Upholding Human Rights?
Military Intervention in Libya and the Fallibility of the Performative

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Abstract

It is widely accepted that powerful Western governments played a decisive role in the violent removal of the Libyan government in 2011. There is also a broad consensus that the stated aims of installing 'freedom' and 'democracy' in Libya have not been achieved. This paper revisits the Western military intervention in Libya, taking as its point of departure and primary aim the exploration of its failure. This failure is deemed to be inevitable since military interventions are invariably constituted through discourse, and since discourse can never fix meaning definitively (i.e. through the logic of performativity). Exploring the fallibility of the performative in the case of the military intervention in Libya can 1) generate new insights into how Western governments' attempts to constitute events in Libya failed to materialize, and 2) facilitate the repoliticization of the event itself. The paper pursues these aims through a poststructural discourse analysis of the broader debate on the military intervention in Libya. It shows how Western governments' 'human rights' discourse was challenged in mainstream media by a 'civil war' discourse, which exposed some of the former's shortcomings and blind spots. Two principal arguments are put forward. First, the paper argues that Western governments' 'human rights' discourse fails due to its essentialist and universalist conception of 'democracy,' which cannot account for the complexity of the political situation unfolding in Libya. Second, the paper argues that the case of Libya stands as evidence of how 'democracy' must rather be considered as a 'promise' which is always 'to come'. It is suggested that this Derridean conception of 'democracy' holds out the best hope for more stable, inclusive and peaceful transitions through tumultuous democratization processes.

Keywords: Military Intervention in Libya, Performativity, Fallibility, Aporia, Democracy

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1. Introduction

Muammar Gaddafi's decades-long rule in Libya was accompanied by a turbulent relationship with the West. Gaddafi's Arab nationalist tendencies, along with the US's staunch support for Israel, seemed to place both on a collision course with one another (El Warfally, 1988). These tensions manifested themselves at times in violent ways. A series of terrorist attacks during the 1980s that Western governments attributed to Libya and Gaddafi were indications of the fraught nature of relations at that time, as were the unilateral and multilateral sanctions regimes imposed on the North African state (Lewis, 2001, p. 2). One of the highest profile cases was the Lockerbie bombing, which despite Libyan denials, would see one of its intelligence officers convicted and sentenced for the crime in 2001. During the Reagan administration air-strikes were conducted on Tripoli following continuous conflict, following a terrorist attack which killed US military personnel in a German nightclub, and a growing dispute over freedom of navigation and what constituted Libya's territorial waters (St. John, 2002). However, a dramatic shift and improvement in relations between Libya and the West occurred in the late 1990s-early 2000s as the US, the UK, and France embarked upon a period of rapprochement with Gaddafi. 'Rehabilitation' or 'redemption' was predicated on the willingness by Gaddafi to give up Libya's arsenal of weapons of mass destruction, make compensatory payments to the families of the Lockerbie bombing victims, and cooperate in the area of counter-terrorism (Takeyh, 2001). For Libya, the prize would be the easing of economic sanctions; for Western corporations there was the potential for lucrative access to develop Libya's oil reserves and infrastructure (Doble, 2010). For all that, serious doubts still remained among high-ranking US officials over the 'non-democratic, totalitarian nature' of the Libyan regime (Powell, 2004).

When large parts of the Libyan population rose up seeking to topple Gaddafi in 2011 it was thus not entirely unexpected. The violent uprisings which spread through Libya were being conceived as part of a much broader event that would come to be known as the 'Arab Spring.' While for many the 'Arab Spring' signaled a 'universal' movement in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) fueled by the desire for greater freedom and democracy, more astute analyses were taking stock of the significant differences between and within states in the region (Anderson, 2011). At any rate, as Libyan security forces desperately tried to put down the uprisings, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) passed two resolutions authorizing military intervention to deal with the crisis (United Nations Security Council, 2011). Powerful Western states the UK, France, and

the US would lead the subsequent military campaign, which would ultimately provide decisive support to opposition forces in bringing down Gaddafi and the Libyan government. These momentous events have provoked a series of questions about why, how, and on what basis the Western powers came to intervene in Libya (Adler-Nissen & Pouliot, 2014; De Waal, 2013; Chivvis, 2013; Davidson, 2013; Anderson, 2011, 2013; Glanville, 2013). Much of this work has highlighted the 'humanitarian' dimension of the military intervention, or on the 'Responsibility to Protect (R2P)' doctrine, honing in on claims by Western officials that this was about defending the 'human rights' of 'freedom' and 'democracy' (Bellamy & Williams, 2011; Pattison, 2011; Weiss, 2011).

This paper contributes to the aforementioned literature by taking a novel approach to the Western-led military intervention in Libya. The theoretical point of departure shall not be this military intervention's success, but rather its inevitable failure. This is not, at least in the first instance, a study on the disastrous consequences which followed the violent removal of Gaddafi (Blunt, 2016). Rather, is to acknowledge that language and discourse invariably fail to constitute political events definitively. This is a consequence of the performative nature of language, as Judith Butler explains: 'breakdown is constitutive of performativity (performativity never fully achieves its effect, and so in this sense 'fails' all the time' (Butler, 2010, p. 153). Performative discourses thus always fail, and this is explained through the logic of iteration: first, any discourse must refer back to its previous iterations (otherwise meaning would be impossible), yet the new context ensures that these past iterations can never be replicated fully; second, no discourse can fix meaning definitively (it cannot exhaust the context within which it is being deployed) and thus there will always be alternative and competing discourses seeking to constitute reality in different ways (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). For that we can deduce that momentous (geo)political events such as military interventions are always in a sense doomed to fail. The value of examining how discourses fail resides in the potential this holds for generating new insights and conducting critique-under what conditions do discourses fail? (Butler, 2010)-, and moreover for enacting the repoliticization of the events in question. As Claudia Aradau (2017) has pointed out, it is the fallibility of the performative that is the condition of possibility for political struggle, contestation, and democracy itself.

