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Centers and Peripheries in the 21st Century: Bulgaria and the Middle East

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Dale F. Eickelman. CENTERS AND PERIPHERIES IN THE 21ST CENTURY: BULGARIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST

Abstract. Guiding concepts in the social sciences are often presented in the abstract. Yet notions such as center and periphery are intimately tied to the historical contexts in which they are created. Thus, center and periphery in its original form was closely linked to the "modernization" theory that dominated the social sciences from the 1950s through the end of the 20th century. Recognizing such concepts in their historical settings facilitates understanding their initial appeal and limits. The author narrates his own involvement with social theory, Islamic studies, and the rapprochement of anthropology and history, and development of the concept of *centers and peripheries*, especially as it was shaped by an ongoing multi-year social historical and anthropological project anchored in Bulgaria.

Keywords: centers and peripheries, Islam, regions, Islamic studies, anthropology, social history

Дейл Ф. Айкелман. ЦЕНТРОВЕ И ПЕРИФЕРИИ ПРЕЗ XXI ВЕК: БЪЛГАРИЯ И БЛИЗКИЯТ ИЗТОК

Резюме. Често резюметата представят водещи концепции в социалните науки. Идеи като тази за център и периферия обаче са тясно свързани с историческите контексти, в които се създават. Така например представата за център и периферия в нейната първоначална форма е неразривно свързана с „модернизационната“ теория, доминирала социалните науки през 50-те години на XX век. Разпознаването на такива понятия в тяхната исторически обусловена среда ни дава възможност да разберем както привлекателността, така и ограничеността им в съответното време. В настоящата статия авторът разказва за собствения си опит в разработването на социалната теория, ислямознанието и сближаването между антропология и история. За целта вниманието се фокусира върху идеята за *центрове и периферии*, а на преден

план е изведен и опитът от едно дългогодишно колективно изследване в областта на социалната история и антропология, свързано с България.

Ключови думи: центрове и периферии, ислям, региони, ислямознание, антропология, социална история

Conceptual Research/Концептуално изследване

Beginnings

Simeon Evstatiev and I have worked together on common projects for roughly two decades. Our common goal has been to encourage a convergence of sociological inquiry with social history and Islamic studies. Our points of departure are remarkably different. In my case, my first graduate training was at McGill University's Institute of Islamic Studies. Older students told me that admissions to the Islamic studies had an informal quota. Half of the students were North American, including some Muslims; the other half were Muslim–primarily from South Asia, with one Jew and one social scientist. A late applicant, I probably fell into the social scientist category. Some of my South Asian classmates were products of the *madrasa* tradition. In studying Arabic, which I took seriously, I had a tutor, a young *shaykh* from al-Azhar who winced when I chose to read ethnographies written in Arabic rather than religious texts, At the University of Chicago, I plunged into anthropology as it was being reconfigured in the early 1960s. This included a strong opening to social history and to seeing the strong potential intersections among anthropology, sociology, and historical studies.

Simeon Evstatiev is a *mukhadram*. In the time of the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632), a *mukhadram* was anyone who lived through the time before and after Muhammad's first revelations in the early seventh century. To complete the analogy, Simeon's initial training in the early 1990s was in the exigent philological text-oriented standards of Oriental studies in Europe, including the former Soviet bloc, and he subsequently grew up as a scholar in an increasingly international academic setting, taking part in what has been done in North America and Western Europe. Our disciplinary origins significantly differ, but increasingly adapted–and contributed to–the practice of social history and the collapsing of rigid boundaries among academic disciplines. In my view, our different points of academic departure accelerate our respective approaches to understanding the role of religious thought and practice in contemporary societies.

In this essay, I suggest modifying the concept of "center and periphery," as used in the heyday of modernization theory from the late 1940s until the end of the 20th century, to the more satisfactory plural notion of *centers* and *peripheries*. Indeed, in our experience it is helpful to think of "theory" in the social sciences as contingent and contested, not fixed and unchanging. "Theories" are historically and socially

rooted. They emerge from particular historical circumstances. Thus, my reaction to "modernization" theory, which I depict below, is largely to recognize that it is a product of its historical time, just as this essay is.

