

INTERRUPTED PATHS
AND CONTINUITY IN THE STUDY OF ISLAMIC HISTORY

An interview with Michael Cook, 2019 Balzan Prizewinner for Islamic Studies, by Massimo Campanini, Lecturer at the Istituto Universitario di Studi Superiori (Pavia)¹

9 June 2020

Massimo Campanini: Professor Cook, the research project you submitted to the Balzan Foundation focuses on *The Formation, Maintenance, and Failure of States in Muslim Societies*. Having in mind your previous seminal books such as *Hagarism* (1977), *Early Muslim Dogma* (1981), and *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (2000), it seems that you are now more interested than before in political and institutional problems. How is this new research linked to your past work?

Michael Cook: That's a question that had never occurred to me, but it's a good one. Looking back over my publications, I can only find three articles that focus on political history (and no books). One article was a microstudy of the expansion of the first Saudi state into a small region of Eastern Arabia, published as long ago as 1989. The other two date from recent years: a long article on the deputies whom the Prophet Muhammad would appoint on the occasions when he was out of Medina – again a microstudy – and a short article on the long-term geopolitics of the pre-modern Middle East – very much a macrostudy. These topics don't have much to do with each other, but the articles do have one thing in common: they all arose out of my teaching. The first one came out of a graduate seminar I taught while a visitor at Princeton in 1984. A year or two before that, a senior colleague

¹ Professor Campanini (1954-2020), who passed away unexpectedly on 9 October 2020, enthusiastically agreed to interview Professor Cook (2019 Balzan Prizewinner for Islamic Studies) for the *Balzan Papers*. The scientific community will remember Massimo Campanini's great genius, especially in the field of Islamic Studies.

in London, Peter Holt, had asked me to teach his course on the Arab lands from 1500 to 1800 while he was on leave. I found the endless commotions of the Janissaries and Mamluks of Egypt and the Fertile Crescent less than inspiring, but I developed a strong interest in the religious politics of the early Saudi state. Looking into the Saudi chronicles, I saw a way to devise instructive assignments for graduate students; selfishly, I reserved one of those assignments for myself, whence the article. The second article, the one on Muhammad's deputies, had a similar origin: I had noticed recurring references in the sources to these appointees, and used them a few times as an exercise for my graduate students. The third article, the one on geopolitics, was different in that it arose from my undergraduate lecturing. In the course of teaching students about the dynasties who ruled the Middle East down the centuries, I needed to find ways to make sense of them for students who were not always engaged or well-prepared. So I had to think, and the article came out of my thinking. In short, I must have been living a double life all along, mostly teaching political history and mostly researching intellectual history. Gradually the political history became more prominent. The book I am currently writing on the history of the Muslim world to 1800 is a work of political history broadly conceived. I think part of my motive for writing it is that I feel I have accumulated a lot of worthwhile material (apt quotations, pithy anecdotes, even insights) that would never find a use in a research project.

M. Campanini: Your answer yields two more questions. First: why did you decide to stop at 1800 when the problem of the state in Islam is an outcome of modernity and modernity is the outcome of colonialism (i.e. after the French occupation of Algeria in 1830)?

M. Cook: Really it comes down to a sense of comparative advantage. I've spent most of my life as a historian working on the history of the Muslim world before it was transformed by the rise of Western power in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and I feel I know my way around this field reasonably well. The last two centuries are a very different story. I have, of course, taught the modern history of the Middle East to undergraduates (by the way, notice that «of course»: if I was an expert on the history of medieval France, by contrast, no one would expect me to teach a course on the French Republic). I have also done some research on the modern period. My book *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* has considerable coverage of modern times. But the core of the book is about earlier times, and I was simply continuing my research on a medieval topic into the modern period. In research on the modern echoes

of medieval Islamic thought, it's on balance much easier for a medievalist to reach forward into modern times than for a modernist to reach back to medieval times. In any case, I have never worked on an exclusively modern project. In the case of the book I am now writing on the history of the Muslim world before 1800, there will in fact be a final chapter on what has and hasn't changed since 1800, aiming to give the curious reader some sense of what has happened to the Muslim world between then and now. But again the core of the book is pre-modern. In the case of my Balzan project, however, we will simply stop around 1800. A project aiming to trace what has become of states in the Muslim world since 1800 could be a very rewarding one, and of considerable interest from the point of view of current events; but it's for someone else to set it up.

