GALACTIC POLITIES: ANTHROPOLOGICAL INSIGHTS FOR UNDERSTANDING STATES IN YEMEN'S PRE-OTTOMAN PAST*

A N D R E   G I N G R I C H

The present volume provides a befitting opportunity to reflect upon Walter Dostal's insights, among many others, into one of the most complex and in fact most challenging topics of studying Yemen's past and present. This concerns the roles of the state, or rather, of states, in the region's socio-cultural past and present. Considering and assessing main scholarly orientations and tendencies in this particular sub-field of research does represent an especially sensitive endeavor in view of the violent and tragic events in which the contemporary united Yemeni post-colonial state was involved throughout the first decade of the 21st century (Brandt 2012). A moment after a presidency of more than three decades left the stage, while a fragile stalemate of opposing forces is being maintained in the Yemen at the time of writing, it is appropriate to take a step back. Whatever our respective approaches may be on those current events, most in the scholarly communities would agree that it still is far too early to subject them to any profound and balanced long-term scholarly assessment from the perspectives of present-day socio-cultural analyses and of contemporary history.

RENEWED DEBATES ABOUT CONCEPTUALIZING STATES IN YEMEN

What may be pursued instead, however, is grasping the current opportunity of raised confusion, disagreements, but also of heightened awareness about the state's roles and properties in the Yemen's present to reconsider some of the established hypotheses about states' roles in the historical and academic past. This also seems to be most appropriate in a discursive situation in which, precisely because of current and recent events in the Yemen, several experts in international relations and in political sciences have discovered the Yemen as a hot spot for their own debates on the topic of states' roles in South Arabia. This includes experts from a number of think tanks as well as some of their critics, such as Lisa Wedeen (2008) and Isa Blumi (2010).

In these debates, Lisa Wedeen has assumed a rather conventional Weberian-cum-constructivist "top- down" and capital city perspective based on the urban elites' positions. By contrast, Isa Blumi at least has tried, with some rather limited success I should add, to contribute "bottom-up" aspects to his global history approach – yet most of this is based on premises that are largely following an individualist orientation and therefore, a Western bias. To make a long story short, the models and theories proposed by political sciences today in order to assess the historical roles of Yemeni states claim to be universalist – that is, they strive at being applicable everywhere. Yet behind the friendly surface of a relatively uniform universalism looms the less friendly substance of a profound Western bias (Beck 2005). Both these US American political scientists have been rather dismissive about any relevant anthropological insights on the same issues that are discussed in these two authors' respective books on the Yemen. This gives me here the opportunity to set the record straight.

Most anthropologists would agree that regional and local histories play important roles in understanding the Yemen's present. Moreover, they would consent that this also is valid for the special research topic of state and governance in Yemen's past and present. As for the main periods of regional history, their fluid and intersecting division (Donner 1998) into pre-Islamic and Islamic history is self-understood, and so are the main subdivisions of Islamic history in the region (although continuities often are equally important for historiography, see Mahoney in this volume). In Yemeni studies it would therefore count as *opinio communis* that in Islamic history, one is well advised to distinguish between pre-colonial states in the region, Ottoman and British colonial state administration, and post-colonial statehood (Daum 1987; Brunner 2005). On the basis of these or similar, relatively loose and flexible distinctions into main eras of statehood, it would then also be consensual that earlier periods always had their profound impact upon succeeding periods in the region. It is obvious that such a focus on regional history would not exclude, but on the contrary would facilitate approaches from a global history perspective as well (Gingrich & Zips 2006).

In addition, regional experts of various disciplines – e.g., historians, archaeologists, geographers, or anthropologists alike – usually would agree that *some* concept of statehood not only is useful, but also is indispensable for the major pre-colonial periods of written South Arabian history. The question of how exactly pre-colonial forms of statehood are to be conceptualized, in fact, is an open research problem to be addressed in this essay. Yet as a general point of departure, an academic consent is well established upholding the view that assuming any one-to-one correspondence between early modern European states and pre-colonial statehood in southwestern Arabia would be misleading an, in fact, erroneous.

