

## WATER SYSTEM AND HYDRAULIC STATE (ORIENTAL DESPOTISM) IN IRAN

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### ABSTRACT

*Pushed through the discourse of the mode of production and some of Marx's scattered manuscripts, some European intellectuals have, over the past few decades, brought about the two theses of and the link between "Asiatic mode of production" and "Oriental Despotism." In the same years, some Iranian intellectuals have mapped out these two theses and introduced it in Iran by writing a few books and articles. The purpose of this research is to study the Asiatic mode of production and oriental despotism. The main message of the Asiatic mode of Production Thesis is to say that the historical process of evolution of the system of feudalism in Iranian society and a large part of the East is not the same as what has happened in Europe. Such a view, of course, does not change anything in the past, it does not add to Europe's pride, nor does it reduce anything from Iran and the East.*

**Keywords:** Asiatic mode production, Oriental Despotism, feudalism.

### INTRODUCTION

Every society in every period of history shows itself in the masses of social, material and immaterial institutions. The systematic unity of those themes, in the special era, emerges that which we call an economic or social system as its need, like the social system of capitalism or the social system of feudalism. We refer to this "thing" or concept with the term "mode of production". This has an historical and economical essence.

The main message of the Asiatic mode of Production Thesis is to say that the historical process of the development of system or feudalism in Iran and a large part of the East is not the same as in Europe. Such a view, of course, does not change anything in the past, it does not add to Europe's pride, nor does it reduce anything of Iran and the East.

But the consequence of this is that, since Europe is the standard model in this regard, then Iranian feudalism is not authentic, and all subsequent developments and subsequent changes are flawed, and at a lower level than Europe. Consequently, they consider the Constitutional Revolution and its aftermath to the Revolution 1969 as unauthentic, and refer to what was happened in the years after the *coup d'état* until the revolution 1969 in Iran as "pseudo-modern". With such an assumption, it is natural for that view to be the retardation in Iran and like countries in the East an inevitable and permanent phenomenon in comparison with Europe. The purpose of this research is to study the Asiatic mode of production and oriental despotism.

## THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF RESEARCH

*1. Nature of the Asiatic mode of production or Oriental Despotism*

In the year 1853, Marx and Engels, in an attempt to write a series of critiques of British foreign policy in the New York Daily Tribune, focused on the analysis of Asiatic society. Influenced by the works of Jeferemille Francois Brine and Richard Bones, they claimed that the lack of private ownership, especially private ownership of the land, is the main cause of social stagnation in Asiatic society. Periodic changes in the political organization of the Asiatic society, due to the ruling dynasty's struggles with military conquests, did not radically change in the economic organization, because the ownership of land and the organization of agricultural activities remained in the hands of the government as the true owner of the land. The static nature of the Asiatic society also depended on the cohesion of the old rural society, which had self-sufficiency with the combination of agriculture and handicrafts.

From Marx's point of view, the "Asiatic mode of production" represents the economic structure of a predominantly agricultural society, which derives from the combination of territorial ownership and political rule in the body of a centralized government. The Asiatic state, for its dual role as the owner/ruler, takes over the economic surplus of direct producers in the form of a land-lord's share-tax. Hence, the relationship of capture (exploitation) does not entail class relations, but is due to the exercise of pure political pressure from the state, which is, in general, the basis of this mode of production. The Asiatic state provides and guarantees the re-production of the economy, and at the same time remains essentially independent of economic relations. The lack of a private ownership of land and independent owner class is a characteristic of this concept and its various interpretations in the Marxist theory (Vali, 1996). Marx in Grundrisse noted the profound difference between the history of the East and the West. In the European feudalism, the existence of independent cities, as the places for the growth and the production of exchange values, had an urgent importance in the development of the bourgeois class and industrial capitalism. But in the east, the city was an artificial product of the state, as well as the function of agriculture and the village. The city was merely an "emirate camp" that was interpreted based on the economic structure of the society. In the Grundrisse, Marx had a special emphasis on the communal ownership of land by the self-sufficient villages. In this way, Asiatic mode of production was a form of communal capture that could have existed outside of Asia.

In Capital, a similar approach to the Asiatic mode of production is seen. In this book, Marx considered the Asiatic rural self-sufficiency and the unity of handicrafts and agriculture as the foundation for Oriental Despotism and social statics.

The credibility of the Asiatic mode of production was of great significance for multi-linear attitudes, since it pointed out that Marxism was not committed to a mechanistic evolutionary scheme in which, based on the inevitable laws, the historical stages would emerge.

