Afterlives of revolution: Alice Wilson’s response

Alice Wilson
June, 2024

I first visited the Dhufar region of southern Oman in 2013. I was soon to learn that some residents were discussing the future of the exiled former opposition leader. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Qadi had been the secretary general of the revolutionary liberation front that gripped Dhufar from 1965 to 1976. Would al-Qadi end nearly four decades of exile, and return to Oman as a loyal subject of the Sultan? Some in Dhufar speculated that the government was intensifying its efforts to persuade al-Qadi to return. One former revolutionary suggested to me that “this story” – the story of the revolution – “is not over until he comes”. This comment seemingly

suggested that, until al-Qadi joined the ranks of coopted former militants, the government considered the revolution's defeat incomplete. By the time I returned to Dhufar in 2015, al-Qadi was back living in Oman – and many believed that the government kept him under close watch. But even then, was the story of the revolution "over"?

My five months of fieldwork in Oman in 2015 led me to question the very possibility of whether this revolution – and others that meet with overwhelming repression – can ever be "over". I learned that some former militants, and later generations of Omanis, reproduced revolutionary values of social egalitarianism, and drew on these values in transformational projects of personal and national significance. These lasting legacies of revolution struck me as a vital – yet neglected – part of the story of when revolution meets with defeat.

> *Yet what becomes of former revolutionaries, their values, social networks, and relationships, after military defeat?*

Most accounts of revolution (including Oman's) focus, understandably, on events at the time. Yet what becomes of former revolutionaries, their values, social networks, and relationships, *after* military defeat? And when revolutionary legacies survive repression, what are the wider implications? In order to address these questions, my book, *Afterlives of Revolution: Everyday Counterhistories in Southern Oman*, extends the timeline of analysis beyond events during revolution. It offers the first extended study of the postwar lives of former revolutionaries in Oman. It draws on the revolution's legacies to rethink its histories and meanings, in an "effort toward decolonizing narratives of revolution and counterinsurgency".

My aim was to highlight a continuation of the revolution and its significance, beyond the conventional timeline of its ending – its "death" – with its military defeat in 1976. With this in mind, the book explores legacies that survive repression as "afterlives" of revolution. The careful readings and insightful commentaries on the book by Nathalie Peutz, Fatemeh Sadeghi, and Nikkie Wiegink further probe the significance of afterlives: for revolution and

counterinsurgency, (post)conflict transitions, and social, political, and economic transformations in southern Arabia and beyond.

Retrieving revolution

As I interacted with aging former revolutionaries living in the Sultanate, I learned how some of them continued to reproduce distinctive revolutionary values of social egalitarianism in their daily lives. Kinship practices, everyday socialising, and social rituals repurposed as unofficial commemoration were among the interactions about which, from my positionality, I was able to learn.

Such survivals were no foregone conclusion. A bloody, British-backed, and increasingly internationalised counterinsurgency war repressed the revolution, campaigning over time to win locals' "hearts and minds". The postwar Sultanate repressed the freedoms of expression and association of all Omanis. Figures of dissent such as the exiled al-Qadi were the targets of government cooptation. Yet despite all this, revolutionary values survived into postwar times.

> *Surviving revolutionary values, however, question claims of resounding counterinsurgency success.*

The implications of these findings are significant, especially given conventional depictions of the counterinsurgency in Dhufar as an allegedly "model campaign" that won "hearts and minds". Surviving revolutionary values, however, question claims of resounding counterinsurgency success. Rather, afterlives show how revolution comprises extended times, spaces, and impacts beyond military defeat. It follows that counterinsurgency violence and even supposedly "exemplary" efforts to win "hearts and minds" fall short of erasing long-term engagement with revolutionary values.

How can we conceptualise these legacies of revolution? For ethnographers, that question is inseparable from how Omanis, including former revolutionaries who occupy heterogeneous positions in postwar Oman, conceptualise the

revolutionary past and its legacies.

Addressing these questions proved no easy task. The Sultanate surveils all Omanis. It represses perceived or actual (former) dissidents. It has expunged the revolution (and other episodes of dissent) from official historical narratives. These conditions constrained the possibilities for inquiry into, and writing about, revolutionary legacies. The fact that Britain had been the informal imperial power, the major backer and orchestrator of the counterinsurgency, and an architect and close ally of postwar authoritarian rule, also made some research participants cautious in their interactions with me, a British researcher. As such, and as Wiegink points out, one of the tasks to which *Afterlives of Revolution* can aspire is to help open up further conversations about the legacies – in Oman and beyond – of revolution after military defeat.

Fortunately, the book was able to follow the lead of Omanis who courageously engage with the revolution outside the confines of government censorship. They and their peers avidly discuss landmark works about the revolution authored outside Oman. The insistence of many Omanis on retrieving the significance of the revolution speaks to the hopes that Omani political scientist Khalid Al-Azri has voiced, and that I cautiously share: namely, that engaging with sensitive topics is "worthwhile" to the extent that "overcoming such fears [of repression]" has "huge potential for changing the current status quo" in Oman.