On the basis of this self-evident consensus two legacies of statehood from the pre-colonial period often have attracted particular attention within the respective research communities. These are the Rasulid state entities (also including the period of Ayyubid rulers as their immediate predecessors) to the south and the west of San'a between the late 12th and the mid-15th centuries (Varisco 1994; Smith 1974, 1996), and the Zaydi states in Sa'da province and Upper Yemen since the late 9th century (Madelung 2002; Serjeant 1969). Apart from the first introduction of Islam into Southwest Arabia, these two legacies indeed represent the most profound and lasting impact of statehood in the pre-colonial era of Yemen's Islamic history. The accompanying assumptions and hypotheses imply that legacies from both state traditions, Rasulid and Zaydi, continued to play a certain role in later eras of Yemeni history, i.e. in colonial and in post-colonial times. This provides the overall rationale why anthropological reasoning about historical states in the Yemen, and about interactions between statehood and local societies, tends to primarily relate its various insights and theories to these two pre-colonial state forms, i.e. the Rasulid and the Zaydi state versions.

In general, anthropological theories about indigenous states' roles in Yemen's past and present primarily were inspired by two main models. These may be, and actually have been combined in various ways with each other. It should be added from the outset that quite typical for anthropology, and contrary to most of political sciences reasoning, both of these models share the major advantage of largely relying on concepts derived from native Arab historiography as well, i.e. they absorb and integrate some of those older Arab scholarly concepts into their respective anthropological model.

TWO ANTHROPOLOGICAL MODELS OF STATEHOOD IN SOUTHERN ARABIA

The first among these two models is what may be labeled the functional or segmentary model. It was first exemplified for the Maghreb by the work of Ernst Gellner (1981), who thereby pursued an older research tradition established by Emile Durkheim and E. Evans-Pritchard. To an extent, Gellner's functional-segmentary model was founded on Ibn Khaldun's work (14th/15th century CE), especially on that author's "Muqaddima" (ed. Rosenthal 1958). In the Yemen, Ernest Gellner's students Shelagh Weir (2006) with her description of Razih tribalism and state influence as a self-perpetuating system, and most importantly, Paul Dresch (1993) have applied and have further elaborated the model into various directions. A few of Dostal's ethnographic writings on conflict resolution in Upper Yemen also show clear leanings towards segmentary theory (Dostal 1974), as is also true for some of the writing by Johann Heiss (1987) and by me (Gingrich 1993).

In the functional-segmentary perspective, the state primarily is conceptualized as the fragile element of mediation between opposing segmentary tribal or non-tribal local forces of similar weight and of some

equivalence to each other. Again and again, however, the state center by necessity is corrupted and weakened in the pursuit of this noble task. It then loses the capacity to accomplish its main function, which is the point when the state center is being transformed into a set of "weak sheep", as Ibn Khaldun metaphorically called it. The weak center then is exposed to attacks from the periphery (which also may be a nearby periphery, if state rule loses influence there), from where "hungry wolves" (i.e. tribes that were hardly integrated) attack the "sheep", and eventually kill them/overthrow them to take their position. From here, the cycle starts all over again. The model does have further ramifications, and leaves room for more complexity, but in a nut-shell, this is how it basically operates.

One of the model's main advantages, beyond its elegance and simplicity, lies in the fact that mediation indeed is a central asset and sign of the quality of good governance in medieval Yemeni state activities. The biography of the first Zaydi Imam in the history of northern Yemen argues precisely this point, by portray-ing al-Hadi ila 'l-Haqq Yahya b. al-Husayn as the ideal mediator among feuding tribal groups of Sa'da and Najran'. According to his biographer (van Arendonk 1960), he managed to establish peace among them by imposing the superiority of shari'a law over customary tribal law. In the long tradition of Zaydi imams in northern Yemen's history, al-Hadi in this regard certainly was seen as a role model that became integrated into the normative pantheon of good Zaydi governance (see Heiss, this volume).

