EUROPEAN FEUDALISM AND MIDDLE EASTERN DESPOTISMS*

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The absence of property in land is indeed the key to the whole of the East. Herein lies its political and religious history. But how does it come about that the East did not arrive at landed property, even in its feudal form?—Engels to Marx.1

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HE TRADITIONAL MIDDLE EAST and feudal Europe had much in common. Both societies were ruled by elites who extracted from the masses similar types of agricultural dues, rents, taxes and services. Both were divided into hierarchical strata which contemporary ideologues glorified as social orders performing essential functions for the body politic. Both societies were strengthened internally by ties of personal dependence which bridged the wide gap between lord and peasant, patron and client, guild master and jourmeyman. Both were further strengthened by all-embracing religions which shaped the individual's outlook towards not only private ethics but also public affairs and political authority. Traditional Islam sanctified monarchs as Allah's shepherds watching over the flock much in the same way as medieval Christianity consecrated kings as God's anointed overseeing the duties of each social order. Middle Eastern "Mirrors for Princes" often began by comparing the occupational strata to the four basic elements in Aristotle's concept of matter—"men of the sword" corresponding to fire, "men of the pen" to air, "men of trade and crafts" to water, and "men of agriculture" to the earth. They invariably concluded by reminding the

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prince that his primary function was the preservation of each in its rightful place. As one philosopher in fifteenth century Persia argued:

Just as the human condition is upset if one of the four elements achieves domination, so the constitution of the kingdom is destroyed, the well-being of the world cut off, and the affairs of men fall into disorder, if one of these groups achieves dominance over the others.  

In spite of general similarities, however, feudal Europe and the traditional Middle East differed in one important aspect. While the political systems of the Middle East were invariably despotic, those of feudal Europe were by definition limited monarchies, with kings uniformly constricted by estates holding privileges, immunities, charters, even "rights of rebellion," and, in the late Middle Ages, viable representative institutions. As Machiavelli observed in his *The Prince*, monarchs in Europe, being surrounded by "independent" and "hereditary" authorities, exercised far less personal power than sultans in the East.

**Theories of Oriental Despotism**

Although Machiavelli drew attention to the important difference between the two power structures, few philosophers after him—until the appearance of Marx and Engels—tried to analyze the reasons behind the difference. The few who tried to do so during the intervening three and a half centuries all resorted to cultural explanations. Hume, for example, while praising Machiavelli's observation as "one of those eternal political truths which no time nor accident can vary," concluded by claiming that princes in the East were driven by the insatiable desire to leave "no advantage of birth, no hereditary honours and possessions, and, in a word, no credit among the people except from their commission alone."  

In much the same way Montesquieu argued that Eastern countries, unlike Western ones, placed no "limitations," "restrictions," and "mediums" on their rulers because they were integrated by one constitutive principle—that of blind fear. Hegel theorized that Orientals, in contrast to Germans, created no "civil societies" because they were at a lower level in the historical development toward the "Consciousness of Freedom": "The East knew and to the present day knows only that One is Free; the Greek and Roman World that Some are Free; and the German World knows that All are Free."

Marx and Engels, however, while agreeing that culture has an important influence on society, turned Hegel "right-side up" by arguing that in the long run "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness." As Engels said at his colleague's graveside, Marx's greatest achievement was to show how the superstructure of any society—its culture, laws, ideologies, and political institutions—are founded predominantly on the economic structure of the society, not vice versa, as previous philosophers had claimed.

Marx and Engels developed the materialist conception of history in the 1840s by examining the West exclusively. But an outbreak of anti-colonial revolts in Asia in the early 1850s spurred them to turn their interest to the East. Discovering that the available western works on Asia—such as James Mill's *History of India*, Bernier's famous *Voyages*, British *Parliamentary Papers*, and Child's well-known *Treatise on the East India Trade*—mostly missed "hitting the nail on the head," they decided to go straight to oriental sources


3 Even in the early modern age, when European monarchies transformed themselves into "new absolutisms," their power—unlike that of Middle Eastern despots—continued to be moderated by the propertied classes. The kings implemented decisions through administrations and centralized armies staffed and officered by the aristocracy. They could expropriate private wealth only by following legal procedures—procedures that were designed to protect private wealth. And they could levy new taxes only through the consent of the estates assembled in their representative institutions. As Henry VIII declared to the House of Commons in 1543: "We at no time stand so highly in our estate real as in time of Parliament, wherein we as head and you as members are conjoined and knit together in one body politic." Quoted by J. Major, "The Renaissance Monarchy," *Emory University Quarterly* (1957), p. 122.


by learning Persian. Their enthusiasm soon waned however. The anti-colonial revolts failed. Western capitalism—its birth from feudalism, its development, and its future transformation into socialism—increasingly monopolized their attention. Persian failed to open up new windows, for, as Engels complained to Marx, Persian sources were unavailable, its poetry was "erotic" but "useless," and its prose was both "deadly dull" and "void of content." Their interest in Asia was not reawakened until the 1880s, when they began to discuss the possibility that peasant uprisings in the East might spark workers' revolutions in the West. To investigate the possibility, Engels learned Russian, and Marx, by the time of his death, could read both Russian and Turkish.