The implications of this shift to thinking of multiple centers and peripheries is the main theme of Simeon Evstatiev's and my respective inter-related contributions to this issue of *Philologia*. To explore this theme, the first part of this essay is highly personal. In creating research or book proposals, we all learn to focus on questions such as what we are going to learn, why the project or subject is worth knowing, and perhaps most difficult, how we know that the conclusion is plausible. My approach in this essay is to indicate more of the accidental and contingent nature of how almost any project in history and the social sciences takes shape. This approach may have the indirect benefit of persuading those just entering an academic field to stick to their goals in spite of unanticipated impediments.

For a classic example, Polish-born anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) chose the Trobriand Islands, off the east coast of New Guinea, for the multi-year research that resulted in his path-breaking *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922). In Australia at the outbreak of the First World War, Malinowski's choice was to sit out the war in a camp for enemy aliens–although a student at the London School of Economics at the time, he was a citizen of the Austro-Hungarian Empire–or to conduct field research in the remote Trobriands, where a ship would call every few months. He went to Australia to participate in a then-standard collective "expedition." Instead, he conducted the first in-depth field research that is now ideally standard in social anthropology.

My academic and professional career was buffeted by the political contexts in which we live, but without the stark choice faced by Malinowski. In mid-1968 as a graduate student in anthropology, my intent was to conduct anthropological field research for at least 18 months in Najaf, in southern Iraq. I wanted to take part in the *hawza*, or the study groups led by leading Shi'a clerics. I had formal permission from the Iraqi government in April 1968 to be on "detached service" to a University of Chicago archaeological station located just outside 'Afaq, a village in southern Iraq, for this purpose. However, the "glorious" Ba'th revolution of 17 July 1968, to use the language of the post-revolution Iraqi press, and the "corrective action" a few weeks later should have alerted me to the impossibility.[1] By September, my wife and I arrived in Baghdad and eventually reached 'Afaq. After three weeks in Iraq and increasing restrictions on my movements, I saw that it was time "voluntarily" to leave.

So I left for Morocco. At first told by an unsmiling senior Ministry of the Interior official in Rabat that I would have to return to the U.S. and apply for research permission, I then said in halting French that I reached Morocco via Baghdad. Still

[1] In October 2009, thanks to Adil Abdul Mahdi, then one of Iraq's two vice-presidents, I finally reached Najaf and sat in on the hawza for three days, interviewing religious figures and community leaders.

unsmiling–later we became friends when he became ambassador first to Canada and then to the U.S.–he replied, "Monsieur, we have no protocol for American students who come to us via Baghdad. Welcome." On the spot he then wrote out two postcard-size notes of introduction to two provincial governors.

My first publications suggest my longer-term interests. *Moroccan Islam: Tradition and Society in a Pilgrimage Center* (1976) concerned religion as popularly understood in the political and social context from the late 19th century to the early 1970s. In retrospect, it was my first reaction against what I saw as the imperious straightjacket of modernization theory on the social sciences. This was followed by *Knowledge and Power in Morocco* (1985), which directly concerned the continuing role of religious intellectuals. At the time Islamic education, especially *madrasa*-based education, was portrayed even by outstanding historians of religion as "the teaching of fixed and memorizable statements and formulas which could be learned without any process of thinking as such" (Hodgson, 1974: 438).[2] Another scholar wrote of the "stifling dullness" of Islamic education (Brown, 1972: 71), and a distinguished French scholar and former colonial official claimed that Islamic education "defies all [sic] pedagogical technique" (Berque, 1974: 167).

Islamic religious education fared no better in the hands of Western-educated Muslims, who characterized it as a "purely mechanical, monotonous form of study" (Zerdoumi, 1970: 196). To offer some personal insight into the social sciences of the 1970s, an anonymous review of a grant proposal I made in 1973 to study anthropologically the role of religious intellectuals strongly recommended its rejection on the grounds that the proposal concerned only dead and dying old men, so that at best it was an historical, not a social scientific, inquiry.

This characterization of the role of religion and religious intellectuals in society was characteristic of the era, although the 1978–1979 Iranian revolution was imminent. In 1988, as a member of the Social Science Research Council (New York) Committee for the Comparative Study of Muslim Societies, we invited Soviet specialists at leading U.S. universities to describe to us the role of Islam in Central Asia. They assured us that there was nothing to say about Islam in Central Asia because Soviet rule had erased Islamic thought and expression from public life.