Offering an account of the legacies of this revolution and their diverse meanings remains a challenging task, though. Frequently, former militants warned me against probing the revolution and its legacies, telling me "there is no benefit" in such inquiry. Some were understandably reluctant to discuss the revolution and its legacies with me. Yet these warnings and truncated conversations contrasted with publicly visible daily interactions that, in their own way, spoke volumes. Some former militants, and family members, remained committed to revolutionary social values.

Afterlives under authoritarianism

I initially wrote about these ongoing legacies as a "social afterlife of revolution". As Sadeghi notes, by emphasising continuing significance beyond military defeat, I questioned the familiar distinction between "successful" and "failed" revolutions. Afterlives highlight instead how both revolutions that oust incumbents (the "successful") and those that do not (the "failed") can go on to have lasting impacts. Sadeghi further disrupts the successful/failed distinction by arguing that ousting an incumbent, or "taking place" (e.g. Iran in 1979), can diverge from the path of "happening", or enacting liberatory agendas (e.g. Dhufar 1965-1976 and thereafter). Her suggestion is a powerful prism for rethinking the maps and timelines of where revolutions have happened and are happening still.

In placing emphasis on a *social* afterlife, I was mindful of risks for research participants. Those I met were living not in exile or in a postwar multi-party transition, but under the kind of authoritarian rule that they had once contested, and that continued to police actual or perceived dissent. Such repressive conditions may foreclose veteran militants from pursuing or speaking at length, at least with me, about revolutionary legacies, especially in areas of political, religious, and economic life that attract close government scrutiny. An analysis that explored such legacies might pose risks of increased surveillance for research participants. Indeed, I make no argument that everyday practices of former revolutionaries posed resistance of concern to the Omani state.

> *This pluralisation foregrounds the diversity of forms that legacies took, as well as the heterogeneity of former militants' positionality, willingness, and capabilities with regard to creating revolutionary afterlives.*

Over the course of writing the book, early concerns about the implications of my argument for the safety of Omani research participants only grew, in line with ongoing political repression in the Sultanate. But what changed was, as Wiegink notes, my shift to write of "after*lives*" of revolution (p. 10). This pluralisation foregrounds the diversity of forms that legacies took, as well as the heterogeneity of former militants' positionality, willingness, and capabilities with regard to

creating revolutionary afterlives. Anthropologist Jessica Winegar notes a "privilege of revolution", spanning class, gender, and other intersectional identities, that underpins participation in iconic revolutionary spaces. Dhufaris' experiences suggest a relative "privilege of revolutionary afterlives" (p. 198), in which intersectional positioning can again favour or foreclose the very possibility of reproducing revolutionary values.

Material and social landscapes

Peutz's and Wiegink's commentaries draw attention to alternative, parallel afterlives of revolution. These range from the built environment to the postwar lives of other groups of former participants in the conflict. The transforming wartime and postwar spaces of Dhufar have indeed engendered material and infrastructural afterlives of revolution, as Wiegink contemplates. For instance, the changing landscapes reflect the efforts of the counterinsurgency and the postwar government to relocate populations from the mountain hinterland, that was the heartland of revolutionary support, to more easily controllable coastal areas (p. 98-136).

Dhufaris nevertheless infused these spaces with meanings that diverged from counterinsurgency agendas and discourses. Some Dhufaris opted for resistance, such as when they rejected accommodation that the government had allocated to them (p. 126). Others cultivated homeliness in their new abodes, personalising neighbourhoods through everyday reciprocity (p. 133). Some speculated as to whether the counterinsurgency agenda had constrained, rather than accelerated, Dhufar's economic development; had the government delayed building a container port in the southern capital Salalah until 1998 out of reluctance to provide Dhufaris with an economic base for potential independence (p. 130)? In other words, might some afterlives take the spectral form of absent yet longed-for infrastructure?

Meanwhile, all-male evening gatherings in Dhufar that take place outside cafés and on street corners include groups of former pro-government paramilitaries,

such as the Socotran veterans whom Peutz met. The brigades of southern Arabians who took up arms for the government (who include former revolutionaries who changed sides) were organised along tribal lines. This fragmentation prefigured the postwar socialising along lines of a specific ethnic identity that Peutz witnessed.

These alternative postconflict afterlives among former pro-government paramilitaries, who gather in ethnically-specific groups, reiterate the distinctive inclusiveness of the everyday socialising among former revolutionaries whom I met (p. 183). The afterlives of pro-government paramilitaries is an area of further research that promises fascinating insights into postconflict dynamics. In future writing, I seek to contribute to these discussions through an analysis of the role of pro-government paramilitaries in the Sultanate's repression of demonstrators who occupied Salalah's streets from February to May 2011.

