



Afterlives of Revolution: Nathalie Peutz's comments

Nathalie Peutz
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In the mid-2000s, while conducting ethnographic fieldwork on the impact of environmental conservation and development projects on the Yemeni island of Socotra, I took a short break from village life to visit Socotrans living in Oman and the United Arab Emirates. It was August and the monsoon winds and rains that had swept across Dhufar, Oman's southernmost governorate, had transformed its mountainous hinterlands into a misty, verdant pasture. I felt as if I had been transported to the Scottish Highlands—so distinct was this area from its surrounding deserts. My Socotran hosts relished the monsoon greenery and cool



climate, too. Like many other residents of Salalah, Dhufar's coastal capital, they had erected a tent in the plain stretching between the coastal towns and the rising escarpment. There, in what appeared like a makeshift tent city situated across the highway from a bustling fairground, they spent much of the monsoon season socialising with friends in their respective tents.

Many of my hosts' friends were fellow Socotrans: middle-aged men and women who had fled the island in the late 1960s and early 1970s to escape the socialist revolution that gave birth to the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY or "South Yemen"). The male Socotrans had not just fled together; they had also waged war together. As I would learn attending gatherings of Socotrans exiled in Oman and the UAE, these men had been members of the pro-government paramilitary battalions (*firqah/firaq*) deployed by Oman's British-backed Sultan to quell the socialist revolution in Dhufar (1965-1976). Between 1971 and 1974, a "unity" *firqah* of some 100 Socotrans and 50 Mahris fought against the PDRY-supported revolutionaries—and so, against their own state—with the belief that Sultan Qaboos would help them liberate Socotra in return. When the war ended, the *firqah* members remained in Oman and or moved to the UAE and were rewarded with citizenship, homes, reservist salaries, and government jobs. But it was only after the fall of the PDRY government in 1990, and the decisive victory over the Socialist Party during Yemen Civil war in 1994, that these self-exiled Socotrans felt it was safe enough to visit their island home. In the meantime, and in the decade that followed, the Socotrans' everyday socialising with their former fellow combatants was one of the many legacies, or afterlives, of Dhufar's "revolution-in-progress."

[*Afterlives of Revolution*](#) invites us to consider how former revolutionaries reproduce lasting "values, networks, ideas, and legacies" that persist long after military defeat, despite their own revolutionary shortcomings, and in the face of authoritarian repression. Focusing on the men and women who had fought on behalf of Dhufar's anti-colonial liberation movement ("the Front"), Alice Wilson's meticulously researched ethnography demonstrates how revolutionary pasts continue to haunt and inspire. It does so by attending closely to the ways in which



the Dhufari revolutionary values of social egalitarianism and emancipation were and continue to be reproduced through everyday interactions, such as daily social gatherings, post-war kinship ties, and unofficial commemorations, in addition to some extraordinary acts. Indeed, it was a debate over how to commemorate the officially-silenced executions of the Socotran Sultan's family members in 1974 that drew me to Salalah a quarter century later to find Socotrans discussing this still festering "wound."

Such everyday interactions help forge and maintain the counterhistories that, elucidated through Wilson's deft analysis, destabilise conventional narratives about Oman, about Gulf monarchies, and about revolutionary experience, writ large. But they also reveal the inherent contradictions, problematic outcomes, and conflicting visions that beset the Dhufar revolution from its outset. Revolutionary social change, Wilson shows us, is messy and complex. It is messy when the anti-colonial, anti-imperialist Front that espoused the abolition of slavery, the emancipation of women, and more egalitarian social relationships relied on child combatants, internal violence, and a gendered division of labor. It is messy when these initiatives toward emancipation did not begin or end with the Front and when Dhufaris claimed that they (not the Sultan) won the war. It is messy when the pro-sultanate battalion of Socotran and Mahri fighters took up arms against their own state in a battle on foreign soil. Far from being symptomatic of failure, Wilson argues, these and other contradictions signal the diversity of revolutionary experiences, the Dhufaris' agency in producing and navigating social change, and the depth of their ongoing engagement with revolutionary values long after the war's official end. The messiness, in other words, is an invitation to anthropologists to focus less on what sparks revolution and more on what survives it: a timely provocation in these "post" 2011-2012 revolutionary times.

Indeed, Wilson's gripping book is a welcome, multifaceted invitation to students and scholars of the MENA region and beyond to re-evaluate both revolutionary change and authoritarian resilience through today's increasing attentiveness to intersectionality, temporality, and space. Not only does it enrich our understanding of the officially-silenced but internationally significant Dhufar



Revolution; it invites us to broaden the temporal, spatial, social, and political scales through which we comprehend revolutions and their outcomes. Not only does it offer a new perspective on the limitations of patronage in Gulf monarchies; it invites us to be more attuned to enduring social distinctions, intersectionality, and also embodied race (blackness) in the Arabian Peninsula. Not only does it interrogate Oman's foundational myth of the Qaboos-led renaissance; it invites us to be more perceptive of the unofficial if ambiguous commemorations that exist outside of official museum exhibits despite being silenced by hegemonic histories.

These invitations certainly inspired me to re-visit the everyday social interactions I witnessed briefly in Salalah: ordinary interactions that extend from and outlive extraordinary events. Offering a refreshing perspective on classical anthropological themes—kinship, social reproduction, the everyday, and matter(s) out of place—Alice Wilson invites her readers to experience the productive messiness (and the privilege) of anthropological fieldwork as a way of joining her interlocutors in imagining alternative horizons. In this, *Afterlives of Revolution* is also testament to the enduring value of the anthropological project.