These theoretical points seem pertinent for the military intervention in Libya since Western governments 'human rights' discourse projecting 'freedom' and 'democracy' for the Libyan people manifestly failed to materialize. To explore the fallibility of Western governments' 'human rights'

discourse I revisit the broader debate on the military intervention which occurred throughout the year 2011. Employing the tools of poststructural discourse theory it will be possible to analyse how Western governments sought to give meaning to the violent struggle taking place in Libya, along with any 'counter-discourses' which emerged to contest their account of events. I will focus on the UK and US subject positions as two of the three key Western powers driving the military intervention (along with France). Some methodological decisions have also been taken to facilitate the analysis. To capture official Western discourse, empirical material will include speeches and statements by the highest-ranking officials of the UK and US governments. The analysis will also focus on four mainstream media outlets to capture any oppositional discourses: The Guardian and The Telegraph from the UK, and The New York Times and The Washington Post from the US. The temporal period for the study shall be the full year of 2011, extending from the first reports of protests in Libya through to the fall of Libyan leader Gaddafi in October of that year.

Through this theoretical and methodological framework, the paper advances two principal arguments concerning the Western-led military intervention in Libya. First, I argue that Western governments' 'human rights' discourse fails principally due to its essentialist and universalist conception of 'democracy'. This 'human rights' discourse cannot account for the complex democratization process unfolding in Libya, which evidences two irreducible and irreconcilable aporias which haunt the concept of 'democracy': on the one hand is the paradoxical relationship between democracy and sovereignty, and on the other is that of freedom and equality (Fritsch, 2002, p. 585; see also Derrida, 2005). Second, and in relation, the paper argues that the case of Libya stands as further evidence of how 'democracy' should rather be understood as a 'promise' which is always 'to come' (Derrida, 2005). It is suggested that it is this conception of 'democracy' which holds out the best hope for more stable, inclusive and peaceful ways of proceeding through tumultuous democratization transitions.

2. Discourse, Identity, and the fallibility of the performative

It is post-structuralist discourse theory that has provided the most convincing tools for the study of language in International Relations (IR). As a broad group of theories, poststructuralism awards a methodological primacy to language itself without denying the existence of a material world (Mouffe & Laclau, 2001). Post-structuralism takes as an important point of departure the lack of essences or foundations in signs, something which harbors

quite profound implications for how different actors seek to both grasp and constitute the World around them. It turns out that the meanings or significations that we attribute to people, places, and objects are always contingent, which is to say that they could be different; the social and political world within which we are immersed 'is not pre-given or determined by external conditions,' and 'people do not possess a set of fixed and authentic characteristics or essences' (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 5). It follows, therefore, that 'the ways in which we understand and represent the world are historically and culturally specific and contingent'. That is, 'our world-views and our identities could have been different, and they can change over time' (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 5).

It is through 'discourse' that actors seek to constitute, fix, support, or contest the meaning of things in our social and political world. We can understand 'discourse' as the structured way in which subjects seek to assign meaning to the World through language (Mouffe & Laclau 2001). In the study of international relations, these objects might include geographical spaces/places, identities, military 'assets', concepts, indeed anything and everything of significance and interest to the different actors. Yet these attempts can never be fully realized since it is impossible to definitively fix the meaning of something: 'it is impossible to fix a sign's meaning, it is contingent; possible, however not necessary' (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 25). Therefore, the nature of the political is that groups are constantly involved in articulating and contesting the meanings associated with the aforementioned aspects of the material world. In carrying out a post-structuralist discourse analysis, therefore, the competing attempts to assign and contest meaning become of particular analytical value. A rigorous analysis should logically account for the changes occurring in 'hegemonic' discourses as they come into contact with 'counter-discourses' (Hansen, 2006). In short, it is the temporal dimension which often takes precedence in an analysis of how discourse seek to constitute the material world.

In post-structural discourse theory 'identity' takes on paramount significance. It is through discourse that identities are assigned to individuals, locations, objects, and various other entities. For instance, the discursive practice of foreign policy is perpetually implicated in the constitution of the identities of the state and its others (Hansen, 2006). 'Identity' thus cannot be understood as unequivocal or self-sufficient; rather, it is relational and inextricably linked to difference, on which it is dependent (Hansen, 2006). For that, when considering how discourse shapes human identity formation, one is compelled to focus on how boundaries between the Self and the Other are created and maintained.

Indeed, it is impossible to think 'identity' in any other terms since it 'would not exist in its distinctness and solidity' if it were self-contained (Connolly, 2002). The key consideration, therefore, is not what a particular identity is, but 'how these boundaries come into existence and are maintained' (Neumann, 1999).

Additionally, one can unpack the concept of 'identity' by inquiring into the different modalities that subjects or objects may be assigned. For instance, we might speak of a geographical identity whereby a people are constituted in relation to a geographical space. National identity is a salient example, not least since it is often (miss)understood as the only important geographical identity. Second, there is the possibility of viewing identity from a temporal perspective, whether that be conceived as fixed or transient, and even that which is assumed to be heading in some teleological direction. Third, and also highly significant for foreign policy analysis, is an identity based on some particular moral or ethical principles. Appeals to these types of identity are, of course, not uncommon at the international scale, where political events of great magnitude such as war and conflict always raise moral and ethical questions. The creation of responsibility in relation to a self-conceived moral or ethical identity is crucial for the elaboration of foreign policies of 'humanitarian' or 'military intervention' (Hansen, 2006).

Since post-structuralist discourse theory eschews the sovereign subject and refuses to assign agency to language itself, discourse and identity can rather be grasped as performative. In developing a theory of gender identity, Judith Butler took up earlier work by John Austin and Jacques Derrida on the performative nature of language. As Butler puts it, 'gender proves to be performance—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by the subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed' (Butler, 1990, p. 25). There is nothing deliberate about an 'act,' rather performativity presupposes they must be understood through the 'reiterative and citational practices by which discourse produces the effects that it names' (Butler, 1993).

