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Axel Havemann (February 20, 1949 – October 11, 2019)

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Axel Havemann in der zweiten Hälfte der achtziger Jahre, Foto: Monika Senge, Berlin.

On October 11, 2019, Axel Havemann passed away in Burgas, Bulgaria, at the Black Sea.¹ For more than four decades, he was a steadfast presence at the Institut für Islamwissenschaft in Berlin. He introduced generations of students in Berlin and at other universities where he taught the history of Lebanon since the 19th century and the social and economic history of the Early and Middle Islamic periods, the fields where he was well known as leading researcher. The fortunate students and colleagues were fascinated by his deep erudition, and the unfortunate ones could hardly pass by his particular mix of being a well-read scholar, and having a rough but hearty Berliner charm which comes with a certain kind of crankiness. One of the first impressions everybody was aware of was his accent, designating him undoubtedly as a native from Wedding in Berlin, an accent not necessarily associated with an erudite intellectual, who he was.

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His intellectual curiosity was awakened at a very young age by his maternal grandfather, who was a typesetter, and the intellectual in the family, with whom the Havemann kids spent a lot of time. His family was also the source of his initial fascination of the Middle East. A cousin of his mother had married a Tunisian and moved to her husband's country in the 1950s. When he was 12, he visited Tunisia for the first time, and fell in love forever with the country, its language, and its culture. It was the decisive moment for his choice to pursue an academic career. Already at the Lessing Gymnasium in Wedding, his teachers discovered his aptitude for historical research. His final exam essay dealt with the conquest of Constantinople of 1453, as he liked to relate.² In 1968, he commenced studying Islamic, Iranian, and Byzantine history at the Freie Universität Berlin, which was a vibrant political and academic place at that time, including Islamic studies. Fritz Steppat (1923–2006)³ and Baber Johansen were the academic teachers who influenced him most in his formative years. Fritz Steppat was the former director of the German Orient Institute in Beirut. When he became professor of Islamic studies in Berlin in 1969, he was one of the first to teach contemporary Middle Eastern studies at a German university. Baber Johansen, today at the Harvard Divinity School, was a young assistant whose research centered on Islamic law as a source for social history. Together, later in 1988, Baber Johansen and Axel Havemann edited the Festschrift for Fritz Steppat.

The late 1960s marked a period of change in the outlook and discourse about the Islamic Middle East: from a still mainly philological field, scholars in Islamic studies began to ask larger questions embracing the developments in other fields of the humanities. Maxime RODINSON's seminal book *Islam et capitalisme* (1966) opened a broad debate on the differences of the Islamic World to the West. Albert HOURANI and S. M. STERN initiated a comparative debate on the nature of *The Islamic City* (1970). Havemann was fascinated by both topics, as were so many others. His master thesis successfully contributed to these debates, in which he studied the office of the *ra'īs* (head of an urban militia) and the *qāḍī* (urban judge) and their involvement in governing the major cities in Syria during the period of Bedouin domination and the Seljūq advance in the 11th century. The question was raised by Eliyahu ASHTOR's "L'administration urbaine en Syrie médiévale" (1956)⁴ and Claude CAHEN in his seminal series of articles entitled "Mouvements populaires et autonomisme urbain dans l'Asie musulmane du moyen âge"

² Listen to the first biographical minutes of the podcast HAVEMANN (2016).

³ See his obituary by Axel HAVEMANN (2006).

⁴ ASHTOR, Eliyahu, "L'administration urbaine en Syrie médiévale," *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 31 (1956), 73–128.

(1958–59).⁵ Havemann tied together the discourse on cities in the Islamic World and Max Weber’s exceptionalism of western capitalistic development. For Max Weber the *Handelskapitalismus* took off from the mercantile urban republics in northern Italy in the 11th/12th centuries. Was there any parallel development in the autonomous Syrian cities during exactly the same time? What was different? Havemann’s close reading of the sources proved that the urban self-administration and -representation by militia leaders and judges was more the result of a necessity and a desperation of urban elites toward their various, mostly nomadic overlords, rather than the rising self-consciousness of an economically potent mercantile urban elite emancipating from their feudal overlords. When the Seljūqs installed a fairly stable interregional government, the importance of the urban self-administrations was diminished over times. Havemann’s outstanding contribution to that debate was published in 1975 in the fledgling book series ‘Islamkundliche Untersuchungen’ by the Klaus Schwarz Verlag, which nurtured many young German scholars in Islamic studies. How hotly these questions were discussed at that times can be seen in two almost parallel independent publications of the very same year. Eliyahu ASHTOR published his “République urbaines dans le Proche-Orient à l’époque des croisades?”⁶ and Gerhard HOFFMANN was looking at the same sources as Havemann in his *Komune oder Staatsbürokratie? Zur politischen Rolle der Bevölkerung syrischer Städte vom 10. bis 12. Jahrhundert*⁷ but from a Marxist perspective, and much less convincing. Extended research trips to Syria and Lebanon followed in the years to come.

Already after earning his master degree at the Freie Universität, he taught as senior research associate (Wiss. Assistent 1976–1981), followed by a similar position at the Universität des Saarlandes (Wiss. Mitarbeiter 1981–1985), only in order to come back in 1985 to his alma mater, the FU, after his doctorate as assistant professor (Hochschulassistent 1985–1991).