For scholars and "development" specialists looking for an easy way to avoid understanding the continuing role of religion and the idea of "valued" knowledge in the "modern" world, modernization theory, so prevalent from the mid- until the late 20th century, offered an easy way out of understanding the creative tensions of centers and peripheries.

[2] A pre-medical undergraduate student in one of my classes commented that madrasa-style resembled many classes in first-year medical school.

A Soviet Connection?

I returned to many of these themes when I began long-term field research in the Sultanate of Oman, beginning in 1978 and continuing, as with Morocco. In 1980, during a brief visit to the then almost inaccessible southern province of Dhofar, a British "development" specialist–at least that's what he said he was–suggested that I seek out Vitaly Naumkin, whose long stays across the border in the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) made him, I was told, my Soviet "counterpart." As I later learned, Naumkin was a protégé of Yevgeny Primakov, himself an Arabist. In 1986, I finally met Naumkin in Great Britain. He was shadowed by a "minder," but we shifted to Arabic for privacy, Naumkin explaining (he told me later) that I was a Palestinian whose English was poor. I proposed a two-year project in which we would bring together Soviets and Americans playing parallel roles in their respective domains. The government people had to be retired from their official capacities but not the academics. We even worked out a telex code that we could use in case we were obliged to send messages that, for example, insisted on adding participants that we did not want to include.

To the surprise of many, the project worked. It brought me into sustained contact with my then-Soviet counterparts working on the Middle East and Central Asia (Coughlin, 2001; Eickelman, 1993). Through contact with the Soviets, mostly Russian, both senior scholars, ex-officials, and graduate students, I came to respect the rigorous training in language and philological approaches that the "Eastern" perspective provided. Our discussions were sufficiently thorough that with its third edition, my general book on the Middle East became *The Middle East and Central Asia: An Anthropological Approach* (1996), instead of just *The Middle East*. I also learned to curb my enthusiasm for using the term "social theory" in our shared meetings. The term "theory" was a conversation-stopper in mixed U.S.–U.S.S.R. company because it reminded our Soviet counterparts, as they would say privately, of their required classes in Marxist doctrine.

Some Roads Lead to Bulgaria

My involvement with Bulgaria came about incrementally. By late 1982, I frequently traveled from New York, where I was then teaching at New York University, to Washington DC. Yousef al-'Alawi, then the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs–Sultan Qaboos was nominally his own foreign minister–asked me to work with a legal team preparing for arbitration over an international boundary dispute. Stephane Groueff (1922–2006) worked as Information Officer at the Embassy of the Sultanate of Oman in Washington DC from 1979 through 1986. Groueff's "boss" was Anthony Ashworth, an expatriate British national with prior experience in Beirut, Aden, and Hong Kong, who "assisted" the Minister of Information in Muscat. As Groueff soon told me, his work with Oman was the first time in his long career where he was paid to

keep a country out of the news and to deflect most journalists from visiting it. On the few occasions when he was allowed to visit Oman, Ashworth kept Groueff's contacts with Omanis to a minimum (Groueff, 2003: 626).

Groueff noted that I got along well with the Omani ambassador and his staff. He soon invited me to lunch at the Watergate, a hotel and residential complex famous, as he pointed out with characteristic humor, for political "leaks" since the Nixon-inspired "plumbers" broke into the offices there of the Democratic National Committee in 1972. He got quickly to the point: let's talk regularly about Oman. It was not long, however, before our conversations turned to Bulgaria. He cared about his country of birth deeply and we remained in contact after his employment in Washington ended abruptly in 1986.

My interest in Bulgaria accelerated after I met Simeon Evstatiev. His article in this same issue of *Philologia* (Evstatiev, 2023) traces his intellectual trajectory and changes to the teaching of social history and Arabic/Middle Eastern studies in Bulgaria. The more I learned, the better I could appreciate what could be gained by understanding religious life and community identity in Bulgaria and the Balkans, and what a Bulgarian-trained Arabist and historian could add to understanding religious belief and practice in general. Prior to my first visit to Bulgaria in 2005, my co-authored (with political scientist James Piscatori) *Muslim Politics* (1996) was translated into Bulgarian (2002). *The Middle East and Central Asia: An Anthropological Approach*, 4th edition (2002; Bulgarian 2019) came much later, perhaps facilitated my ability to meet an emerging generation of Bulgarian academics and students.