If it is possible to conceptualize gender identities as something performed or enacted, this perspective could extend to other identities as well. Butler's work is relevant for more overtly political contexts, including the identities and practices associated with the state itself (Campbell, 1998b; Weber, 1998; Bialasiewicz, Campbell, Elden, Graham, Jeffrey, & Williams, 2007). David Campbell clarifies that this does not equate individual identities with collective identities. Instead, the argument is that the formation of gender identities

parallels the formation of state identities. In essence, 'the performative constitution of gender and the body is analogous to the performative constitution of the state' (Campbell, 1998b, p. 9). Thus, similar to gender identities, any perceived inherent identity of the state is simply the 'ontological effects of practices which are performatively enacted' (Weber, 1998, p. 78). As a result, we can view the state's identity as a subject that is in a state of flux or undergoing a process of transformation. It is created and sustained through discourse, enabled by the repetitive nature of citational processes that work to performatively constitute the state as a subject. These expressions and actions do not stem from a sovereign state subject; rather, 'the identity of the state is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its result' (Weber, 1998, p. 90).

It is worth making clear that the theory of performativity does not exclusively attend to the linguistic over the material world. Instead, it allows for agency by bridging the gap between idealism and materialism, recognizing that while discourse shapes the social and political world, agents can make material decisions (Bialasiewicz et al., 2007, p. 406). To grasp this more clearly, differentiating between 'performativity' and 'performance' can be helpful. 'Performativity' challenges the notion of a sovereign subject and we can understand it as a 'discursive mode' which captures the re-iteration of discourses; 'performance,' on the other hand, assumes the existence of a subject. It is just that the 'conditions of possibility created through the infrastructure of performativity' (Bialasiewicz et al., 2007, p. 408) always constrain the subjects who are assumed to be executing these performances.

One of the more intriguing aspects of understanding the state through a performative lens is that its dependence on previously articulated expressions of identity is not merely about maintaining coherence. The state functions through these prior expressions of identity in its efforts to re-stabilize itself. This leads to a crucial aspect of performative theory: a gap inevitably forms between the perceived notions of a fixed identity and the ontological impossibility of fully achieving them. States are thus perpetually striving to stabilize their identities in a 'permanent need of reproduction,' and are 'always in a state of becoming' (Campbell, 1998b, p. 11). However, this drive for identity stabilization is ultimately futile and destined to fail. Any attempt at final closure is ontologically elusive, as 'for a state to end its practices of representation would be to expose its lack of pre-discursive foundations: stasis would be death' (Campbell, 1998b, p. 11). In short, the state must continuously engage in

practices of representation because its very existence or identity depends on them.

The fallibility of the performative is precisely what makes discourse possible in the first place, meaning that 'success' or 'failure' is always inherently inconclusive (Butler, 1997; Mercier, 2018). The nature of language's iterability means that any utterance must depart from its prior context to be applied in a new one. Despite attempts at mastery, this effort is doomed, since one can never fully achieve complete discursive stability. The reiterative logic can never exhaust the context within which it is employed and always already confronts the constitutive force of the 'outside' (Mouffe & Laclau, 2001). Faced with criticism and the destabilization of the link between identity and policy, individuals or groups will attempt to adjust the discourse and 'recreate stability through modification of either the construction of identity or the proposed policy' (Hansen, 2006, pp. 28-29). The fallibility of the performative is also what enables political critique and contestation, allowing for the subversion of existing notions, structures, and identities, thereby unleashing significant emancipatory possibilities. Ignoring this fallibility within the structure of sovereignty can inadvertently reinforce the sovereign state (Mercier, 2018). Conversely, the theory of performativity can reveal the illusory and precarious nature of sovereignty. As Michael Glass and Reuben Rose-Redwood highlight, examining the 'practice of enacting the state' is part of a broader effort to re-politicize the performative acts that sovereign authorities and their intellectual supporters have long used to naturalize the contingency of social and political norms. In essence, 'the performative practices that constitute the state are open to re-articulations and new becomings' (Glass & Rose-Redwood, 2014, p. xiv).

3. Performing human rights in Libya

Despite denials to the contrary, denials which would be repeated for the duration of the military intervention in Libya, it would not be difficult to show that the main foreign policy pursued by the UK, US and French governments was that of regime change (Robson, 2024). First, all three had an important role in securing two resolutions at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC): UNSC Res. 1970 and soon after UNSC Res. 1973. The latter, in particular, would authorize the imposition of a no-fly zone and 'all necessary measures' to protect civilians. Second, the NATO bombing campaign that followed would only end after Libyan leader Gaddafi had been captured, forces loyal to him were crushed, and the National Transitional Council (NTC) had become the de facto governing administration. This, it is worth recalling, only came to pass after

several months of fierce, albeit futile, resistance from Libyan security forces. The concerted efforts of disparate groups of anti-government militias on the ground, along with the advanced and technologically superior military power of Western forces in the skies, would ultimately bring about an end to Gaddafi's reign. Indeed, the intentions of intervening Western governments were spelled out not long after the first media reports of violence in Benghazi and elsewhere. Addressing the House of Commons with noticeably strong rhetoric, British Prime Minister David Cameron (2011d) expressed his understanding of the events in clear terms: 'for the future of Libya and its people, Colonel Qadhafi's regime must end and he must leave'. Meanwhile, the US government was also adamant that Gaddafi's authoritarian rule as Libyan leader had ended, even if greater degrees of caution were detectable in their statements. Again, only days into the crisis, US Secretary of State Clinton (2011b) proclaimed that Gaddafi 'needs to do what is right for his country by leaving now.' Shortly after President Obama (2011e) was even more blunt: 'Muammar Gaddafi has lost the legitimacy to lead and he must leave.'