There can be no doubt that the functional-segmentary model therefore has its merits and its advantages, despite its Maghrebinian origins, for Southwest Arabia. Some of this region's most important features in fact are quite adequately addressed by the model – such as, for instance, the relevance of Islamic and customary law, the significance of hierarchical layers of status and of egalitarian distinction, the state machinery's rela-tive fragility, and so on and so forth. The model's main disadvantage, however, is its disregard for profound transformations. A priority for continuity (as opposed to discontinuity) and for domestic and internal (as opposed to wider and external) factors was largely theory-inspired in this approach, and sometimes tended to disregard empirical evidence to the contrary. The segmentary model thus is largely confined to a perspec-tive of "Plus ca change, plus ca reste la meme chose": the more changes occur, the more the basic features nevertheless remain the same in this perspective. This is a legal mediation-based, cyclical model of the history of statehood and governance (see Heiss, this volume).

The second model also became popular because in a way, it does to an extent balance out those disadvan-tages of the first one. I prefer to call the second one the "cultural historical" model. It is best exemplified in the works of historian Robert Serjeant (1969; Serjeant & Lewcock 1983) and anthropologists such as Walter Dostal (1984) or Mikhail Rodionov (2007). In many ways, the second model is built on insights derived from the work of al-Hamdani (10th century CE), notably in his "Sifa" (ed. Mueller 1884-91). In the Yemen, a number of anthropologists have tended to follow this perspective, ranging from Thomas Gerholm (1977) to some of the works by Johann Heiss (Heiss 2005; Heiss & Slama 2010), Gabriele vom Bruck (2005) and myself (Gingrich i. pr.) to Bernard Haykel (2010) and others. In the second model, repetitive cycles are less important than sequences of transformation. These sequences are brought about by internal as well as by wider external forces that are less relevant in the first model. Between these internal and external forces, the state acts – and this is the crucial point – not only as a legal and diplomatic mediator, but also as cultural entrepreneur, translator, and innovator, in short as a civilizational force.

Much of Walter Dostal's work on the state in Arabia, from his early (Dostal 1964) paper on the continuities of cultural forms to his very last book (Dostal 2008), testifies precisely to these points. Profound transforma-tions usually are brought about in periods when existing states no longer are able to absorb and accommodate new external flows and growing internal tensions.

The Khaldunian and Gellnerian functional-segmentary model does deserve respect and appreciation. Yet in my view, there are also merits and advantages in the second, i.e. in the cultural historical model – particularly so if that is combined with elements from the first model. Some of these greater advantages may be sum-marized as a greater appreciation for language, art, and religion, as well as a more careful consideration for profound long-term changes in history together with the impact of external flows and long-distance influences.

The second model in fact seems to have more direct empirical relevance for the Ayyubid and Rasulid state forms. These Sunni (Shafi'i) states relied from the outset on good connections along the Red Sea – for military and political reasons as much as for trading and commercial purposes. Economic innovation and scientific

curiosity were much more explicitly on the agenda of Rasulid rulers, and much more effectively put into practice during their reign. In that sense, the Ayyubid and Rasulid states much more obviously functioned as "civilizational forces of transformation".

So in a certain, relative and limited way, it does make some sense to attribute the segmentary (cyclical) model more closely to main Zaydi historical forms of statehood, while associating the civilizational (transformative) model somewhat more intimately with Ayyubid and Rasulid historical states. Yet any binary reasoning would tend to lead us astray in this matter, i.e. it would be one-sided to characterize the Ayyubid/Rasulid state organization as the one with only transformative characteristics, and contrast that to Zaydi state organization as the one with nothing else but legal qualities of mediation. It is much more realistic and plausible to argue that both forms of state organization had features that are reflected in both of these two models, but each of these state organizations had somewhat different priorities.

The Zaydi state was largely operating within a wider tribal environment where addressing and mediating smaller and larger conflicts belonged to the more regular routine operation of running a government wherever it did have at least some influence. At the same time, however, the Zaydi state also did accommodate some innovation from outside, even before the Ottoman presence set in. For instance, the first introduction of growing coffee in the northern mountains seems to have taken place long before the 15th century, and for what we know today it was absorbed fairly smoothly into the Zaydi realm.