What better place to witness this creative collapse and solid reconfiguration of the scholarly landscape than in Bulgaria? A Bulgarian literary theorist, Galin Tihanov (2004), depicted the Balkans as a shatter zone for languages and literature, where the juxtaposition of multiple languages and traditions also augments the potential for creativity across language and communities.

Evstatiev and others facilitated my understanding of the academic worlds of Bulgaria in general and of Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski in particular. Since then we have met often in conferences and academic visits in Europe and the United States, some of which we had a role in organizing. Each time my work progressively expanded. Colleagues at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, where historian Diana Mishkova was a Fellow in 1998–1999 and I was in 2000–2001, facilitated more recent contacts with Bulgarian colleagues and students from 2005, my first visit to Bulgaria, often with a convergence of research themes and academic interests.

From 2010 until 2013, Sofia University's Center for the Study of Religions hosted an international research project, "Religion and the Public Sphere," which Evstatiev (2023) describes in his own contribution to this issue of *Philologia*. The final workshop/conference meeting of this project in July 2013 was also where we conceived our co-edited *Islam, Christianity, and Secularism in Bulgaria and East-*

ern Europe: The Last Half Century (2022). The completion of the book involved a process of mutual discovery between Simeon Evstatiev's approach to Islamic studies, with his strong background in text-based historical research, and myself, more steeped in the social sciences and, since the late 1960s, an increasing skepticism with the prevailing received wisdom of the social sciences, notably the influence of "modernization theory" to understanding the role of religious beliefs, practices, and values in society.

Modernization Theory and Its Aftermath

Even before the concept of center and periphery became common in the first decades of the 20th century, the emergence of the nation-state in the early 19th century prompted serious efforts to homogenize societies around a national center. For example, Émile Durkheim's powerful distinction between "elementary" and complex societies is better understood by his influence on educational and language reform in late 19th century France (Durkheim, 1977). The Parisian dialect was chosen as the privileged spoken and written form of French, marginalizing all other variants and furthering the development of a highly centralized, secular state.

Writing in the heyday of modernization theory in the 1960s, the sociologist Edward Shils observed that "intellectual work" originally arose from religious occupations, but that religious orientations in modern times attract "a diminishing share of the creative capacities of the oncoming intellectual elite" (cited in Eickelman, 2000: 120).[3] Use of terms such as "oncoming" indicate Shils' ability to get beyond such fixed dichotomies such as "tradition" and "modernity," making his ideas more compatible with historical accounts of what happened in history. In his view, the notion of the sacred has shifted from religious concerns to a focus on and mastery of the technological, organizational, and political skills most useful in forging a modern state (Shils, 1975: 1–16).

"Religious" intellectuals were thus implicitly marginalized. Common to all variants of modernization theory was the assumption of a declining role for religion, except as a private matter. "Modernity" was seen as an "enlargement of human freedoms" and an "enhancement of the range of choices" as people began to "take charge" of themselves (Madan, 1997: 747–759).

For the Muslim-majority world, leading social scientists were inventive in alliteration if not in social history or an understanding of major differences. For example, one suggested that Middle Eastern societies faced the stark choice of "Mecca or mechanization" (Lerner, 1964: 405). Another preferred a water metaphor, that a "reformist Islam" would open "the sluice gates and [be] swamped by the deluge" (Halperin, 1963: 129).

[3] This discussion of Shils is adapted from Eickelman (2000).

Modernization theory was misleading on two fronts. One was to assume the growing marginality of religion. The Iranian revolution of 1978–1979, the growth of liberation theology in 1960s Latin America, and the 1980s Polish Solidarity movement should have created doubts about the fading of religion and religious values, and the contemporary resurgence of Hindu nationalism in India should also give pause. "Secular" societies, far from being intimately linked to more "rational" solutions to social and economic problems, were equally affected by barriers to "modernity."