The Western-led military intervention in Libya of 2011 revolves around the question of sovereignty. Whether the Libyan government's claims to sovereignty were invalidated by its inability to protect its population (R2P) on the one hand, and whether powerful external states had a right to violate that sovereignty based on a putative cosmopolitan order on the other. In approving Resolutions 1970 and 1973, the UNSC had effectively ruled in favor of the latter, disqualifying the sovereignty of the State of Libya, and in its place invoking the human rights of the Libyan population. It is the international community, led by the Western states of the UK, France and the US, who shall be tasked with upholding those rights.

It is also clear from early statements made by UK and US officials that the situation in Libya was being constituted in terms of 'human rights' and the 'Responsibility to Protect (R2P)'. Condemnations of the Libyan government were in fact widespread, as the civil insurrections in different parts of the country were met with coercive violence from Libyan security forces. The dominant 'human rights' discourse used by the governments of the UK and US emphasized the (liberal democratic) universal values of 'freedom' and 'democracy'. Cameron (2011d) traces these links: 'We must not remain silent in our belief that freedom and the rule of law are what best guarantee human progress and economic success. Freedom of expression, a free press, freedom of assembly, the right to demonstrate peacefully: these are basic rights...they are not British or western values - but the values of human beings everywhere.' Another

example of this can be seen from Hillary Clinton (2011a), declaring that 'it is the responsibility of the Libyan government to respect the universal rights of their own people, including their right to free expression and assembly.' In line with the apparent requirements of R2P, the failure of the Libyan government to ensure these human rights and protect its population lends legitimacy to any external military intervention. Indeed, it would be on this basis that UN Security Council Resolutions 1970 and 1973 would be approved authorizing the use of military force (United Nations Security Council, 2011).

Once the violence is understood in terms of 'human rights,' the identities of those who had become embroiled in the violence can be demarcated accordingly. It is the figure of 'Gaddafi' who is to be held directly responsible for the situation in Libya and the 'human rights' abuses occurring there, and as such becomes the radical 'Other' in opposition to the Western 'Self'. The Libyan leader is defined as 'murderous' (Cameron, 2011c), a 'brutal dictator' (Cameron, 2011g) or 'tyrant,' (Obama, 2011b) and the leader of a 'barbaric' and 'illegitimate' regime (Cameron, 2011d). In short, Gaddafi is the antithesis of the rational, moral, and democratic Western identity. In a longer, yet exemplary pronouncement from Cameron, he assesses Gaddafi's response to the events in Libya: 'Colonel Gaddafi has responded by attacking his own people. He has brought the full might of the armed forces to bear on them, backed up by mercenaries. The world has watched as he has brutally crushed his own people' (Cameron, 2011a). As can also be ascertained from the previous citation, the dual-Libyan Other being constructed by Cameron comprises a secondary side and what is defined as a coherent, unambiguous and uniform 'Libyan people'. The UK government, and to a notably lesser extent, US government officials, establish and employ this operation, which is characterized by a clear-cut division of the dual-Libyan Other. As we shall see, this stands in marked contrast to variations of a 'civil war' discourse prevalent in political and media circles, which spoke of a 'stalemate' situation on the ground, and a multifarious band of 'rebels' fighting against the Libyan government.

Using a 'human rights' discourse also constitutes the Self identities of the UK and US governments in particular ways. In particular, both governments are performatively constituting themselves moral. 'Human rights' has an unmistakably moral dimension in that these are purportedly universal values; an irrevocable ethical responsibility is thus generated on the part of Western governments. We can see this in a speech delivered on Libya by Obama during which he moralises unashamedly: 'to brush aside America's responsibility as a leader and -- more profoundly -- our responsibilities to our fellow human beings

under such circumstances would have been a betrayal of who we are. Some nations may be able to turn a blind eye to atrocities in other countries. The United States is different' (Obama, 2011d). Of course, one must keep in mind that the dissemination of 'human rights' qua 'freedom' and 'democracy' had become as a key part of the national security strategy of both the UK and US (The White House, 2010; UK Ministry of Defence, 2011).

The 'human rights' discourse being used to give meaning to the Libyan crisis has an important geographical dimension. Events in Libya are being situated within the MENA region. As such, the events were grasped as part of a wider 'Arab Spring' phenomenon, which was characterised by precisely these elements. After laying out the UK government's own stance before the House of Commons - that 'Colonel Gaddafi's regime must end and he must leave'- Cameron's 'statement on Libya' aims to contextualise through reference to the wider region: 'North Africa and the wider Middle East are now at the epicentre of momentous events,' he begins, and 'In many parts of the Arab world, hopes and aspirations which have been smothered for decades are stirring. People, especially young people, are seeking their rights' (Cameron, 2011d). President Obama also viewed the situation in this way: 'Now, throughout this period of unrest and upheaval across the region the United States has maintained a set of core principles which guide our approach. These principles apply to the situation in Libya' (Obama, 2011c).

By imbuing the Libyan people with the human rights of freedom and democracy, significance is assigned to both their temporal and geographical identities. This appears in two principal ways. First, regarding the 'Arab Spring,' the 'momentous' events sweeping through MENA (Cameron, 2011d) are constituted as a 'precious moment of opportunity for the region' (Cameron, 2011b). Second, in line with this, the identity of the Libyan Other is also constructed along temporal lines. The temporal identity of the 'Libyan people' is portrayed as lagging behind the civilized, developed Western Self. Ontologically, however, they are essentially the same, with the 'Libyan people' aspiring to complete their temporal development by realizing their universal human rights. In fact, for both Cameron and Obama, it is the 'destiny' of the Libyan people to achieve this; yet this is a 'destiny' which is reliant on external support from the West. In supporting 'the universal rights of the Libyan people,' including the 'rights of peaceful assembly' and 'free speech,' Obama is committed to helping the 'Libyan people to determine their own destiny' (Obama, 2011b). Speaking later at the London Conference on Libya on the 29th March, 2011, Cameron spoke in similar terms: 'Just as we continue to act to help

protect the Libyan people from the brutality of Qadhafi's regime… so we will support and stand by them as they seek to take control of their own destiny' (Cameron, 2011h).