The 1960's anti-Stalinist process also affected the revival of Asiatic mode of production. Meanwhile, Althusser's structuralist Marxism also sparked on the pre-capitalist modes of production based on the methodology employed by Marx in Capital. Emphasizing the existence of a kind of epistemological breakdown in Marx's works, based on the methodology of capital, Althusser seeks to recognize and differentiate the "scientific" aspects of these works from the Hegelian and Kantian aspects.



## *2. Iran before capitalism as an Asiatic society*

The view that Iran was an Asiatic society before the constitutional period has had a significant acceptance among the social scientists, economic historians, and political activists, both Marxist and non-Marxist. The acceptance of this view is essentially due to two factors: first, the concept itself and its specific application in the Iranian history have been taken from Marx and have a long history in Marxism; secondly, it seems that this concept has not the theoretical and empirical contradictions of the opposite views which regard Iran as a feudal society; contradictions such as the lack of landowner aristocracy and the eastern institution.

Marxist definitions are general in this regard, and it is often confined to the non-critical use of this concept in the socio-economic and political conditions in Iran before the Constitutional Revolution. These definitions emphasize the importance of the state ownership of agricultural land and the prevalence of tax-rent that derives from the general geographical and climatic conditions of Iran.

On the other hand, the non-Marxist definitions are more in line with the correspondence or non-correspondence of this concept with the history of Iran, and they show its various real or non-real contradictions; they do not show the scientific and innovative nature of their analyses. The concept of "Asiatic inherited despotism" of Ashraf and the theory of "Iranian despotism" and the "low water and dispersed society" of Katouzian are the most serious and influential of such definitions.

Some have proposed a generalization of the idea of the hydraulic society and the concept of the Asiatic state, which, as a result, equated this concept with other concepts of pre-capitalist modes of production in the historical materialism. Others have emphasized communal ownership (Grundrisse) as the basis of social relations in Asiatic societies instead of state ownership (capital); the recent view examines the Asiatic societies as transitional societies whose transition from non-class society to the class society has not stopped.

Andersen's work on Dar-al-Islam is a clear example of this (Perry Anderson, 2013); Anderson does not care about the feudal and Asiatic definitions of non-European societies, and considers them to be theoretically and empirically misconceptions. His critique of the Asiatic mode of production relies on the same classical arguments, and does not accept this concept because of its inconsistency.

Balibar accepts this stance in his influential article, *The Fundamental Concepts of Historical Materialism* (Althusser 1970). Balibar examines the concept of the Asiatic mode of production under the conditions of its formation in Marx's writings. In his opinion, in those circumstances, this concept has a theoretical position similar to the concepts of other pre-capitalist modes of production. All of these concepts are a means of clarifying the character of the mode of capitalist production, and this is done in a retrospective way by examining the complex historical process of transition from non-economic relations of capture to the economic relations of capture. According to Balibar, the difference between the capitalist mode of production and pre-capitalism one lies in the correspondence/non- correspondence of the necessary labor and surplus labor.

## *3. Iran as an Asiatic Society*

Orssel has considered one of the main causes of the decline of agriculture in Iran to be the vastness of the royal lands, the Great Real Estate, and the increasing expansion of endowments (Orssel, 2003). Lady Shil also points out that although most places of Iran have kanat, they are



in danger of being ruined and unusable due to the unpopular governments and the successive wars (Mary Leonora Woolf Shil, 1998).

"Asiatic inherited despotism" and "Low-water and Dispersed Society" are the concepts that are intended to explain this unilateral relationship between the despotic state and the economy of Iran over a period of more than two thousand five hundred years.

Katouzian begins his discussion by criticizing the use of general and abstract patterns in the particular features of Iranian history and emphasizes "the remarkable methodological similarities between the views of the supporters of feudalism and the proponents of Oriental Despotism." He believes that these two methods of analysis are based on "the generalization of abstract and general theories," and this is "their great methodological weakness" (Katouzian, 1993, p. 50).