M. Campanini: Let me then consider directly at least one of the most intriguing issues of the period you are covering and will cover more thoroughly in the project: the birth of the Saudi-Wahhabi state in the eighteenth century. It seems to me a real turning point between pre-modern and modern Islam. A few years ago Pascal Ménoret described the Saudi-Wahhabi state as a case of proto-«Arab nationalism». I don't agree at all with him, but it is necessary to find a middle way between the idyllic picture of Wahhabism offered by Natana DeLong-Bas and the demonic picture offered by, say, Khaled Abou el-Fadl. What do you think of this ideologically characterized debate?

M. Cook: Khaled Abou El Fadl, as well as being a fine scholar of Islamic law, is also an enlightened Muslim intellectual with a strong concern for the future of Islam. By contrast, I'm just a historian trying to tell my readers what happened, and why, to the best of my limited ability, and seeking to do it *sine ira et studio*, in the phrase you quote below from Tacitus. So whatever my personal sympathies might be, professionally I'm an observer of the debate in which Abou El Fadl is engaged, not a participant. As to the work of DeLong-Bas, to my mind the picture she gives us of early Wahhabism is based on a problematic selection and use of primary sources.

M. Campanini: Do you believe it is possible to link the birth of the Saudi-Wahhabi state with the so-called Prophetic state in Medina, and if so, how might it be done?

M. Cook: Yes, I think it is possible. Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb must have seen such a link himself. When his followers sustained a disastrous defeat at the hands of the Makarima, the Isma'ilis of the region of Najran, he consoled

them with quotations from the Koran relating to the defeat of the Muslims at the battle of Uhud, a key event in the life of the Prophet. The rise of the first Saudi state is one example among many of the mode of state formation initiated by Muhammad: a religious leader raises the desert (or mountain) tribes and establishes a state. This, if you like, is the Ibn Khaldunian model. That said, there are other movements that mimic what Muhammad did more closely and explicitly than the Wahhabis did, and in one crucial structural respect the Saudi state was quite unlike that of Muhammad. Instead of a single leader who covered both religion and politics, we have here a dual leadership: Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab was the religious leader, and Muhammad ibn Saud was the political leader. This, as the medieval scholars remark, was how things were done in ancient Israel – a prophet like Samuel provided the religious leadership, while a king like Saul provided the political leadership. Such dual leadership continued in the Saudi polity until quite recently: the descendants of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab were the religious leaders, and the descendants of Muhammad ibn Saud were – and still are – the political leaders.

M. Campanini: It is unavoidable to return now to method and to the issue of the sources. Did you change your mind about the reliability of early Muslim sources that you (and Patricia Crone) in *Hagarism* deemed mostly unreliable?

M. Cook: The short answer is yes. A slightly longer answer would go back to the first paragraph of the book, where we said that it was not unreasonable to present a sensibly edited version of the Islamic tradition as historical fact, but equally that it made some sense to set it aside and start again, as we did using non-Muslim sources. The work I've done in early Muslim history since then has definitely inclined more to the first approach, but there's a fence there that I still sometimes sit on. In 2015 I published the lengthy article mentioned above on Muhammad's deputies. If you collect the source material you find many contradictions, but also a certain underlying consistency, so the question of reliability has no obvious answer. There is a point in the article, about two-thirds of the way through, where I say this to the reader, and then announce that for the rest of the article I will simply assume the basic picture given by our sources to be reliable, and see what happens if we try to make sense of it in historical terms.

M. Campanini: This discussion involves the whole question of *Le métier de l'historien* in Marc Bloch's terms. Although Tacitus claimed to have written *sine ira et studio*, this is impossible. Willingly or not, in writing his or her

work, the historian judges and interprets. Hence a number of questions arise: what in your opinion is the relationship between the writing of history and society?

M. Cook: No historian can write history *sub specie aeternitatis*, and eternity has better things to do than to write history. So the only history that gets to be written is composed by humans, each of whom inhabits a particular position in a particular society and interprets human actions from that vantage point. But I don't think this makes it impossible to write *sine ira et studio*. Some historians get angry and take sides; some don't, or at least keep it in check. Also, I don't think that being located at a particular place need be a prison. After all, we often change our views, or find ourselves drawn to two incompatible views. Moreover, part of the excitement of reading Tacitus is getting a sense of how the world looked from a vantage point that was no less specific than our own, but very different from it. One thing humans have, in varying amounts, is empathy – the capacity to enter into the feelings of people who do not resemble oneself. We use it all the time – or fail to use it – in everyday life; applying it to people who lived a long time ago is an extension, riskier but not inherently different.