The 'Arab Spring' phenomenon can thus be shown to shape the geographical and temporal contours of events in Libya, and yet, conversely, the outcome of these events in Libya was also being framed as crucial to the success of the 'Arab Spring' in the broader region. Connecting the two, Cameron (2011f) warned: 'we have seen the uprising of a people against a brutal dictator, and it will send a dreadful signal if their legitimate aspirations are crushed, not least to others striving for democracy across the region.' Thus, external intervention and the removal of Gaddafi were being put forward as not only desirable for the future of the Libyan people but also significant for the region as a whole, since a failure to act decisively could negatively affect other countries showing democratic aspirations. What we have here is a kind of geopolitical 'domino' logic, but in reverse: the failure of an oppressed people to overthrow their authoritarian rulers could inhibit positive developments in other neighboring countries. The formulation of this logic is a consequence of Libya being situated geographically as part of MENA and categorized ethnically as 'Arab,' aligning it with the 'Arab Spring' phenomenon. While, of course, many individuals and groups within Libya were demanding greater political freedoms, the attempt to unify disparate countries under the 'Arab Spring' signifier remains problematic. For one thing, it suggests a uniform response, which may not be suitable for the varied social and political contexts of the region (Anderson, 2011).

It is important to highlight that the spread and entrenchment of liberal democracy in Libya was also in conformity with Western security interests. On the one hand, the emphasis placed on human rights entails the bio-political security of human species life; on the other, the emphasis on territory suggests the geopolitical securing of space. It is just that both are intertwined in Western security practices, meaning that we cannot have the one without the other (Dillon, 2007). In his pronouncements about the events in Libya, Cameron articulates this from an early stage: 'I am clear where British national interest lies. It is in our interests to see the growth of open societies and the building blocks of democracy in North Africa and the Middle East' (Cameron, 2011f). And President Obama concurs with this very point in the following citation: 'The United States,' he assures, 'has an important strategic interest in preventing Qaddafi from overrunning those who oppose him….the democratic impulses that are dawning across the region would be eclipsed by the darkest form of

dictatorship, as repressive leaders concluded that violence is the best strategy to cling to power' (Obama, 2011d).

4. 'Civil war' and the deconstruction of the 'human rights' discourse

In the previous section, we have seen how the governments of the UK and US were performatively constituting events in Libya of 2011 in terms of 'human rights,' and their own identity as the sovereign guardian of these 'universal' rights. However, this discourse of 'human rights' must inevitably fail due to the impossibility of 'universal' values; those who evoke them do so from a situated perspective thereby invalidating claims to universality. In the case at hand 'human rights' is equated with the Western liberal values of 'freedom' and 'democracy,' but since these also reflect these Western governments' own biopolitical/geopolitical objectives, this discourse is only invoked on a case-by-case basis and always conforms to a particular spatio-temporal context. It is therefore impossible for Western governments to live up to past iterations –or indeed non-iterations- of the human rights discourse being deployed in Libya. At any rate, any 'success' which this discourse may have will also be dependent on the conditions in Libya and the willingness of the Libyan population to accept their designated status as subjects of Western 'human rights'. In this section, we shall continue analysing the debate on the military intervention in Libya, but this time exploring an oppositional 'civil war' discourse which emerged in the mainstream media in the UK and US. The aim shall be to use the debate as a means of exposing the fallibility of the 'human rights' discourse deployed by Western governments to constitute the crisis in Libya of 2011.

As variations of a 'civil war' discourse were being disseminated by US and UK mainstream media, the 'human rights' discourse being deployed by Western officials was challenged in key ways. Gone are the sole references to the 'Libyan people,' or sub-groups such as 'protesters', 'demonstrators' or 'civilians,' which were being placed in opposition to Gaddafi and Libyan security forces. A new opposition is instead established between 'loyalists' and 'rebels'. Media reports highlight these identity constructions, noting that 'Gaddafi loyalists were engaged in fierce fighting with rebels who had hoped to march on Sirte, Gaddafi's hometown and a strategically vital city still under tight government control' (Hendrix, Faiola, & Perry, 2011); 'Muammar el Qaddafi's loyalists clashed with rebels' (Cowell, 2011); and later, 'on the western border with Tunisia, rebels and loyalists fought all day Thursday for control of a strategic crossing that the rebels seized in a surprise move last week' (Chivers,

2011). The first thing to note about the term 'rebels' is that it does not convey the same legitimacy as 'Libyan people'; speaking of a collective entity differs from framing a specific faction, or groups of 'rebels,' against 'loyalists.' This framing complicates the perception of the violent conflict. As inferred from the previous media references, it is no longer plausible to depict the 'rebels' as purely peaceful. For instance, the New York Times illustrates the association between the 'rebels' and their readiness to use arms: '... but witnesses said that the rebels seemed to use every weapon at their disposal, including Katyusha rockets, multiple grenade launchers, and antiaircraft guns as they tried to dislodge the loyalists' (Fahim & Kirkpatrick 2011).

Within the same article, we can observe the consequences of employing a 'civil war' narrative in the geographical delineation of the nation. This deviation from the occurrences in Tunisia and Egypt makes references to the 'Arab Spring,' the 'Arab World,' or the 'Middle Eastern' region somewhat obsolete. This shows a noticeable shift in the perspective through which the 'civil war' in Libya is now primarily perceived as a national issue. Fahim and Kirkpatrick's article, along with other accounts using this narrative, specifically highlight the battles for control in Libya's cities and towns: 'In the western part of the country, government forces continued to attack the besieged rebel-held city of Zawiyah, just 30 miles from Tripoli, the capital and Colonel Qaddafi's stronghold. Separated by vast distances, Ras Lanuf and Zawiyah have become battlegrounds in Libya's developing civil war' (Fahim & Kirkpatrick, 2011).