On the other hand, the Ayyubid and Rasulid state presence was situated in domains where tribal organization either was more dispersed – as in the central and southern highlands, and in the hilly parts of the coastal plain – or, alternatively, where it was mostly absent as in large parts of the coastal lowlands. From the outset, this implied that legal disputes may have been more frequent, but more often they must have taken on smaller scaled dimensions. So the role of the state, and of its representatives, in the Ayyubid and Rasulid domains could not possibly lack the functions of providing arbitration and mediation according to shari'a principles. These functions merely were less spectacular and of a smaller scale than in the Zaydi case, while the "transformative" functions were much more conspicuous and effective.

Seen against the relevant historical and empirical background to which they refer, it therefore turns out that neither one of these two models is self-sufficient. What certainly is required is a combination of both of them, and in different versions of combinations at that. For certain historical cases the segmentary model may take the lead, combined with secondary features of the cultural historical model; for other instances, a balanced combination between the two may be more appropriate; in other cases still, the cultural historical model might take the lead, and so forth. The fact that Walter Dostal used both models – in a few cases his version of the segmentary model, in many other cases, his versions of the cultural historical model – therefore testifies to this scholar's great insights into the historical anthropology of Southwest Arabia already during those early phases of research when the topic of the "state" in southern Arabian history was rarely addressed at all.

A first intermediate result of this exploratory discussion therefore is that neither of the two main models of state organization that anthropologists have been using is self-sufficient. A second intermediate result indicates that one or the other combination between both of them is at least necessary to do justice to the two main state forms in pre-colonial Yemen. Thirdly, we thus may state that such a combination may be necessary for an appropriate analysis – yet necessary is not identical with being exhaustive or sufficient. A number of important features in pre-colonial Yemeni states still remain inadequately addressed, even if we employ a combination of both models discussed so far. For instance, there is the feature of fragility – more conspicuous in the Zaydi example, but also implied in the Ayyubid and Rasulid case. The feature of relative fragility comes along with interruptions, and ruptures, in time and space, with volatile presence and disappearance, and with mobile boundaries that could expand and shrink almost anywhere and at any point in time. In short, many of those very characteristics by which medieval states in South Arabia would typically differ from the modern, postmodern, and postcolonial norm remain under-explored, if we do not consider at least a third model.

A THIRD MODEL: GALACTIC POLITIES

As already anticipated by the title of this paper, I would like to introduce a third major anthropological model of historical statehood in Asia to this discussion about the properties and roles of indigenous states in Yemen's pre-colonial past and its repercussions in the present. In addition to the existing and well established two models discussed so far, it might be worth discussing the "galactic" model of the state for the reasons specified at the end of the previous section.

Originally, this model was developed for southern Asia and South East Asia. Therefore many of those elements have to be stripped off the original model if and whenever they are specific to those regions and their religions. Still, many of the model's other core elements may then continue to remain valid for discussions about Southwest Arabia as well. The "galactic" notion was coined by the Sri Lankan expert and Harvard anthropology professor Stanley Tambiah (1977), who also relied on several indigenous historians from that part of the world to elaborate his conceptual vision. In addition, Tambiah also relied to a certain extent on insights on South East Asian kingdoms by Robert Heine-Geldern (whom he refers to in his 1977 paper), who was Walter Dostal's most important teacher and intellectual influence in Vienna during Dostal's student years.

Tambiah emphasized a galactic picture of the medieval state in mainland South East Asia, envisioning a central planet surrounded by differentiated satellites, more or less autonomous but within the center's orbit – and at the margins, other such competing minor and major planetary systems. These moving clusters of planets include dynamics of pulsation, and changing spheres of influence that are waxing and waning. The respective center has to try and entertain separate, dyadic relations with each of the satellites for the purpose of keeping them apart from each other, and at bay *in toto* (which of course has its limits, triggering off resistance). Foreign trade and a limited capacity for internal taxation and mobilization belong to the state's key assets. The concept includes the emergence and rise of certain centers, as well as crises, demise, and disappearance.