His doctoral thesis (1983) at the Freie Universität Berlin moved to another hotly debated topic: the different paths of 19th-century modernization efforts in the Middle East. Published soon after in 1983, it looked at rural movements in Mount Lebanon in the 19th century. Relations between feudal landlords and the peasants were seen as a key for the modern development of Lebanon. Havemann analyzed the peasant uprisings in 1821, 1840, and from 1858 to 1861 as crucial moments in

5 CAHEN, Claude, „Mouvements populaires et autonomisme urbain dans l’Asie musulmane du moyen age”, three articles in: *Arabica* 5 (1958): 225–250; *Arabica* 6 (1959): 25–56, 233–265.

6 ASHTOR, Eliyahu, “République urbaines dans le Proche-Prient à la l’époque des croisades?” in *Cahiers de civilisation medievale* 18 (1975): 117–131.

7 HOFFMANN, Gerhard, *Komune oder Staatsbürokratie? Zur politischen Rolle der Bevölkerung syrischer Städte vom 10. bis 12. Jahrhundert*, Berlin 1975.

the history of Mt. Lebanon. The modern backdrop of his thesis was the ongoing civil war (1975–1990). These uprisings were often interpreted as the first national movements, and he approached them through the lens of the participants' social background. For the first time, the concept of *'āmmiyya* appeared as a self-reference of the rebels. This new term for a social popular movement survived their rebellions. It was the time of the loosening of social bonds, and the increasing economic links to the European markets. He analyzed these watershed moments based on a comprehensive study of contemporary sources and archival material.

Having made his name as a rising scholar of Lebanese history, it seems natural that he tackled in his habilitation project the larger question of historiography in the Middle East, exemplified with the modern Lebanon. He had already established a network of colleagues. He himself traces this project back to conversations with the Lebanese Historian Kamal SALIBI (1929–2011)⁸ in the summer of 1983, whom he met several times at many occasions and places.⁹ The topic was of utmost importance at a time where the civil war was still ravaging the country, and the question of national identity was one of the most divisive sectarian topics. Several times, he went to Lebanon staying at the German Orient-Institut in Beirut and interviewing modern authors and visiting archives. He was a diligent researcher who was only satisfied when he was able to trace all the sources possible. After six years, the usual term for a *Hochschulassistentz*, which was in general without tenure track, the habilitation was still far from being completed. It took him another ten years to finish his second book. These were personally and economically difficult years for him, despite being awarded two habilitation fellowships by the German Research Foundation (DFG) between 1992 and 1996. In those years, he led classes as an adjunct professor at the FU and the Universität Halle-Wittenberg. In 2001, he submitted finally his habilitation at the FU. It was published in the following year as *Geschichte und Geschichtsschreibung im Libanon des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts* and includes also the period after the Ṭā'if accord (1989) until 1999. It was the first thorough analysis of the Lebanese historical writings, firmly situated within the discourse on historiography in the French, German, and Anglophone scholarship. He had based the study on every available source describing the tension between a fledgling national identity and sectarian consciousness in Lebanon, reflected in its historiography. It was a stupendous collecting effort of material. The study included early amateur as well as later professional historians since the Mandate period. It would not have been possible to write it without his close friendships to Lebanese historians such as

⁸ See HAVEMANN's article about Kamal SALIBI of 1988 and his obituary 2011.

⁹ HAVEMANN (2002), vii–viii.

Kamal SALIBI at the American University of Beirut and Abdel-Raouf SINNO at the Lebanese University. Writing the history of historiography in and of Lebanon as an outsider allowed him a different fresh distant angle. It became a classic reference for that matter and was translated into Arabic in 2011 by George KATTURA.

After his habilitation in 2001, the way seemed open for him for a professorship within the German system. Acknowledging his scholarly achievements, appointments as visiting professor followed soon. They were always short term, leaving him for years in a precarious professional situation. But these appointments came almost regularly until his retirement in 2017, mostly at the FU but also at the universities of Freiburg (2003–2004), Erfurt (2006–2007), and Halle-Wittenberg (2007–2008). It was tragic that he never achieved a tenured position. In the years following his habilitation, he revisited some questions of Lebanese historiography and authored numerous articles on the social and economic history of the Middle Islamic period, his other beloved field of research. It is very characteristic for him and for his call to being scholar that after his retirement, he realized a dream. In 2017, he emigrated to Turkey, to the Seljūq city of Alanya, to be among the rich Middle Islamic culture in a wonderful inspiring Mediterranean landscape, also to live close to the Lebanon, and to be able to devote his time to research. It did not turn out as he had hoped for. Sandra Kirov, his partner of many years could not permanently join him due to Turkish immigration laws. A terminal illness shortened the enjoyment of his new home. In his last days, he stayed with his partner at her home in Kiten, Bulgaria.

With him an outstanding historian has gone, who always placed his talent for history and historiography into the pursuit of larger historical questions and debates. He was an influential teacher for some of his students. Whenever he saw talent for historical studies in someone and a keen interest to pursue it, he supported her or him with his passion and all his time, his advice, and much more.

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