The media's coverage of the Libyan civil war in 2011 exhibited a distinct regional and spatial emphasis, as evidenced by the prevalent use of the 'civil war' discourse. A clear divide was drawn between the 'west' and 'east' of Libya, with these cardinal directions delineating the two principal regional blocs involved in the conflict. On the one hand, there is Tripolitania in western Libya, understood as more of a stronghold for Muammar Gaddafi's regime. On the other, there is Cyrenaica in the east, which emerged as the base of the rebel forces seeking to overthrow the Libyan government. This spatial framing was clear in news reports, such as one from The Washington Post, which described a 'bloody stalemate' unfolding 'with the death tolls rising in both east and west'. The media's focus was particularly trained on the eastern city of Benghazi and the broader Cyrenaica region, which were viewed as the epicenter of the rebellion. Journalists like The Guardian's Martin Chulov (2011) reported directly from this eastern front, capturing the rebels' determination to topple Gaddafi's four-decade rule. This emphasis on the east was further reinforced as US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton traveled to meet with the rebels'

provisional government, the National Transitional Council, which was headquartered in Benghazi. Overall, the media's coverage was imbued with a distinct regional and spatial framing, underscoring the divided nature of the Libyan civil war and the pivotal role played by the eastern front in the ultimately successful effort to overthrow Gaddafi's regime.

While Libya is often extracted from its wider MENA spatial setting in media reports deploying the 'civil war' discourse, this is not always the case. It is just that when this happens, the temporal context shifts back to a different period. For instance, while the 'human rights' framing of the conflict, with its binary depiction of 'Gaddafi' versus 'the Libyan people,' finds clear precedents and parallels in the uprisings occurring in neighboring Tunisia and Egypt, through the 'civil war' discourse analogies are being drawn with past violent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. This shift is significant, as it signals an attempt to situate the Libyan civil war within a different historical and geopolitical context - one marked by protracted internal strife, foreign intervention, and the perils of such involvement. By evoking the examples of Iraq and Afghanistan, commentators like Seamus Milne sought to issue a cautionary tale: 'It's as if the bloodbaths of Iraq and Afghanistan had been a bad dream. The liberal interventionists are back. As insurrection and repression has split Libya in two and the death toll has mounted, the old Bush-and-Blair battlecries have returned to haunt us' (Milne, 2011).

In constituting the identities of the 'civil war' belligerents in terms of 'loyalists' vs. 'rebels,' there is a certain ambiguity surrounding the identity of the latter. This would take on even greater significance, as the 'rebel' forces in Libya grew more fragmented and dispersed. Regarding a 'disquieting data point,' Ross Douthat claimed that 'Eastern Libya, the locus of the rebellion, sent more foreign fighters per capita to join the Iraqi insurgency than any other region in the Arab World' (Douthat, 2011). These kinds of discoveries cast doubt on the popular narrative of a unified, democratic, and Western-friendly opposition facing off against an autocratic regime. Events like the assassination of rebel commander General Younis only heightened these concerns further, being viewed as 'ominous' in so far as it 'raises the spectre of a democratic movement degenerating into tribal conflict' (Chulov, 2011).

The 'civil war' discourse being used to constitute events in Libya would be reinforced through reports of widespread agreement that a 'stalemate' situation had been reached on the ground (Warrick & Sly, 2011). One of the main discursive inconsistencies that this evaluation of the conflict posed was a gap between the stated military aims of the NATO mission and the political

aims of Western governments. Aerial support being given at this point 'to protect' the Libyan population was clearly not proving decisive in so far as the Libyan 'rebels' could not bring down Gaddafi and the Libyan government. This meant that the UK and US political aim of forcing Gaddafi out through a de facto policy of 'regime change' was, at least in the current circumstances, unachievable. And if the present 'stalemate' situation were to continue, 'what then?' (Hertog, 2011).

For many of those deploying a 'civil war' discourse to make sense of the violent events occurring in Libya, the solution to the crisis would have to be a political one. This was deemed to be the most prudent course of action, since any increase in military force could lead to the exacerbation of an already critical situation of insecurity. The African Union, in particular, was advocating this stance, emphasizing that outside powers should not 'take sides in a civil war,' but 'should promote dialogue, reconciliation, the peaceful resolution of conflicts, and help in enforcing agreements arrived at after negotiations such as the agreement on the Sudan'. In short, 'the crisis in Libya requires a political solution and not a military one; and the AU Road Map is the most viable option' (Rugunda, 2011). The UN special envoy for Libya, Abdel-Elah Al-Khatib, lent his support to this view after visiting 'both sides' in the conflict: 'I think every crisis and conflict needs to be solved in a political manner. We need to solve it politically and I do not believe that at the end of the day the military confrontation can provide the solution that people aspire to. In the end it has to be a political solution' (Al-Khatib, 2011).

5. Putting an end to resistance

As the debate surrounding the Libyan conflict was increasingly dominated by the idea of a 'civil war,' reaching hegemonic status in the media, even leading the US president to acknowledge a 'stalemate' on the ground (Obama, 2011a), Western governments found themselves under pressure to reinforce their 'human rights' narrative. Despite the initial political aim of regime change in Libya, the constant reiteration of the conflict in terms of human rights made it increasingly difficult to consider alternative solutions, such as those being proposed by the African Union. The insistence on a rights-based approach not only created ethical obligations, but also limited the flexibility to pursue a negotiated settlement. The Libyan opposition were seemingly not interested in resolving the conflict through negotiation in any case (Fahim, 2011). With the conflict escalating and both human and financial costs rising, it was also becoming clear that coalition efforts to protect civilians were unlikely

to lead to the ousting of Gaddafi. In light of these challenges, Western governments would ultimately seek to augment the use of coercive means, particularly through military power, to support 'rebel' forces and overcome the 'stalemate' reached on the ground. This, however, would run the risk of reinforcing divisions between the different regions and tribes in Libya, exacerbate the ongoing violence, and galvanize resistance to Western intervention (Vandewalle, 2011).