Here, as in Marx's view, we are faced with the state as a foreign force, which has no basis in the social relations of the Iranian society. The state is a centralized political unit that has been imposed externally to the social structure of agriculture through the military conquest; with the appropriation of the "mass economic surplus" of Iranian dominated farmers, it imposes a complete domination and despotic rule on the domestic population: a process that in its turn hinders the emergence of feudal autonomy and bourgeois citizenship in Iranian society. According to Katouzian, this society lacks native political relations and structures. These relations are imposed from the outside, from the aggressive tribes that either possessed it or timely, in accordance with their instant goals (that is a domination on the indigenous inhabitants without a state and political identity) they created it. The concept of the Iranian society here is the same with its economic structure: a society of the self-sufficient crops producers who lack their political, legal and ideological relations. But, as we will see, the use of such a model to explain the complexities of the historical evolution of Iranian society makes it difficult for Katouzian to resolve the big questions.

There is a significant difference between Marx and Katouzian's analyzes of agricultural relations and structures. Marx in the Grundrisse clearly emphasizes the prevalence of collective (tribal) ownership on the land in the East. In contrast, Katouzian's view of the nature of property relations in the scarce and dispersed Iran is very important, and this ambiguity is by no means accidental, because of the two forms of ownership on land, which is associated with Asiatic despotism, no one can be included in this model of Katouan without the unresolvable theoretical and conceptual problems. State ownership of agricultural land is not consistent with the complete self-sufficiency and independence attributed to rural societies, while at the same time, the collective/tribal ownership undermines the decisive and dominant role assigned to low water.

Katouzian claims that the Iranian village is an autonomous economic unit with the certain social boundaries determined by "internal socioeconomic structures, and external geographic and political-economic relations".

Katouzian emphasizes the centrality of the role of Boneh in the scarce and dispersed Iran, and attributes various production and distribution functions such as a mode of production to it. But in the absence of communal ownership of land, the concept of Boneh to him becomes a mode of production without ownership relations.

In fact, the scarcity of water may have encouraged collective collaboration. And there's no doubt this is the main reason behind the construction of the kanat network in the Iranian



villages. However, the water scarcity cannot in itself be responsible for the supposed dominance of communal ownership of land in the Iranian village. A point that is very important in Katouzian's claim on the production and distribution functions of Boneh.

#### ***4. Applicability of Asiatic mode of Production in Iran***

For Olivier the way to the advancement and perfection of Iran is to build kanats, gangs and other irrigation facilities. These reforms will not be possible, except that the wise and philosophers rule. The Lord, the Shari'ah, and the religion direct the people to the cultivation and proliferation of animals and plants. This means that these should be the shari'a imperatives (Antoine G. Olivier, 1989). Eugene Flandén also says that the disadvantages of land, water scarcity, and neglect of the people have caused together Iran's deterioration (Flandén, 1976). Some researchers overwhelmingly emphasized the specific historical features of societies in Asia, Africa, and South America, and concluded that certain laws govern the evolution of these societies, and that there are no general laws governing the evolution of the world history. This tendency is not acceptable, although this does not mean the negation of the characteristics of the evolution of various societies that arise from the existence of different historical conditions. Other researchers also try to incorporate the "Asiatic mode of production" within the framework of historical evolution, and not to separate it from the general history. But they also did not have a systematic view that identified human relationships in this "mode of production" and did not distinguish the factors that destruct this system.

At the same time, the thinkers who have paid attention to this issue in the second half of the nineteenth century and have speculated about it, have not provided systematically and exhaustively (unlike their other works) any theory, due to the lack of any sources about Asiatic and African societies.

The special features of the concept of "Asiatic mode of production", agreed upon by the followers of this concept, can be summarized as follows:

- 1) The most important feature of the "Asiatic mode of production" is the lack of private property: the property is either state owned or communal. Due to the communal ownership of land (the lack of private ownership), which results in the lack of evolution of the social division of labor within the congregation, the congregation of village keeps its internal unity. So the Asiatic societies remain stagnate and do not evolve. In other words, the undeveloped division of labor strengthens the interconnectedness of the congregation by preserving the unity of agriculture and crafts.
- 2) Agriculture is not possible due to the geographical and climatic factors in all eastern societies without the existence of large irrigation arrangements. Such arrangements involve the existence of a central power to build these arrangements, distribute their water and repair them. That bureaucrat layer that exercises this power, and due to the specialization and domination on these arrangements constitutes a large part of the social surplus of production, creates the "Oriental Despotism". The eastern despot has a lot of power because he plays the organizing role of production, despite the fact that he does not own the means of production.
- 3) The government handles surplus production, and distributes it among irrigation specialists and other members of the bureaucracy that lives in cities. Therefore, the Asiatic cities are fully subjected to the central power. In other words, the cities as





centers of consumption are expanding to the detriment of rural areas. Because the cities do not exchange anything with the village in return for receiving agricultural surpluses, and the production remains the dominant source of use value.

