

EDITORIAL

This issue enables us to continue with our tradition of alternating special issues with open issues. We would like to thank Emanuel Marx, a doyen of nomadic studies, who graciously accepted the burden of guest-editing this issue, which is devoted to a very volatile region and to a topic which is not much in favour with students of 'traditional nomadism' either in the Middle East or elsewhere. We would also like to express our appreciation to Don Cole, another doyen of nomadic studies, for having agreed to be interviewed for this volume – and to Mark Peterson for having spared time to do the interview.

In many places in the Arab Middle East, pastoral nomads still make an important contribution to their regions' economies and their income is often fairly high. Nevertheless, governments everywhere consistently try to dispossess and settle them, greatly impoverishing thereby both the pastoralists and the regions concerned. The studies presented in this issue also bear this out. The antipathy towards nomads in this region presumably reflects the differences in political organisation – nomads stubbornly holding on to their autonomy and horizontal networks while governments try to impose inclusion and hierarchy. The structure of Middle Eastern nomadic society is endorsed by Islam in the insistence upon individual responsibility before God. This is reinforced by Islamic jurisprudence in that unequal contracts are invalid, so that imposed or implicit contracts can always be challenged whether they be between individuals or between communities. Whether a government will recognise the applicability of a strict Islamic interpretation of its implicit contract with the population at large is neither here nor there; a good Muslim will regard him or herself as holding the moral high ground.

So it is ironic that the phrase 'the nomad elite', used to describe the world-circling super-entrepreneurs employed by multinational corporations (in Susan George's *The Lugano Report* London, 1999), contains more truth than the author, perhaps, realised. For the similarities are not confined to great mobility and a lack of a fixed base. Like traditional nomads, the nomad elite is engaged in a struggle between irreconcilable ideologies. Both subscribe to the view that they are, and should be, independent of government – traditional nomads in the Middle East by their adherence to Islamic values, the 'nomad elite' by their insistence on the rightness of pure capitalism. Neither see anything wrong in regarding their first loyalty as towards themselves, flouting financial regulations and co-operating with governments only when convenient. However, the underlying premises are rather different.

A major difference between these two types of nomads is in their concept of freedom. Traditional nomads in the Arab Middle East are, or regard themselves as, free men treating with other free men and what power their chiefs possess is power to enable, not power to coerce. The 'nomad elite', while imagining that they are

free are, in fact, at the beck and call of their employees; they can be, and are if newspapers can be believed, regularly and summarily dismissed. There is none of the conceptual equality which characterises Middle Eastern nomads. Their idea of power is the same as any government's, power over, power to coerce. Thus global corporations do not look on their employees as sheikhs regard their tribesmen. They are concerned not with ensuring the freedoms of their world-wide workforce (essentially the economically un-free of the Third World or illegal migrants in the West), but with finding the greatest source of profit and hence the cheapest source of labour.

The chasm between the moral philosophies/ideologies of these two groups on the one hand, and that of government or civil society on the other, is certainly worth further investigation. This is especially so when both groups designated as nomads have aims which are, superficially, so similar and when high mobility and rejection of government control are major features of both.

Under present circumstances nomads have had to submit to government on purely pragmatic grounds – government now has the naked power to enforce its decisions as did, sometimes, individual rulers in the past. The papers included in this issue discuss these very real problems facing Middle Eastern nomads and try and come up with suggestions for improving the situation. In doing so, they also raise issues which are relevant for the lives of nomadic populations well beyond the Middle East.

Finally, we have some news for you from the *Commission on Nomadic Peoples*. As we mentioned in an earlier issue, the Commission has set up a web site for you to register with as members. So, please go ahead and register on-line at www.qeh.ox.ac.uk/cnp. As soon as you register, you will be included on an e-mail list and will regularly receive the Commissions' announcements.

The Editors