It can be clearly seen how and why these more general features and properties of the galactic state model may be fruitfully applied for Southwest Arabia, also by combining it with elements of the cultural historical (transformative) and the functional-segmentary (cyclical) models. Both main versions of medieval Yemeni states feature these movements of waxing and waning, and of spatial shifts in their central location as well as in their main realms of influence. The galactic concept also helps to address internal rivalries inside the realms of Zaydi and Ayyubid/Rasulid statehood, as much as the tension-ridden relationship between them. And, while the segmentary and the cultural historical models primarily address defining functions of statehood, as well as functional cycles or periods, the galactic model primarily is focusing on shifting spheres of power in a relational or flexible structural sense.

Lifting the galactic model to such a level of abstraction where it can be peeled out of its original Buddhist and Hindu contexts of reference is not an easy task, and will require some additional conceptualization. In a similar way, moving the model from there into the different contexts of Shafi'i Sunni and Shi'i Zaydi statehood will make additional theorizing on the relevant implications for statehood necessary. Still, at this point these tasks seem feasible and worth the effort. The infusion of the abstracted galactic model with Shafi'i- and Zaydi- oriented elements of statehood indeed suggests that the outcome of this exercise will be two Southwest Arabian versions of the galactic model. By consequence, the abstract model is perceived as cross-cutting both main versions of statehood, i.e. the Zaydi and the Ayyubid/Rasulid version – similar and complementary to the segmentary and the cultural historical models.

Again, it therefore seems appropriate to combine the galactic model with the other two models in one or the other way wherever appropriate for the historical contexts of Southwest Arabia. The advantage shared by all three models is their potential to highlight basic specificities of states in pre-colonial Asian history – specificities that often are ignored in Euro-American historians' or political scientists' discourses on states in medieval Asian history. In those discourses, the states in question often are conceptualized after the model of modern European states. For this reason, fixed territorial boundaries and hierarchical control over land and humans inside these boundaries is central to such models of medieval Asian states, similar to the precursors of modern states in European history.

In the long run, discussions like the present one can demonstrate that modeling "the state" after European-based ideals only superficially seems to be faithful to a universalist paradigm, but in fact is pursuing a profoundly Eurocentric practice. For pre-colonial Southwest Arabia (and to an extent, also for pre-colonial

South Eastern Asia), fixed territorial boundaries certainly cannot be taken as a primary criteria of functioning statehood, thereby conceiving of the states in question as "containers" that precede the container models of modern nationhood and provide the main arenas within which hierarchical control is exerted. On the contrary, the medieval Asian states we have been referring to here, display defining characteristics of clustering into major and minor systems of statehood that are always "on the move" through time and space, including fairly constant processes of territorial expansion and contraction. These aspects therefore not only apply to empires wherever the term applies, but also to smaller states in Asian pre-colonial history.

Jack Goody (1976, 1990) once quite rightly pointed out that for Africa south of the Sahara it was not so much territory but rather humans that were the primary object of pre-colonial state control. One may therefore raise the analogous question whether "control" was of any primary relevance at all for pre-colonial Southwest Arabian statehood. From the available evidence it rather seems that hierarchical "influence" was the more permanent orientation pursued by most of these state constellations on the move, to be substituted by control and physical force only when necessary. "Influence", however, requires less coercion and more persuasive efforts from above through charisma, ideology, religion, symbols, rituals, and mobilization, and – by contrast to "control" – much more identification from below (Godelier 1978). Identification from below certainly is facilitated wherever the liturgical and ritual languages are accessible for the common people because they correspond more closely to the spoken vernacular forms (Behnstedt 1985). In addition, identification from below is much more indispensable wherever the common people are constituted to a considerable extent in collective associations of free persons that include large landscapes of tribal communities and interethnic constellations.

It thereby becomes conspicuous where this analysis is taking us. In the long run, these anthropological insights inspired by Ibn Khaldun, al-Hamdani, and by South East Asian historians may combine their effects towards a more regionally grounded and less uniformly universalist approach. That element of regional grounding also includes an emphasis not only on how local scholars but also how local actors perceive of states in their own interactions and identifications.

Instead of a uniform universalism with a western bias at its core, as advocated by many political scientists in the west, anthropology therefore proposes a more diversified approach of multiple universalism that also is taking account of Asian specificities. In fact this demonstrates the continuing fertility of anthropological insights on states' roles in Southwest Arabia's past and present.

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