- 4) As a result, these societies have remained in this system for centuries, so that the "Asiatic mode of production" loses its coherence with the advent of capitalist countries. In other words, the Asiatic societies have no history prior to the arrival of the West.

### 5. Forms of Land ownership

Most proponents of the theory of "Asiatic mode of production" consider the lack of private ownership of land as the most important feature of Asiatic societies (Witfugel, 2011). Usually, it has been said that the feudalism in the ancient East, especially in China, India, Mesopotamia and Egypt, has had such a character.

The private ownership of land in the more developed areas of the Achaemenid Empire is an undeniable fact. In the western regions of this empire, the land has not been owned by the state, kings, or primitive congregations. Of course, the Achaemenid kings, like the kings and rulers of different regions of the world, had plenty of properties during and after that period, but they were not the main owner of all the lands of the empire. The collective ownership of communities was also found in the areas where their level of socioeconomic development was low. But these communities were disintegrating in more advanced areas.

Indeed, the notion of private property has been so rooted in the socio-economic development of Middle Eastern societies that even the "powerful Eastern despots" could not ignore it. For example, we know that the Sumerian kings had to buy land from their owners (Witfugel, 2012). Although the Achaemenid kings did not voluntarily seize the real estate in the conquered territories, they recorded only the property belonging to their former kings and nobles in their own name.

The existence of private land ownership along with the ownership of communities continued until the period of the Parthians and early Sassanids as a result of the special evolution of the socio-economic relations of the Iranian plateau. It seems that in Iran, the emergence of feudalism occurred through two disintegrations of slavery and village congregations from outside and inside. However, the existence of communal congregations in the eastern parts of the Iranian plateau during the Parthians and Sassanids is not a specific phenomenon of the Eastern societies. The Germanic tribes, which, without the passage of complete slavery, entered the feudal system, they coexisted with the system of total slavery in Rome. Under the various material conditions, such a development occurs, and under the influence of the more developed system, the lower systems accept the evolved relationships (No'mani, 1978).

### 6. Feudalism

The most important features of feudalism are the following:

- 1) European feudalism was based on the collapse and disintegration of the Roman Empire, which ended with the abolition of the slavery system.
- 2) Several centuries after the feudal system throughout Europe, all or some of the following socio-economic characteristics were rooted in it.
- 3) Establishing private property on the land and focusing it both in the place and over time by applying rigid laws and customs such as non-transferable inheritance and the exclusive inheritance of the eldest son.



- 4) Establishment of a serfdom system that obliges farmers in various forms and requires them to pay for their excess production, that is, more than the minimum necessary for livelihoods, as rent, tribute and so on.
- 5) The various other obligations of peasants, such as the provision of direct and indirect services to the lord, payment of certain amounts for the permission to marry, etc., become common.
- 6) Establishing a lordly system, including the presence of the lord in his realm.
- 7) Formation of an inflexible class structure of quantitatively little aristocrats. Monopolization of land ownership in time and place through the inheritance and emergence of the inherited government of a minority of nobility. (But the survival and continuity of these two social and economic links was guaranteed only by applying "legal" and traditional rules and regulations against the restitution of land and the inflexible inheritance and succession regulations. From the above, one can conclude that the social, occupational and geographical mobility is very limited in feudal society).
- 8) Centralization of the political and economic power in the villages, which produced almost all agricultural and industrial products; the dominance of local markets; the relative weakness of financial wealth and the non-importance of domestic trade; the cities and towns, either, at first, almost did not exist, or, later, were of a trivial importance.

The reciprocity of contractual obligations of different classes, the state and its feudal-aristocratic basis. Thus, while political power was in the hands of the state (which also included feudal nobility), the exercise of power was carried out through the contract - laws, traditions, customs, and so on.

### **7. Feudal relations in Iran**

Pointing to the scarcity of water around Shiraz, its impact on the decline of agriculture and the destruction of the fertile soil of the region, James Mourier says: "Here is the grievous status of a country that all its natural benefits have been degraded by its oppressive government (Mourier, 2007). Olivier reports that due to the lack of water and the destruction of irrigation networks, Iran's cultivated soil was only cultivated for about one twentieth (Antoine G. Olivier, 1991). Dervil also speaks of the drought of the country and the ruining kanats (Dervil, 1988). In this case, the arguments and evidences that those who have referred to the existence of feudalism in Iran are relatively more serious.

