus the designation of a region as a crisis area and the deployment of related policies have a strong impact on the political sphere. The conclusion is that the crisis, far from being an external event that triggers a reaction, is rather a developed and sophisticated machine for governance. Through this conclusion, the book enables a dialogue with relevant contemporary issues in the field of both political and social sciences.

On the first point, Iocchi reconstructs the history of the region, highlighting as a central moment the Islamisation of the Kanem area in the 11th century and the establishment of its sultanate, which created a boundary between civilised “Muslims” who are allowed to enslave the “uncivilised” animists of the area. This distinction, and the social connections it created throughout the Sahel and Sahara, had a radical impact on local politics. Trade with Muslim networks concentrated in specific centres formed the backbone of social and economic life, while most of the areas excluded from these networks were depicted as wild and lawless, potentially dangerous for attacks on the caravan, potentially useful as sources of enslaved people. The Lake Chad region was thus portrayed as a mobile frontier between a civilisation based on trade through Muslim networks and animist groups under threat of enslavement. Despite the syncretic nature of local Islam, the economic importance of *razzia* contributed to the survival of this identity distinction, which was never challenged by colonial and post-colonial governments, and in some ways even crystallised by them. Hence the historical roots of the violence in the area and the struggle between a weak but violent power interacting with an allegedly “anarchist” area. The description of these peculiar forms of violent power and economic dispossession echoes other works by authors such as Janet Roitman, Marielle Debos, Louisa Lombard and Judith Scheele, and is functional to introduce a more ethnographic observation about the central problem of the book: how do local people navigate such a context?

This is the second crucial point. Iocchi contextualises the contemporary situation by explaining how the social and political context of the 1990s – where the historical section took us – created a fertile environment for the spread of a Salafi approach to religion. Salafism began as a political protest against inequality and injustice in northern Nigeria, before escalating into violence with the emergence of Boko Haram, which then provoked a violent response from the Lake Chad riverine states. The more interesting aspect of this section is the focus on how individuals navigate such a context, focusing on protecting their interests and livelihoods, but also developing a moral

compass appropriate to the situation. In this framework, the emergence of Salafi jihad in the 1990s is linked to the intersection of growing economic exploitation due to the impact of neoliberal policies across the region and the reintroduction of local elections in Nigeria. The combination of these dynamics is the trigger for religious extremism. Salafi movements became popular because they criticised growing inequality and the abuse of local and traditional forms of power, but after harsh repression they turned into guerrilla warfare against the state. The book shows how local people coped with this situation, which, contrary to the initial demands, increased inequalities and violence during the management of the crisis.

This conclusion leads us to the third, and probably the most important theoretical part of the book: the idea of “crisis” as it has emerged over the last thirty years is an integral part of the neoliberal order and therefore political actors use the term “crisis” to implement a specific form of governance that confirms and legitimises their power. Iocchi describes the Lake Chad crisis through the eyes of those who live it, and this angle gives us an interesting perspective. People’s livelihoods are threatened by both the violence of jihadists and the army. The only ways to survive are to negotiate with violent actors or to enter the “NGO universe” to get some basic protection. The first strategy carries the risk of being labelled as “terrorists” or “terrorist supporters,” and Iocchi emphasises that, unlike other armed rebellions, there is no room for reconciliation or peace with Boko Haram and its sympathisers, who are dehumanised as “terrorists.” The second strategy requires a “victimisation” to be considered as legitimate beneficiaries of aid and to enter a depoliticising structure that creates dependency from the “peacekeeping economy.” In this respect, the book highlights the disenchantment of most of the local population, who feel excluded from a flow of money that mainly benefits humanitarian actors living in closed enclaves. The humanitarian expats have limited social interactions with the inhabitants of Lake Chad, seen as potentially dangerous even if they are portrayed as vulnerable. This peacekeeping economy is valued by the state as it creates safe passages and hubs for state authorities without necessarily integrating local areas and burdening the state with the task of administering them. The book therefore emphasises how the “exceptionality” generated by the crisis affects governance, not only in the core area of tension but also in other border areas, such as Ngueli. Here it is the tight control of the border that reinforces the capacity of the state to act against the will of its citizens, either by imposing illegal taxes on movements of people and goods, or by evicting people and

rebuilding houses on the grounds of security. Thus, the “crisis” increases the capacity of the state to rule over its own citizens, legitimising its actions and agenda, and giving it stronger instruments of control.

In conclusion, the declaration of a crisis legitimises an exceptional form of governance, which in turn reinforces inequalities and reproduces if not exacerbates the conditions of the crisis itself. What is happening in Lake Chad is not isolated, but part of a wider global strategy of governance. By exploring what is ostensibly a very local context of crisis and showing how local people navigate it, the book highlights important dynamics at the micro-political level that enable us to understand not only the functioning of the socio-political machine in Lake Chad, but also the mechanisms of social control that are applied globally in the neo-liberal institutional framework through the idea of crisis. This shift in perspective shows how the dynamics observed in Lake Chad can be used as a lens to analyse governance and politics in the expanding “crisis zones” around the world, starting with the Sahel, of which Lake Chad is a part, and for which crisis is also becoming an inescapable buzzword. In a context of crisis, policies are decided by technocratic institutions, implemented with military support and focused on security and stability, while social and economic rights are compressed and guaranteed only to those actors who have managed to be labelled as vulnerable. Meanwhile, the management of the territory and, ultimately, more far-reaching decisions, as the author describes the urban reforms of N'Djamena following the Boko Haram bombings in the city, are under the control of the executive, with little or no accountability or compensation for the local population. Indeed, in a crisis area, all residents become potential terrorists or vulnerable people. In both cases, the dimension of citizenship is lost under the tight control of various unaccountable institutions. In a world where the number of crises is increasing, we should read carefully and remember the challenges and risks identified by the author in the management of the Lake Chad crisis.

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