Moving concepts

Wiegink identifies rich potential for an expanded analysis of afterlives that explores notions of haunting, trauma, transcendence, and religion. She contemplates that, given the sensitivities that I encountered in Dhufar, *Afterlives of Revolution* can lay grounds for such future conceptual work. Her query brings my thoughts back to questions of how Omanis themselves conceptualise the legacies of their revolutionary past – and the inspiration those understandings provide for further analysis.

In their own words – in admittedly strained circumstances – research participants spoke with me of values such as egalitarianism (*al-musawah*), the common good (*al-maslahah al-'ammah*), and an interest in challenging social stratification and segregation. A notion of afterlives was a metaphor that, subsequently, I brought to the analysis. I have since reflected that I was perhaps inspired by a postwar publication of 1979 that campaigned for international solidarity with Oman's exiled revolutionaries in South Yemen, and that took the title "The revolution is alive". My fieldwork in 2015 seemed to speak, rather, of a different quality of

ongoing presence that I sought to capture with “afterlives”.

Wiegink’s insightful commentary invites me to revisit the significance of the themes she identifies for Omanis. For many of them, the revolution and counterinsurgency were laden with experiences of haunting and trauma. When some Dhufaris surveyed postwar landscapes of the city and the mountains, they remembered wartime confinement and concealment (p. 120, 221). One elderly woman was still disturbed by memories of the British military personnel who had raided her home looking for a relative in the liberation movement (p. 26). Several people warned me not to ask about the front’s internal executions (p. 85). As Omani novelist Bushra Khalfan has aptly evoked, the revolutionary past, state violence to repress it, and the government’s refusal to acknowledge that past, are like a “wound” that, whilst it remains “covered”, will be “always present and deep” (p. 243).

The feelings that the revolutionary past provoked were not exclusively painful, though. One person assured me that former militants felt “no remorse” that their participation in the revolution had led them to sacrifice for the greater good (p. 134). Meanwhile, former militant Zahran al-Sarimi writes of revolutionary ideas continuing “like wildfire” (p. 236). Do not convictions of sacrifice endured, and the unstoppable force of wildfire, evoke transcendence, specifically of the silencing and condemnation of the revolution?

The question of religion is especially fraught with regard to this conflict and its aftermath. Government propaganda positioned the revolutionaries as “godless communists”, against a counterinsurgency that claimed to defend Islam. As such, one legacy from Dhufar is the instrumentalisation of militarised Islam in counterinsurgency and proxy wars – a policy that has gone on to have truly global afterlives.

The role of religion in the lives of former revolutionaries is a similarly charged topic. Might postwar religiosity imply distance from former militantism, and submission to the state authorities that (like so many in the region) claim an

authority derived from their defence of the "right" Islam? Or, to what extent might drawing attention to any absence of religiosity among former militants expose them not only to social stigma, but also to more intense suspicion on the part of the state?

During my fieldwork, the stakes were high; they made questions of religion especially sensitive – and, accordingly, made me particularly interested in the analysis of Dhufari researcher Mona Jabob regarding the postwar religiosity of former female revolutionaries (p. 189). Their postwar conservativism contrasts starkly with earlier images of "liberated" revolutionary women. In hindsight, Jabob notes, female former militants problematise how the revolution pressured them to embrace the gender emancipation that it promoted.

But might the postwar social conservativism of some former revolutionaries also reflect experiences of living under governmental repression? A relative of one veteran female revolutionary recalled to me that when the woman in question eventually returned to Oman, she first adopted modest clothing in the context of her encounter with the authoritarian state. Security officers laid out a long black outer garment (*'abayah*) while telling this woman: "this is what you will wear" (p. 129). How might the religious afterlives of female former revolutionaries signal the historical and ongoing impact of a coercive, authoritarian state in their lives?

> *The religious practices of female former revolutionaries are especially complex afterlives that seemingly transcend not just revolutionary pressures, but also postwar authoritarianism and patriarchal norms.*

This possibility does not, however, prevent female former militants from continuing to subvert conservative gender norms. Postwar religiosity, by signalling conformity with religious conservatism, provides these women with a form of social legitimacy. That respectability extends protection to those who continue to disrupt patriarchal restrictions on women's circulation in public – notably in ways that reverberate with earlier revolutionary emancipatory agendas (p. 189). The religious practices of female former revolutionaries are especially

complex afterlives that seemingly transcend not just revolutionary pressures, but also postwar authoritarianism and patriarchal norms.

When is a revolution "over"?

Afterlives – perhaps by their very open-ended nature – necessarily invite further inquiry and conceptual elaboration. In beginning a discussion on afterlives of revolution, my book engages with questions that Omanis have faced: was the revolution "alive" after its military defeat? When would the story of the revolution be "over"? Revolution's afterlives prompt us to keep asking many questions.