Interview – Matteo Capasso

Written by E-International Relations

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This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other early career scholars.

Matteo Capasso is a Max Weber Fellow at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute (EUI), Italy. He specializes in international relations and political economy. His current research examines the impact of US-led imperialism on countries of the Global South, with a particular focus on the MENA region. Matteo previously worked as Research Associate to the H2020 EU-LISTCO project, focusing on the political economy of the EU's Neighbourhoods; and as a consultant to the EuroMeSCo 'Connecting the Dots' project. He has received a PhD form Durham University on the everyday politics of Libyans under the Libyan Arab al-Jamahiriyah and will soon be starting a Marie Curie Global Fellowship between Ca' Foscari (Venice) and Columbia (NY).

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

This has been a gradual process. As I started my PhD, I began working on the relationship between power and resistance by focusing on the realm of the everyday, and I found inspiration in the work of Lisa Wedeen on Syria and Alexei Yurchak on the Soviet Union. However, throughout this process, I started feeling the need to connect those everyday experiences to geopolitical and geoeconomic structures. In other words, I think that subaltern studies had forgotten to pay attention to structural conditions too quickly. On a personal level, this switch took place by reading the work of Arab political economists, such as Ali Kadri and Samir Amin. Their work forced me to rethink how wars and militarism allow the perpetuation of the political-economic structures of global capitalism, and this is how I ended up focusing on the need to rethink war and security in the MENA region from a political economy perspective.

In the spirit of political solidarity and subject-location, I feel that it is vital to explore such structural questions, which entail reflecting upon the role played by Global North countries in contributing to the emergence of wars in the periphery of the world. Saying that, everyday IR still needs to garner much more attention in the discipline, as I find it one of the most important approaches to undo its highly masculinist premise.

In your most recent article you challenge traditional literature that depicts Libya's fragmentation as "self-inflicted". To what extent is Libya's fragmentation down to internal governance issues?

The extent to which Libya's fragmentation is down to internal issues is proportionally related to how one approaches and interprets the nature of capitalism and imperialism, and—in turn—the historical integration of the country within it. In other words, this answer will vary according to the conceptual assumptions that we adopt, which influence how we see, explain and interpret the world around us, including Libya's fragmentation. This has concrete political implications, thus it is more than a simple analytical exercise, it is a class position.

For instance, let us assume and accept three main hypotheses—quite prevalent in the academic literature—about Libya. First, the country has never developed modern state structures since the Italian colonial period (the idea of statelessness). Second, the 1969 revolution led to the immediate instauration of an authoritarian regime that

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remained in power until 2011 by manipulating both tribes and oil revenues to control the population, while never embracing the values of the 'liberal international order'. And third, the NATO-led intervention was needed and successful to help rebels oust an authoritarian regime, but it lacked a plan for the 'day after.' If we accept uncritically these three main hypotheses, the answer to your question is that Libya's problems are of a fundamentally internal nature. The legacy of authoritarianism, the oil curse rooted in geographical, historical and tribal divisions have brought the country to its current destruction. These narratives stress the existence of a so-called path dependence, but where is the role of US-led imperialism and the global order in all this?

In my most recent article, it is not my aim to deny the significance of these elements. However, I believe their emergence is explained in isolation from the inter-state imperialist structure led by the US, as Kadri and Amin wrote about. In doing so, I do not deny that by 2011 the Libyan government had become increasingly repressive toward the people. However, this change was gradual and came about with the progressive military and ideological defeat of these revolutionary and socialist political movements that had guided the decolonisation period in Africa since the 1950s, including Libya. In doing so, I claim that fragmentation in Libya does not simply require the building up of 'liberal institutions and elections,' rather its internal fragmentation should be understood as a form of social reproduction that US-led imperialism requires to resolve its constant crisis of capital accumulation, even more so today since Western power is in decline.

In the same article, you suggest moving away from the dominant view of Libya's economy as a 'war economy'. Why is this so important?

Let me start by saying that the work of think-tanks and researchers on the 'war economy' in Libya is empirically rich and very detailed. The problem does not lie in what it describes happening on the ground, but the assumptions it contains when interpreting the emergence of these economic practices (see my answer to your previous question) and, as a result, the type of policy-related recommendations provided. In my opinion, the problem lies in locating the war as a process starting in 2011, thus de-historicising its roots, while trivialising the anti-imperialist history of Libya. As I write in the article, I suggest instead that the conflict between Libya and US-led imperialism started way back when the revolutionary government dared to reclaim its sovereignty over national resources and propose a model of political and economic development that challenged the idea of a state-centric and market-oriented world political system. In such a scenario, the current war has a twofold meaning. First, the war is the culmination of this long political conflict, compounded by international sanctions and military confrontations, which triggered fundamental internal changes in Libya. Second, and more importantly, war and militarism have become the new modalities through which many post-colonial states in the MENA region enter the circuits of capital.