Western officials made assurances that everything was being done to bring about an end to the conflict. For Hillary Clinton, greater financial assistance to those fighting Gaddafi would be necessary, assuring that 'money is flowing, other support is available' (Clinton, 2011d). 'Gaddafi is still getting squeezed in all kinds of other ways,' Obama was also keen to confirm, 'the noose is tightening and he is becoming more and more isolated' (Obama, 2011a). In these two quotes, we can detect the reluctance in US officials to commit to a greater military role in forcing an end to the Libyan resistance, something which was at least partly explainable because of domestic political pressures. This was not the case with the UK government, however, as high-ranking officials seemed to be willing to highlight this crucial dimension of the campaign. Indeed, William Hague ensured that 'time is not on Gaddafi's side,' as, 'the diplomatic, economic and military pressure on him will only intensify in the coming weeks' (Hague, 2011a). At the same time, officials would re-iterate that their policy was about protecting the Libyan people, and that any intensification of the pressure on Gaddafi was not a sign that the mission had changed. As Hague put it: 'we will continue in that way, intensifying what we're doing, the Apache helicopters are an example of that but that's different from mission creep, this is not mission creep changing the nature of the thing, this is intensifying what we are doing in order to make this mission a success' (Hague, 2011a).

Despite mounting evidence that Libya was indeed descending into a complex civil war, and reports that Gaddafi had accepted the African Union's 'roadmap to peace' (Sherwood & McGreal, 2011), Western governments would pursue their own policy of regime change in Libya by striving to: 1) undermine and negate elements of the counter 'civil war' discourse, and 2) maintain stability of their own fledgling 'human rights' discourse. Regarding the former, UK and US officials would have to elide the 'rebels v loyalists' identity construction being propagated by the 'civil war' discourse in the media, along with concomitant questions surrounding the identity of those fighting against Gaddafi. Any acknowledgement that there was indeed a 'civil war' occurring

would undermine their own claims that their involvement was to protect 'human rights' and ensure that the 'Libyan people' could reach their 'destiny' of freedom and democracy. In the first place, a civil war situation does not imply the same ethical responsibility as that generated by the 'human rights' discourse; it suggests a much more complex situation on the ground, placing in doubt the unity of the Libyan people or Libyan opposition. This would also prompt a recognition of the decisive role of NATO in breaking the 'stalemate': as such, the discursive claim that Western forces were merely protecting the Libyan people would have already collapsed. Finally, this would no doubt have brought into focus the very real risks of exacerbating the conflict and instability.

As for the stabilization of their own 'human rights' discourse, several discursive strategies can be identified for how this was being done. First, we can find the reiteration of the hegemonic 'human rights' discourse positing a 'brutal' and 'illegitimate' Libyan government in opposition to a besieged and brutalized Libyan people. In response to doubts being raised about the consequences of the US government's actions, for instance, Clinton reverts to the original aim to protect civilians: 'And if you look at the region–can you imagine, David, if we were sitting here and Qadhafi had gotten to Benghazi, and in a city of 700,000 people, had massacred tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands had fled over the border, destabilizing Egypt? Everybody would be saying, "Why didn't the President do something?"' (Clinton, 2011e). UK Defence Secretary Fox (2011a) put it in similar terms: 'All that we want is that men, women and children can sleep safe in their own homes knowing that they will not be attacked by their own government'. The focus would then be shifted to the job at hand, issuing a steadfast warning and assuring: 'its resolve (international community) will not falter until we have achieved militarily and politically what it has set out to do' (Fox, 2011b). Libya's place within a wider 'democratic transition' occurring in the region would also be re-iterated. As stated in a speech given on the 19th May, Obama speaks of the 'extraordinary change' where people 'have risen up to demand their basic human rights'. Events are once more articulated on teleological grounds and as indicative of a 'longing for freedom'. Conceived of in this way, events in MENA 'should not have come as a surprise,' nor should the outcome of 'freedom' be in any doubt since 'strategies of repression and strategies of division will not work anymore'. In short, he concludes, 'change cannot be denied' (Obama, 2011f)

Yet, as it was becoming increasingly clear that the conflict in Libya was becoming more and more convoluted, the role of the UK and US governments was likewise being questioned. As UK Foreign Secretary Hague all but ruled out

a British peacekeeping force in the aftermath of the military intervention, journalist Andrew Marr articulates an obvious challenge to this position: 'our moral responsibility is different,' Marr states, 'I mean we will have helped to bring this regime down, we will have broken the Government as it were, so in terms of the pieces afterwards, we have an obligation presumably as a country to ensure that, you know, that there isn't chaos' (Mar, 2011). It was also becoming less credible to insist on the unity of the Libyan opposition forces, or that this movement was universally democratic.

Another discursive strategy to stabilize the 'human rights' discourse being deployed to performatively constitute events in Libya was to place a greater emphasis on the Libyan opposition. This was difficult because of the heterogeneity of the uprisings and 'rebel' forces, with speculation that some groups were even motivated by radical jihadi ideologies. To deal with this, UK and US officials would admit partial ignorance regarding the identities of the groups fighting against the Libyan government. When asked if he was clear about who the UK was supporting, Foreign Secretary Hague conveys this uncertainty: 'well a fairly clear sense. We've got to know some of them quite well'. And he continues, 'there's also a great mixture who support them; there are representatives of all areas of Libya, there are representatives of many shades of opinion' (Hague, 2011a).