M. Campanini: Do you believe in the adage *historia magistra vitae*?

M. Cook: I would have to distinguish between a strong sense and a weak sense of the saying. I don't believe that knowing the history of yesterday means that you *know* what to do today. Take the present pandemic: locking down a society courts economic disaster, while opening it up courts medical disaster. I don't think any amount of historical knowledge would enable you to decide the optimum balance between the two, so I wouldn't agree with a strong sense of the adage. On the other hand, I do think that an awareness of the course of past pandemics is more likely to help than ignorance of it, so I would subscribe to a weak sense of the adage. Compare the way we value experience in ordinary life. To say that someone is experienced is to say that they have encountered somewhat similar situations in the past, have seen what worked and what did not in those instances, and can bring that awareness to bear on the problems of the present. Offered a choice between an experienced and an inexperienced pilot for your international flight, how long would you hesitate? Knowing some history is a form of secondhand experience.

M. Campanini: What should be the role of history in youth education?

M. Cook: Ants, chimpanzees, and humans all have a place in a story that reaches far back into the past. But only humans have the capacity to *know* that story and *understand* their place in it. Of course they don't agree on what the story is, whether we're talking about our distant origins or the relatively recent past that we call history. There are broadly religious versions and broadly scientific versions of the story, with plenty of contention between and within them, not to mention hybrids that combine features of both; my own sympathies are with the broadly scientific versions. But more important in the present context, I value the fact that I possess this capacity for self-awareness in a wider context, a faculty that ants and chimpanzees lack, and I would accordingly like to see it extended in some form to all my fellow humans. That doesn't, of course, mean that I have a right to force it – or some version of it – on them through the educational system. But education is inherently coercive, particularly in its early stages – those who taught me to read and write never obtained my informed consent. So if we are to lay down a coercive curriculum, I think there could be a lot to be said for including history in it.

We can, of course, advance a more pragmatic argument for teaching history. As I said above, it conveys secondhand experience, and I would wish to see it taught in a manner that effectively delivers that experience. I'd like to see young people emerge with a wisdom beyond their years about how the world works, how people behave, how passions and interests play out, and how human communities come together and fall apart. I also set a high value on an education that does this truthfully; I have no use for the yoking of the teaching of history to ideological and other fantasies, whether of the left or the right. The bottom line is that I believe in the desirability of teaching history in schools and universities, and teaching it honestly.

M. Campanini: A last question, coming back to Islam proper. Not many years ago, Angelika Neuwirth argued that Qur'anic studies are still in their infancy in comparison with Biblical studies. Do you think that the situation is similar regarding Islamic history studies?

M. Cook: There's something about the metaphor of infancy that I'm a bit uncomfortable with. If all we mean is that less work of a modern academic kind has been done on the history of the Muslim world than on that of, say, Europe or East Asia, that's an unquestionable fact – and it's also good news for people working in the field, since it means they still have plenty of new ground to break. But the metaphor also has an implication for the future: it suggests that fields have a trajectory that takes them from the womb to the tomb, or at least from infancy to maturity. What would

maturity mean for my field? Frankly, I don't even know how to begin to imagine the way it might look in as little as a couple of centuries' time. Will the academy still be there? If so, will the part that concerns itself with my field have expanded or contracted? Will a growing number of researchers be trying to eke out a living from a body of source material not much larger than what we have today, and will they be resorting to ever more specious intellectual contortions in order to do it? Or will vast new bodies of information that we cannot as yet envisage be brought to bear? Or none of the above? In any case, if my field has the good fortune to have matured in two hundred years' time, I doubt that it will look very similar to the mature historical fields of our own time.

M. Campanini: Do you have a fresh proposal to foster this kind of studies?

M. Cook: No. Scholars often talk about the future of their fields as if what was needed was some kind of academic equivalent of a Soviet Five-Year Plan, so everyone could advance in lockstep. Fortunately this is just rhetoric: such a plan, were it to be implemented, would of course be a disaster. What is needed is a level playing field and space for individuals to try innovative approaches. The level playing field is the larger problem there.

M. Campanini: Does the Balzan project fit aptly in this perspective?

M. Cook: Yes, I think it fits well in the perspective I've just outlined. We're hoping to create a space within which the members of our group can try out new ideas – their new ideas, not mine.

M. Campanini: I thank Professor Michael Cook so much for his availability and generosity. *Ila al-liqà.*