The briefness of their excursions into oriental studies prevented Marx and Engels from applying, in any depth, the materialist conception of history to the East. Nevertheless, their investigations proved to them that the societies of Asia were fundamentally different from those in Europe. Before this research, they had identified (in The Communist Manifesto) only three main epochs in history—an ancient, feudal, and bourgeois. After their research, Marx, in his "Preface" to A Critique of Political Economy (published in 1859) and his Grundrisse (written in 1857-58) added a fourth stage: "In broad outlines, the Asiatic, ancient, feudal, and modern bourgeois modes of production can be designated as progressive epochs in the economic formation of society." Volume III of Capital indicates that they retained this general framework for the rest of their lives.

Marx and Engels—much like their predecessors—saw the political difference as the most glaring contrast between East and West. But unlike their predecessors—they sought the explanation more in socio-economic factors than in cultural ones. Engels began the whole discussion by posing to Marx the question of why landed property had been recognized in Europe, even during the feudal era, while it was invariably threatened in Asia. In grappling with this question they found two separate answers. Marx summarized both in his return letter to Engels. First, he began, arid geography created in many parts of Asia the need for large-scale public works—especially of essential irrigation works. Consequently, the state, through its extensive bureaucracy, was able to dominate society. Second, he added, arid geography also sharply fragmented much of Asia into small and isolated communities—"little worlds in themselves." Thus, he concluded, the state dominated society not so much because it was itself strong, but because society was remarkably weak. Marx and Engels' later writings on the East tend to emphasize one or the other of these two explanations.

Engels, on the whole, tended to stress the theory of bureaucracy. In the letter that posed the question of why private property did not fully develop in the East, he offered the explanation that aridity created the need for artificial irrigation. He elaborated on the same theme some thirty years later when taking issue with Dühring, who claimed that small elites ensured dominance over traditional societies merely through the use of physical force. Engels retorted that the few ruled over the many not because of force but because they carried out certain essential functions, such as the administration of vital irrigation works in arid climates.

Marx, on the other hand, invariably minimized the importance of bureaucracy and instead emphasized the theory of social fragmentation. This is most noticeable in the Grundrisse. As Eric Hobsbawm writes in the introduction to his selections from that work (entitled Pre-Capitalist Formations), Marx held that the oriental states could he centralized or decentralized—"more despotic or more democratic." Marx himself explained in these notes (as well as in his other scattered writings on the East): "I do not push anyone could imagine a more solid foundation for Asiatic despotism" than the "small stereotype of social organisms" known as "clans," "tribes," and "villages." These "microcosms"—"bound locally" by "geography,"

12 Ibid.
15 Engels to Marx, June 6, 1853. Selected Correspondence of Marx and Engels (New York, 1942), pp. 66-68.
16 Marx to Engels, June 14, 1855. Selected Correspondence of Marx and Engels, p. 70.
theory of bureaucracy when generalizing about the Middle East. Max Weber, for example, defined "Sultanism" as a form of administrative "patrimonialism." 22 Karl Wittfogel, in his controversial Oriental Despotism, builds on Engels' remarks in order to develop the theme that Asiatic states were stronger than their societies because of their total control over irrigation works. He further claims that Marx and Engels "mystified" the subject in order to avoid the anarchist conclusion that an autocratic administrative elite would appear in a centralized socialist economy. 23 George Lichtheim, in an essay on "Marx and the Asiatic Mode of Production," also claims that Marx and Engels, while anticipating Weber, "shirked" the inevitable conclusions of their findings. 24 And Ernest Mandel, in his Formation of the Economic Thought of Karl Marx, concludes that the existence of large bureaucracies explains the non-existence of independent classes in Asiatic societies. 25