Yet concerns surrounding the aftermath of the conflict and Gaddafi's expected fall would have to be dealt with more substantively. Here, a double discursive strategy can be detected. The first thing would be to place a greater emphasis on the self-appointed leaders of the Libyan opposition, the National Transitional Council (NTC from now on). Of course, the NTC had not been elected and thus lacked political legitimacy, but this did not stop Obama from asserting that the opposition 'has organized a legitimate and credible Interim Council' (Obama, 2011f). There would also be a need convince of the NTC's democratic disposition: 'I think it is important to say that these people at the top of this organisation are genuine believers in democracy, in the rule of law. It is quite inspiring as I, as I said earlier this morning to see their real hope for the future of their country'. And he continues, 'I think they are genuine in wanting a democratic Libya and in their hopes for a free country' (Hague, 2011b). Cameron would also show a tendency to put the focus onto the democratic credentials of the Libyan opposition: 'if we are patient and persistent,' he assures, 'we will see the steady growth of the National Transitional Council which is an organisation that wants to make sure Libya is one country, is a democracy, is not extremist Islamist, is not tribalist but is

actually joining the mainstream of the world as a successful democracy' (Cameron, 2011e).

The second discursive strategy used to deal with the violent disintegration of the country at this stage was to meet it head on, and recognize the magnitude of the task at hand. It is difficult to imagine how this could have been any other way. Regarding the 'TNC's own roadmap', one notes the displacement of responsibility. Clinton emphasizes the precarity of the situation in her speech after the Libyan Contact Group meeting: 'we are well aware of how difficult and challenging the road ahead of them is' (Clinton, 2011c). Yet these are difficulties that are to be expected in going from 'one kind of regime to a democracy', and especially so in a country like Libya where it was 'Colonel Qadhafi's modus operandi and modus vivendi, actually, to have no institutions.' And even though the Western powers were playing a crucial role in bringing down Gaddafi and the Libyan government, it is clear from Clinton's statement that the responsibility for moving Libya forward was now with TNC, who 'have made great strides and are on the right path' (Clinton, 2011c).

6. Conclusions

The dire political and security situation that followed the violent removal of Gaddafi and the Libyan government in 2011 has cast a shadow over Western governments' role in assisting 'rebel' forces, and moreover their stated aims of bringing about a democratic transition in Libya. Nonetheless, this paper has been primarily concerned with the failure of the military intervention at the level of discourse, as something inevitable due its performative logic. We can perceive this already in the ways that Western governments' 'human rights' discourse fails to constitute definitively the identities of those involved. First, it is impossible for these governments to constitute their own 'Self' identity as sovereign defenders of 'universal' human rights given past and present inconsistencies in how this discourse is deployed. Second, the 'human rights' discourse clearly fails to constitute the identity of the 'Libyan people'. Resistance by some segments of the Libyan population against 'rebel' forces and the Western-led military intervention evidences a refusal to accept their designated status as subjects of 'universal' human rights. As events transpired, it also becomes clear that some of the armed 'rebel' forces fighting against the Libyan government had little interest in assuming their purportedly 'universal' rights of 'freedom' and 'democracy' in the aftermath of the conflict.

Yet, the main argument of this paper is that Western governments' 'human rights' discourse fails principally due to its essentialist and universalist

conception of 'democracy'. This discourse is being mobilized in support of the Libyan opposition, and in conjunction with Western governments' own biopolitical/geopolitical objectives, but the complex dynamics of the democratization process occurring in Libya constantly undermine its meaning making. These dynamics evidence two aporias or paradoxes which bedevil the concept of 'democracy': democracy/sovereignty and freedom/equality. On the one hand, while the logic of 'democracy' presupposes 'sovereignty'-without this the demos would be unable to rule-, the latter inevitably leads to exclusions which undermine the former-all groups can never be represented equally (Derrida, 2005). On the other hand, the concept of 'democracy' also implies both 'freedom' and 'equality,' and yet both also co-exist in a paradoxical relationship; excessive freedom will impinge upon equality, while greater equality compromise freedom (Thomson, 2014, p. 97). In the case of Libya, the violent conflict taking place in 2011 was essentially a struggle over sovereignty in order to bring about democratization yet the refusal of the Libyan opposition to negotiate with the existing Libyan government would lead to the exclusion/marginalization of its supporters as equals in the 'democratic' transition occurring (Rice, 2011). Thus, greater freedom for the Libyan people does not necessarily equate with greater political equality.

It is not just that Western governments' 'human rights' discourse fails due to the complex and volatile conditions in Libya, but that its essentialist and universalist conception of 'democracy' leads to a foreign policy which will exacerbate those conditions further. This is ultimately a regime change policy for which Western military power is deployed to assist in the violent removal of the Libyan government, eschewing any serious attempts to reach a negotiated political settlement between all parties, and in doing so facilitating the ongoing deterritorialization and de-securitization of the Libyan state e.g. the crushing of state security forces, the dismantlement of any albeit defective political institutions, and the proliferation of armed militias. Forcible regime change may well have been the best way for Western governments to pursue their own short-term biopolitical/geopolitical aims in Libya, but the resultant exclusion or marginalization of certain political groups and interests from the democratic transition could only sow the seeds of future political instability and violent conflict. These consequences have been inimical to the Libyan people's own prospects of greater democracy, and also at odds with the wider security interests of Western states.

The point here is not to seek a reconciliation of the democracy-sovereignty and freedom-equality aporias inherent in the concept 'democracy,'

and which characterize democratization processes-this would in fact be impossible, as these tensions are irreconcilable and present in all democracies (Mouffe, 2000). On the contrary, it is to stress the importance of maintaining these tensions in place as a means of grasping and addressing the complexity of democratization processes and transitions. For that, the paper argues, secondly, that the case of Libya stands as further evidence of how 'democracy' should be conceived of as a 'promise' which is always 'to come' (Derrida, 2005). It is suggested that this conception of 'democracy' holds out the best hope for more peaceful, stable, and inclusive ways of navigating democratization transitions by keeping them open to the possibilities of negotiation and contestation.

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