In other words, the current level of destruction and economic under-development that characterises the Arab region cannot be simply attributed to religious/sectarian/tribal divisions. Wars, mercenaries' groups and infrastructures of surveillance appearing in Libya reflect the re-articulation of many states in the region in a changing US-led global order. They function as a domain of capital accumulation, a sphere of production and simultaneously, as a manifestation of the class struggle. These wars not only strip developing nations of their autonomy and resources, but also sustain the currently declining imperialist powers and rents. Therefore, the predatory economic behaviour of these militias and armed groups that now control Libya does not simply reflect the 'legacy of Qaddafi'. Rather, it is a symptom of the new modes of Libya's integration into the global economy. What the future holds is difficult to predict. However, if we can diagnose the past and present, then we can start developing the tools to change the future. In this regard, I hold that we cannot anymore elide the link between war and capitalism, security and profit. It is possible to build a better future, but this will be achieved by treating capitalism as part of the problem, not the solution, across the North and South of the world.

During the 1980s, to what extent were Libyan national policies developed directly as a form of "post-colonial resistance"? Was the country more focused on its foreign policy than resolving middle/long-term socio-economic issues within the country?

The development of these national policies was part-and-parcel of their foreign policy. In the age of decolonisation, post-colonial resistance and nationalism were an inherent part of a revolutionary project that called for a radical

change of the relations of domination in the international order. The Libyan revolutionary regime began pursuing projects of political, economic and monetary integration at the regional level, believing in the necessity to overcome unequal integration in the world market, and the international hierarchy that facilitated the domination of the global South by US-led imperialism. These strategies of regional integration did not derive from the rejection of nationalism; rather, they were conceived of as integral to the securing of national independence. The nationalisation of the oil industry in Libya or Algeria, like the Egyptian nationalisation of the Suez Canal, represented a paradigmatic moment in post-colonial resistance. It was as much an issue of domestic development as it was foreign policy. This move, in fact, was an important piece to the puzzle that led to the official call for a New International Economic Order in 1974.

Nonetheless, while these types of development policies had helped to improve the lives of millions of people—i.e. increasing life expectancy from 55 to 64 years old over the course of eleven years—it also had its internal problems and limitations. The government assumed a purely distributive role, and the revolution had failed to transform the working classes into a productive force for the economy. These failures, however, took place in a geopolitical context where these post-colonial revolutionary projects faced the constant threat of war, led by US imperialism and its allies. Opposing imperialism meant winning back the power to imagine alternative paths to development and regional cooperation, to regain the power to shape one's economy, culture and society, thus reclaiming sovereignty to national resources and an equal access to technology. This is the meaning of undoing the process of unequal exchange.

Inevitably, the military and ideological defeat—including the decline of the Soviet Union—turned the progressive state-elites into a class of compradors, searching for personal profit while abandoning the progressive goals of national and regional development. This, once again, was a gradual battle fought at the local level and, more importantly, while the country had been put under international sanctions and the threat of war for more than a decade.

What mistakes have international institutions made when attempting to resolve the crisis in Libya? How should the international community proceed in the future?

There are two main points to discuss in relation to your question. First, the mistakes made by international institutions in Libya start way before the 2011 crisis. For instance, why did the UN accept the proposition of the UK and US to put Libya under multilateral sanctions from 1992 to 2002, despite the Libyan government calling for a fair trial of the suspects in relation to Lockerbie (an issue I discuss in further detail within my article). Also, many analysts and UN observers questioned the judicial validity of the trial of one Libyan individual, nonetheless, an entire country was put under sanctions. What I am trying to say is that international institutions, unlike any other country in the world, reflect and interact with the global order. For many years, Western powers have used the UN as a platform to advance their own interests. Second, to help resolve the crisis in Libya, international institutions should act as a system of checks and balances to capital accumulation. Their focus, for instance, should switch to the promotion of a structural reorientation of the international economy in the interests of the marginalised. This cannot take place in the absence of the democratisation of global institutions and the subordination of the world market to non-market imperatives of sustainable development. The crisis in Libya can be solved if it is approached as contradictions of capitalism unfolding in the periphery of the world.

What are you currently working on?

I am working on three interrelated projects. First, I am completing an article, which I hope to publish soon, where I question the role of 'capitalist modernity' in shaping the ways in which Libyan revolutionaries gradually imagined their path to freedom. Also, I am working on a project comparing expert knowledge production within the field of IR and IPE on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and the Libyan Arab al-Jamahiriyah. Drawing on the work of Nivi Manchanda and Robbie Shilliam, I am interested to unpack the racial and class nature of this knowledge production, assessing how it feeds into a Western-centric vision of development and security. Finally, I am happy to share with you that I have been granted a Marie Curie Global Fellowship, and I will be based between Ca' Foscari (University of Venice) and Columbia NY. This is, as you can imagine, a super exciting opportunity. In this post, I will have the chance to unpack in depth how the gradual transformation of US-led imperialism changed the history of Libya, and vice versa, from 1969 to the present. I can't wait to start working on this.

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What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars?

I believe the saying in English goes 'Fortune favours the bold' (*la fortuna aiuta gli audaci*, we say in Italian). You need to be passionate in what you do and—hopefully—chances will come. However, the academic job market, like many others today, is very difficult and short-term contracts are becoming the norm. Also, academia is a great place because pedagogy and education are instruments that allow thinking outside of the box. However, as much as they hold such potential, they have always been the site of regulation and control, where the cultural hegemony—to use Gramsci's words—is created and reproduced. I am saying this not to be a kill-joy, but to make sure that one does not approach it in an excessively romantic manner.