

SELF-GOVERNANCE ACROSS TIME

KRÜGER (D.), MOHAMAD-KLOTZBACH (C.), PFEILSCHIFTER (R.) (edd.) *Local Self-Governance in Antiquity and in the Global South. Theoretical and Empirical Insights from an Interdisciplinary Perspective*. Pp. viii + 474, figs, b/w & colour ills, maps. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2023. Cased, £82, €89.95, US\$103.99. ISBN: 978-3-11-079624-7. Open access.

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We expect effective states to demonstrate strong leadership, ruling their territories and people in a way that enhances the perception of a powerful state. However, what happens in cases of weak statehood when opportunities but also necessities emerge for local governments and groups to assume responsibilities typically handled at central level? Are successful local initiatives and self-governance always indicators of weak statehood, or can they also be understood as signs of successful central governments? These questions lie at the heart of the book under review, which presents the results of a conference held in 2021. This gathering was organised as part of a much larger project financed by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) as Research Unit 2757 'Local Self-Governance in the Context of Weak Statehood in Antiquity and the Modern Era (LoSAM)', which was conducted by a group of scholars from the universities of Würzburg, Bayreuth and Leipzig. The value of this larger project lies in its intentionally interdisciplinary and comparative approach, analysing notions of self-governance in various societies past and present. The purpose of this volume is to show the potential of such an approach and provide new insights as a result. As the editors explain in the introduction, the significance of the local level, whether it be the neighbourhood, the village or the city district, is not only vital to any society, but also defines the success of a larger entities such as states.

The sixteen chapters are divided into three parts, preceded by an introduction and by the individual contribution of G.F. Schuppert. Schuppert explains the principles behind the book, elaborating on definitions of statehood and of cities as legal communities and as spaces of communication. The first part of the volume deals with the more general theoretical concepts and the interdisciplinary and comparative approaches that form its basis, while Part 2 is devoted to the ancient Mediterranean, and Part 3 focuses on the modern era.

Part 1 opens with an essay by J.P. Schmidt, who offers observations on the core values of a 'good society', showing how he considers the interactions between state, the community as well as the market to be crucial for a such society. In this first part of the volume the contribution by A.S. Erben, Krüger and S. Thomschke stands out for its successful application of the interdisciplinary and especially comparative method to a case study involving the Roman Boğazköy, Antioch on the Orontes (in the Levant) and Maputo in Mozambique. The authors integrate the disciplines of archaeology, ancient history and human geography. The specific focus of their contribution is the way in which water supply was organised at a local level. As water supply is among the highest priorities of all local communities and states around the world past and present, it is ideally suitable for a comparative perspective. As the authors acknowledge in a thorough evaluation of their methodology, despite the diverse case studies, it is crucial for such comparative analysis to begin with shared questions. Without shared questions, it is impossible to

develop a meaningful and innovative analysis, as the individual parts will remain disjointed without proper engagement with each other. Similarly, J. Hock, V. Tietze and N. Zante attempt a comparative analysis in this part of the volume on local vigilante groups in ancient Maccabean Judea and contemporary Burkina Faso.

The second part of the book is dedicated to antiquity, with two sections divided according to geography, thus one on Syria and Judea and one on Italy and North Africa. Each of the contributions present case studies, based on a broad range of different types of ancient sources, from Ptolemaic royal decrees and biblical verses to inscriptions, monuments or Latin literature. Although the contributions in this second part cover a broad chronological range spanning several centuries and present diverse case studies, they illustrate several common features. First, the dynamics within the relationship between the local level and central authorities should be understood in terms of reciprocity (as previous scholarship has already shown). However, much more credit should be given to the demonstrated effectiveness and necessity of local initiatives and structures. This becomes apparent especially in situations of weak statehood, but can be considered functional in the case of strong states. Indeed, in the case of the Roman empire we can observe that Rome deliberately leans on the proper running of local government and initiatives. D. Syrbe, in his contribution, calls the 'self-imposed limitations of exercising direct power in provincial territories' an 'inherent element of imperial rule' (p. 315).

Second, several contributions re-emphasise the role of individuals or collectives of local powerbrokers such as members of the local elites fulfilling local offices or leading men in religious communities such as the Jewish or monastic communities (contributions by F. Knopf, J.W. van Henten, J.R. Stenger, F. Cassini). These men would not only be mediators between local and central levels, but they were also responsible for self-regulation and initiatives of groups and entire communities at the local level. Closely connected to this aspect of local powerbrokers is the space provided for local autonomy and differentiation (contribution by R. Avneri Meir). Every part or region in a state has its own particularities that do not impede the broader unity of a kingdom or empire or any other type of statehood.

The third part of the book deals with the Global South, with sections on China, Brazil, Mozambique and Burkina Faso. This part offers an even more geographically diverse set of articles, although there is a focus on Africa (three contributions). In terms of chronological focus, all contributors deal with modern times, ranging from the late nineteenth century to the just completed decade of the twenty-first century. The article by A.S. Hauser, a case study on China's poverty alleviation programmes in the period of 2014 to 2020, shows remarkable similarities with some of the mechanisms seen in Part 2 on antiquity. Issues such as the level of agency for individuals at the local level in strong and weak states or the tension between official central narratives and local realities seem very much to be part of universal mechanisms of local self-governance that are being advocated across the volume. For instance, as many smaller communities around the ancient Mediterranean relied strongly on their local leadership and practices, early settlers in Brazil similarly experienced minimal state support while self-regulating their newly set up communities, which in turn led to strong local initiatives and organisations (A.P. de Moraes Bennech and M.J. Zago). The three articles on Africa have a particular focus on Mozambique and Burkina Faso, ranging from the micro-level of street vending (R. Hansine) to national processes of integration and inclusive growth (I. Macamo Raimundo) and the impact of migration on long-established forms of self-governance (A. Prestes Dürrnagel and J. Tiegna). Overall, this third part of the book demonstrates how 'global' and comparable modern experiences of local self-government are, even if they take place on different continents under different kinds of government.

At first sight, the volume might appear to have a varied and at times scattered nature, but a close reading of all the contributions reveals remarkably similar mechanisms of local self-governance. What stands out are the constant direct or indirect interactions between the local level and the more central levels of government. In cases of weak statehood central government might not have much choice as regards the way in which it allows local initiatives, but the decision of what to allow remains an active choice. Ultimately, the volume emphasises that the core of statehood lies at the local level, where people interact, form communities, experience hardship and thrive. Life unfolds at the local level, not in a distant state.

While the conference from which this volume originates focused on the impact of weak statehood on the nature of local self-governance, the volume clearly serves as the first step towards a more integrated investigation into self-governance mechanisms throughout history, across continents and under various types of central governments. Throughout history numerous examples demonstrate that the effective functioning of local communities often relies more on local and micro-level approaches than on central authorities. Especially the contributions in this volume that have tried to employ a comparative method to bridge the ancient and the modern worlds show potential new avenues for further exploration. It would be a missed opportunity if people interested in only specific time periods or regions overlooked articles outside their immediate interest, as the volume as a whole offers some interesting possibilities for comparison and cross-referencing to phenomena emerging in different contexts.

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