Centers and Peripheries

Abstract ideas in the social sciences are often presented ahistorically. Yet they have profound links to the times in which they are created. The writings of the late Edward Shils (1910–1995) were my introduction to the idea of center and periphery. I first read his 1961 essay (Shils, 1975: 3–16). In a time when many simple assumptions governed modernization theory, such as the notion that societies across the world can modernize to the extent that they are guided by "rational" decision makers freed from the shackles of religion and tradition, Shils focused on the more subtle notion of the "central" zone of any society. This center was not necessarily geographical, but one of shared core values and beliefs propounded as sacred. Thus, political leaders may proclaim that the state, or a party, holds a near monopoly on sacred values, and in repressive states it is even possible to silence the overt expression of contrary or alternative ideas. In Shils' macrosociological terms, societies consist of "a number of interdependent subsystems–the economy, the status system, the polity, the kinship system" and institutions that have the cultivation of cultural values educational institutions, religious ones, and others (Shils, 1975: 3–4).

In its heyday, modernization theory appeared easy to understand. It allowed international aid specialists, bankers, and government planners, often working on a global scale, to disregard local and transnational understandings of hierarchy and value.

Like many ideas in the social sciences, we need not be tied to past formulations, assuming for example the existence of a single center. Social integration need not presuppose a single hierarchical center, but instead can recognize multiple linkages among various ethnic, kinship-based, regional, and religious communities that do not arrange themselves into an agreed ranking or that do not allow for the unquestioned emergence of just one. Moreover, relations often shift, often in ways that thwart bureaucracies and hierarchies but which nonetheless benefit wider societies and the state. In Italian towns such as Caserta, for example, many of the growing population of the elderly have household help from specific Ukrainian villages. When more help is needed, Ukrainian women already in Caserta are asked to recommend people known to them. In Morocco's Rif, single women, often divorcees and widows, leave for domestic work in small Spanish villages. Between their income from work in Spain and their influence in securing work permits for

other villagers, migration has profound and positive consequences for their role in their villages of origin. Their new status as wage laborers and immigration brokers "trumps" their gender and precarious social origins (Ramírez, 1998). Moreover, many societies and organizations are too large and too differentiated for those at the supposed center to have adequate knowledge about the rest of society. There is also a tension between the centers to dominate the periphery, and for the struggle of multiple centers to retain their autonomy. This can facilitate a positive, creative tension in many societies.

It helps to think of centers and peripheries as intricate Chinese puzzles, capable of rearrangement in many different ways.[4] Similarly, "peripheries" can also be places of innovation, where new ideas and practices emerge more readily than in established centers. Centers and peripheries are necessarily in flux, with their actors supervising, pleading, ignoring, and negotiating.

Transnational movements likewise do not require an organizational or hierarchical center. The Pope and the Vatican appear to provide an ordered hierarchy, but the experience of liberation theology is but one of many indications that the Catholic hierarchy, while asserting its primacy, tacitly makes many accommodations to Catholicism as locally received and understood. Some Muslims assert Mecca as its spiritual center, which it is for the pilgrimage. Yet in the competition for religious authority, today as in the past Mecca is one of many competing centers. Thinking in social historical terms, is Mecca the center for Islam more than Najaf, Qum, or, in the past, Istanbul? Or is the genuine pilgrimage or spiritual center just one of the heart?

We can also conceive of forms of integration that do not presuppose such an order, or multiple linkages among various ethnic, kinship-based, regional, and religious communities which do not arrange themselves into an agreed ranking or that do not allow for the emergence of one. The relations and even alliances among these groups often shift, frequently in ways that thwart bureaucracies and hierarchies.

Finally, there has often been the almost unquestioned assumption that written texts are more central than oral traditions or other cultural forms of authority. Yet the significance of texts derives not from their inherent centrality but from the contingent political, social, and economic circumstances of those interpreting them. Whether our focus is on Bulgaria or Morocco, the Ottoman Empire, or any other state or regional configuration, the ideas of region, religion, and belonging are multiple. Just as there is no single path to secularism, so there are many forms of belonging to a state, a faith, or even an academic community. Some nationalists in their sphere or religious true believers may claim that the nation is eternal or the faith immutable. From the perspective of contemporary social history or social thought, such beliefs are social facts and can be treated as statements of value. However, the multiple changing ways in which shared ideas and practices get trans-

[4] The image of the Chinese puzzle is suggested by Michael Schatzberg (personal communication, 1988).

formed, both implicitly and explicitly, often in ways that are not fully recognized at the time, offers insight into our shared social imaginations.

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