



Gulf Research Centre Cambridge

Knowledge for All

Workshop

## The Rentier State at 25: Dismissed, Revised, Upheld?

Workshop Directors:

Steffen Hertog  
The London School of Economics  
and Political Science  
United Kingdom  
Email: [s.hertog@lse.ac.uk](mailto:s.hertog@lse.ac.uk)

Giacomo Luciani  
4a Chemin des Bajules 1297 Founex  
Switzerland  
Email: [giacomo@luciani.com](mailto:giacomo@luciani.com);  
[giacomo@grcf.ch](mailto:giacomo@grcf.ch)

### Abstract

“The Rentier State”, edited by Hazem Beblawi and Giacomo Luciani, was published 25 years ago. At the time, neither Beblawi nor Luciani were aware of the article that Hussein Mahdavi had published in *Studies in the Economic History of the Middle East* edited by M.A. Cook and published already in 1970. Nor were they aware of the parallel elaboration of Lisa Anderson in her article “The State in the Middle East and North Africa,” *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 20, No. 1, October 1987. Anderson, in contrast, was aware of Mahdavi and quotes him, but was not aware of Beblawi and Luciani. She also writes: “The notion of the rentier state is one of the major contributions of Middle East regional studies to political science, and the literature on the impact of externally generated revenues, particularly those produced by exports of oil, is relatively well developed.” So the rentier state is a paradigm that has had more than one father, and possibly it is 42 rather than 25 years old, but there is no doubt it has become “normalized” as a standard concept in the toolkit of area scholars as well as comparative political scientists.

In these decades, authors have variously argued against the validity of the rentier state paradigm, adapted it to specific circumstances and realities in regions different from the Middle East, or simply continued to refer to it. But is it still a useful tool? The proponents of this workshop, working in association or separately, have attempted to go beyond the rentier state, studying ways in which continued, long-term rent recycling can change the nature of state-society and state-business relations away from the original model of autonomous state and politically marginal society, and ways in which the state could

evolve from being rentier into being a state supported by the domestic economy through taxation.

## **Anticipated Papers**

The workshop invites all who have entered this debate in some form – attacking the theory, proposing adaptations or simply using it – to propose papers, aiming at reaching an updated view of the rentier state. Papers can focus on a single country case or propose cross-country analyses for specific aspects of the rentier state theory.

Following are some illustrative questions that we would like to pursue:

1. Can rentier states effectively diversify their economies and reduce dependence on their respective source of rent?
2. Can they in parallel develop fiscal systems?
3. Can authoritarian rentier states successfully democratize?
4. Is there an evolution of rent circulation mechanisms and what are the implications of it?
5. Can rentier states successfully engage in regional integration among themselves? With non-rentier states? Within what limits?
6. Are rentier states intrinsically prone to conflict and militarization?
7. Does rentier status influence the level or rather the quality of a country's authoritarianism?
8. Which characteristics of the GCC rentier systems are typical of rentiers in general and which ones are historically specific to the Arabian Peninsula?
9. Is there class politics in Gulf rentier states?

The above are purely indicative questions: suggestions and original ideas are most welcome!

## **Workshop Director Profiles**

**Prof. Giacomo Luciani** is Scientific Director of the Master in International Energy of the Paris School of International Affairs at SciencesPo and a Princeton University Global Scholar attached to the Woodrow Wilson School and the Department of Near Eastern Studies. He is also a visiting professor at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva and co-director of the Executive Master in Oil and Gas Leadership. He is Senior Advisor to the Gulf Research Center and in this context serves as the Team Leader in the EU-GCC Clean Energy Network Project. He is also actively involved in the POLINARES FP7 research project. From 2007-10, he was Director of the Gulf Research Center Foundation, Geneva. In 1997-2010, he was Adjunct Professor of International Relations at the SAIS Johns Hopkins University Bologna Centre. From 2000-06, he was Professor of Political Economy and co-director of the Mediterranean Programme of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute. In this time, he directed the EUROGULF project within the SYNERGY program and participated in several other EU-supported projects (INDES,

ENCOURAGED, MEDSUPPLY, EUROGULFHCT). His research interests include the political economy of the Middle East and North Africa and the geopolitics of energy. His work has focused primarily on the economic and political dynamics of rentier states and issues of development in the GCC countries. He is a member of the Oxford Energy Policy Club, the Geneva Petroleum Club, and the Energy, Oil and Gas Club of the Institut Français du Pétrole (IFP). He is a frequent speaker at conferences and events organized by leading institutions in the field of energy affairs.

**Dr. Steffen Hertog** is senior lecturer in comparative politics at the London School of Economics. He was previously Kuwait Professor at Sciences Po in Paris, lecturer in Middle East political economy at Durham University and a post-doc at Princeton University. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of Oxford. He has been travelling and working in the Middle East extensively since 2000, both as an academic and as public policy consultant.

Steffen's main interest lies in Gulf and Middle East political economy, specifically Arab bureaucracies, state-business relations and labour markets. He has a subsidiary interest in issues of political violence in the Islamic world.

His academic publications have appeared in leading political science and area studies journals, including *World Politics*, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, *Review of International Political Economy*, and *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. His book on the politics of economic reform in Saudi Arabia, *Princes, Brokers and Bureaucrats: Oil and the State in Saudi Arabia*, was published by Cornell University Press in 2010. He is the editor of *Labour Market, Unemployment, and Migration in the GCC* (Gerlach Press 2012) and co-editor, with Giacomo Luciani and Marc Valeri, of *Business politics in the Middle East* (Hurst 2013). A book about Islamic radicalism and higher education, co-authored with Diego Gambetta, will be published soon by Princeton University Press.