The aim of the present paper is to apply Marx's often neglected theory of fragmentation to nineteenth century Iran. Three main reasons determined nineteenth century Iran as a choice for the case study. First, Iran's society was based on small, isolated economic units until the impact of Western imperialism late in the century. Second, its rulers—the Qajar dynasty—were despots without the instruments of despotism, for they exercised unlimited authority yet lacked both a standing army and a centralized bureaucracy. Third, its main religion—Shi'i Islam—by denouncing all temporal authority as illegitimate, ideologically undermined the official doctrine of divine right. Religion, therefore, can not explain the existence of despotism, for, as one historian has aptly put it: "The Shi'i state is a contradiction in terms." 26 Implicit in the present study is the thesis that the findings for Iran are also applicable to much of the traditional Middle East—even for such bureaucratic states as the Ottoman Empire, where the sultan's power was extensive not only because

25 E. Mandel, Formation of the Economic Thought of Karl Marx (New York, 1971), pp. 50–54. For an example of the application of the bureaucratic theory to the Middle East by a social scientist and a Middle East specialist see: A. Azar, Nisam-i Feudal-i ya Nisam-i Aysa-i (Feudalism or Asiatic Societies) (Tehran, 1967).
he controlled a centralized administration but also because he ruled over a fragmented society.

Feudal Europe

Much of the political history of medieval Europe is a history of struggles between kings attempting to establish royal dominance and lords of the realm fighting to preserve their corporate liberties.27 In the forefront of the struggles were the nobles, who, possessing domains sometimes the size of minor kingdoms, successfully safeguarded themselves with Charters of Liberties.28 These demands, such as Magna Carta in England and others which, in the words of Marc Bloch, "resound from one end of the Western world to the other,"29 placed strict limitations on monarchs. Kings promised to collect taxes only after obtaining the consent of tenants-in-chief, to abide by custom when calling for military service, to respect the property of their wards, and to punish "freemen" only after they had been found guilty by their peers in court.30

The other two estates—the clergy and the Third Estate—also struggled to limit royal power. The Church, as a "universal" organization, jealously guarded its independence over such matters as property endowments, investitures of bishops, and use of canon law in its own religious courts. The Third Estate, headed by the bourgeoisie, in exchange for loans advanced to bankrupt kings, received charters permitting cities to choose their own mayors, councils and magistrates, and to administer their own guilds, markets, and law courts. As Henri Pirenne summarized in his Medieval Cities:

Little by little the princes formed the habit of calling the burgurers into the councils of prelates and nobles with whom they conferred upon their affairs. The instances of such convocations were still rare in the twelfth century; they multiplied in the thirteenth; and in the fourteenth the custom was definitely legalized by the institution of the Estates in which the cities obtained, after the clergy and the nobility, a place which soon became, although the third in dignity, the first in importance.31

The medieval estates, however, would not have achieved success against the kings without the ability to function as collective bodies. Family feuding often divided the nobility, and religious sectarianism at times weakened the Catholic Church. Rival factions on occasion also splintered medieval cities. But the estates on the whole tended to transcend internal divisions in order to safeguard their interests. Most cities were bound together by prosperous merchants, by viable guilds, and, in the words of Pirenne, by "a collective personality."32 Most clergymen, in spite of theological differences, remained faithful to the universal Church. Most nobles, moreover, although they occasionally squabbled, remained highly conscious of their aristocratic interests. For example, William II of England, in his attempt to expel the Archbishop of Canterbury, failed to rally the barons, who, even though they had differences with the Archbishop, decided that the arbitrary punishment of any single tenant-in-chief would eventually undermine all their collective interests. A few years later, when the king asked for financial aid, they took an oath, each to the other, promising to give no answer except in communis responsio. This has been described as a classic example of "collective bargaining" between estates and king.33

Qajar Iran

The social orders of nineteenth century Iran—known in Persian as tabaqa—closely resembled the medieval estates of Europe. Corresponding to the feudal nobility was a landed class (tabaqeh-i ma-luk-i al-taw'if) formed of royal princes (shah-zadegan), notables (a'yan), aristocrats (ashtar), chiefs (ilkhan), and large free-holders (tuyul-dar). Performing functions similar to those of the Christian clergy was the Muslim religious order (tabaqeh-i 'ulama). It included the few high-ranking mujtahids—the spiritual leaders of the Shi'i

community; the imam jum'ehs (custodians of the Friday Mosques) and the shaykh a-Islams (chiefs of Islam) in each of the main cities; and, on the local level, qasits (judges), sayyids (descendants of the Prophet), and low-ranking preachers (va'ez), clerics (mullas), and teachers (akhunds). Finally, equivalent to the Third Estate, was the general community (millat), formed of merchants (tajirs) and craftsmen-tradesmen (pishivaran) in the towns, and of small farmers (dehghan), peasants (raiyat) and tribesmen (iliyati) in the countryside.

