

Abstract Title: Arab Jacobins? The Yemeni Revolutions in Historical Perspective

Abstract Body: Walter Benjamin once said that if they win, even the dead shall not be safe. When counterrevolution succeeds so thoroughly, on local and global scales, even the memories of what once had been a great revolutionary uprising in a small defenceless place are erased, and that erasure gets reflected in even the leftwing writings of a later time. Amidst the chronicles of modern revolutions, and, not least, of modern Middle Eastern revolutions, from Iran in 1905-6 Turkey in 1908 to Afghanistan in 1978, the revolutions of what can broadly be termed 'Yemeni', that is North Yemen, South Yemen, occupy a normally marginal when not almost wholly unrecognised place. Separated from the mainstream of Middle East politics in the period of the Cold War, and framed by regional and internal concerns that few observers, even those from elsewhere in the Middle East, analysed, the events that spanned over three decades, from the September 1962 revolution in North Yemen, to the final subjugation of the South by Northern forces in the war of 1994, were of immense importance both in the history of the Arabian Peninsula and of the modern Middle East, but also in the annals of twentieth century radical upheavals, and revolutions, themselves. Much of this history may remain obscure, for lack of reliable documentary and other evidence, many of those involved are now silent, dead, or reincorporated into local states. The memory of these radical years may mean little to younger generations, but, both to restore historical accuracy about this period of modern Arab history, and to draw out the lessons of these three decades, a retrospective analysis of these revolutions is certainly called for. The relevance of these revolutions is, however, based on something more important than these considerations, which is simply the fact that these revolutions remain of immense importance today, *that none of the tasks which these revolutions set themselves, and few of the issues they were intended to resolve, have been settled.* The same applies to the revolutions in Yemen of the period 1962-1994: state formation, the relation of state to society in its class, clan and tribal forms;; the role of religion in state and society; the position of women; the economic context of social activity and the economic base of the state; the character of education; the very definition of the nation. All of these issues, posed first in dramatic form in the September 1962 revolution in Sanaa remain on the agenda of the twenty-first century in South Arabia. Much as contemporary authorities, and public opinion, may seek to escape from the memory and legacy of that first explosion in South Arabia, the agenda it posed, pertinent and unfulfilled, lives on. My paper is thus a timely attempt to understand the roots of the current uprising(s) in Yemen, initiated against the former dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh in the unfulfilled promise of the old revolutions in *both* the former North (1962) and South (1967) of the country, on the occasion of the centennial of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and the 50th anniversary of the Marxist revolution in south Yemen (1967). It also focuses on revolutionary upheaval and state consolidation in revolutionary Yemen (1962-1994) and on analytic issues following from these events and from a retrospective analysis of the events of these years. These observations may serve, along with other recuperations of the upheavals of a social and ideological kind that have marked modern Middle Eastern history, to provide a corrective to prevalent ahistorical accounts of Yemen rife in the mainstream media today, resting as the latter do on simplifications about Islam, deserts, Arab resistance to reform and the like, portraying Yemen as some sort of Orientalist fairyland, part beautiful and part

dangerous, caught in some sort of time warp, each man armed with multiple weapons, each tribe and group at every one else's throat.