- 1) The origin of "Iranian feudalism" is unknown. The economy of slavery did not exist as a result of the performance of internal or external forces as a prelude to feudalism.
- 2) There is no evidence of the existence of any form of serfdom or dependence on the land during the Iranian history; maybe the unarmed farmers have always been exposed to the desires of the masters, but this, by itself, does not imply the existence of a fully established network of productive relations which is characteristic of the landlord system. Of course, the peasants had to transfer the excess production in the form of charges and tribute to one of the exploiters: the state, the lord, the owners of iqta and others. But this is not a sign of feudal relations.



- 3) The lord usually settled in urban centers. Hence, the use of the term the "absent lord" by the Western scholars is completely unnecessary. Historically, the term was used in the case of a small minority of European lords who, in the absence of their estate, failed to fulfill their obligations and responsibilities.
- 4) The class structure was flexible, there was no House of Lords, not aristocrats, nor the distribution of power among the wealthy. On the contrary, the rules of inheritance, both before and after Islam, were a hindrance to the concentration of private wealth and the consolidation of social dignity. In any case, there was no guarantee that the wealth of a person, in whatever form, would reach all children or not, because it could easily be confiscated or usurped by the public institutions or the "individuals".
- 5) There was no legal relationship or stable contractual (ie, legal) obligations between the various classes of government and people. There were, of course, tasks that, if the government had been unaware of doing it, eventually was led to its fall, As a result, the domestic, especially international, trade had spread very widely and the cities and towns were relatively large and densely populated.
- 6) Before or after Islam, there was no religious organization whose role and significance had the least similarity to the role and significance of the Catholic Church in feudal Europe. The clerical leadership of the Zoroastrian religion has probably been more hierarchical than the Islamic clerical system, the lack of a rigid religious hierarchy in Islam is well-known and does not require much explanation. What should be added to the Shi'a is that it was a fully-fledged communal institution whose legitimacy and power arose from its followers. In theory and often in practice, the Shi'a religion has always been based on the opposition to the government.

#### 8. Nature of Property in Iran

The nature of property in Iran can be summarized as follows:

- 1) The direct ownership of the land by the state, which has been characterized in recent centuries as to be special and then pure, though in many ways, but has always been very broad.
- 2) At least in principle, the uncultivated lands were considered entirely state-owned.
- 3) Most of the other arable lands were, by the state, at the disposal of individuals, usually court members or government agents. The owner of the property did not have any legal security and there was no guarantee for the transfer of land to his or her own inheritors.
- 4) Moreover, there were different systems of feudalism. It is interesting to note that a class of the owners of iqta in India of Mongol era that were called the landowner.
- 5) There were small landownership, but the farmers did not have security even in this case.
- 6) There were public and private endowed lands. The first had more security and the second was a source of income for the survivors of wealthy landowners and traders. The confines of neither of these were stronger than the private ownership in Europe, let alone the respect for European endowments.

#### CONCLUSION



The dominant system was despotic, and the country, in the general sense of the word, Eastern: The question, however, is whether the Iranian society fits into the analytical patterns usually provided under the heading of Asiatic mode of production or Oriental Despotism.

Many of the features that Marx, Engels and their predecessors have mentioned for the Asiatic society have been observed in the Iran's economic and social relations. It is also true that the general dryness of the country that caused water shortages and the proliferation of artificial irrigation has been a major parameter in the fate of this society. But the central core of Witfugel's theory, which is based on the existence of a widespread and focused bureaucratic system (generalized from Chinese history), is not entirely relevant to the Iranian society. Moreover, his enormous generalization under the "hydraulic society" is too simple, mechanical, deterministic, and limited, and there is little evidence that the direct distribution and allocation of water was one of the main duties of the state. Ultimately, Witfugel's emphasis on the comprehensiveness of the power of the state has inadvertently diverted attention from its more important characteristic, that is, the despotic nature of this power, which affects its application not only at the head but also at all levels of the social pyramid. In addition, ignoring this important feature has led to the emergence of opposite theories - such as theories of authoritarian states and monarchies - that by focusing on the degrees of the authoritarian nature of ruling powers from Western Europe to East Asia, do not pay attention to the distinctive quality of Oriental Despotism. The distinction of the Iranian government is that it has monopolized not only power but despotic power, not the absolute power of legislation, but the absolute power of unlawful acts.

Whatever the reason for this, the Iranian society has been dictatorship for 2500 years.



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