In spite of general similarities between European estates and Iranian tabaqat, the two differed in one fundamental way: while the former were viable collectives, in politics as well as in political theory, the latter were sharply divided into small vertical communities. The landed class was split into feuding families, antagonistic chiefs, and rival notables. The 'ulama were splintered into local sects, legal schools, and differing doctrines. And the general population, both urban and rural, was fragmented into conflicting groups—into warring tribes, villages, and even town wards. The estates of Europe, on the other hand, were not mere socio-economic categories: they were also active political forces. The tabaqat of Iran, while situated in similar social positions, were unable to transform their latent socio-economic interests into collective behavior. Insofar as their members shared a common way of life, they constituted social orders. Insofar as this common way of life failed to overcome communal fragmentation, they were unable to constitute real political forces.

At the basis of social fragmentation was geography. Scanty and seasonal rainfall (with an annual mean precipitation of less than 10 inches for half the country), long stretches of barren desert and mountains, together with a marked lack of rivers, lakes, and concentrations of water, all combined to break up the sparse population into small communities. There are no statistics from Qajar Iran, but projections backwards of recent censuses, together with historical evidence and adjustments for periodic fluctuations, indicate that the total population at the end of the nineteenth century numbered about 9.8 million. Of this total, over 55% were villagers, 24% were tribesmen, and 21% were townsmen (defining a town as a concentration of more than 5,000). The villagers were scattered into 15,200 settlements with a mean population of only 340 persons. The nomads were divided into at least 250 independent and semi-independent tribal units. The urban population was concentrated in some 90 small towns and 10 large cities—Teheran, Tabriz, Isfahan, Mashad, Yazd, Kerman, Kermanshah, Khoi, Shiraz, and Hamadan.

Geographical isolation was reinforced by lack of commerce and communications. Many of the communities, especially villages and tribes far from towns, were economically self-sufficient, producing both their own handicrafts and agricultural needs. Even the towns had their own rural wards where they raised much of their farm goods. The additional food consumed by the towns was brought in not by individual farmers, but by the government or by landlords who collected part of the annual crop from the peasants and sold it directly in the urban bazaars. The limited commerce that existed was mostly in luxury goods. This limited commerce was invariably hampered by the absence of passable and safe roads—the only means of transport in a traditional environment lacking rivers and coast lines. As one European traveler reported, lack of communications created frustrating crises in which the inhabitants of one province could be dying of starvation, while at the same time the inhabitants of another province could be enjoying overabundance. Moreover, the few arteries that existed between the main cities were frequently threatened by bandits, tribesmen, and sudden floods. One British diplomat spent a whole week covering the distance between Teheran and Isfahan. Another Englishman, visiting Iran at a time of relative security, found it difficult to persuade his muleteers to cross the Kurdish mountains. Another visitor, traveling as light as possible on horseback, could average no more than twenty-seven miles a day. Surprisingly, the existence of safe and passable roads did not inevitably bridge distances. The same visitor noted that the establishment of security on the road between Teheran and Tabriz had persuaded the peasants to forsake their villages for more secluded

54 Statistics for the nineteenth century have been taken from J. Bharier, Economic Development in Iran, 1900-70 (Oxford 1971).
56 Harford Jones (Brydges), An Account of the Transactions of His Majesty's Mission to the Court of Persia (London, 1856), p. 178.
areas in order to escape the tax-collector: "In Persia the richest villages are (for the same reason) in some retired valley in the mountains as far from the main high-roads as possible."

These geographical barriers began to erode only late in the nineteenth century. As Iran was gradually incorporated into the world market—with the volume of external trade almost doubling in the latter half of the century—modern means of communications were slowly built. Nevertheless, the whole of the country in 1900 still had less than 800 miles of modern roads, 8 miles of railway, and a few miles of waterways. As one modern economist has stated, "Iran of 1900 was a fairly primitive society, almost isolated, and barely distinguishable as an economic entity."

The geographical barriers were further increased by linguistic barriers, for Iran was a mosaic of diverse tongues and dialects. The central plateau was predominantly Persian, with an intermingling of non-Persians such as Qashqayis, Bakhtiariis, Arabs, Afshars, Azeris, and Lurs. The majority in the Caspian provinces were Gilaki, Mazandranis, and Taleshi villagers, with a minority consisting of Persian and Azeri peasants, and of Qajar, Turkmen, and Kurdish tribesmen. The northwest was Azeri, with pockets of Kurds, Afshars, Armenians, Turkmen, Assyrians, Shahsavans, and Tats. The south and southwest were formed of settled, semi-settled, and nomadic Kurds, Lurs, Bakhtiariis, Arabs, Persians, and Bayats. The southeast was mostly Baluchi with some tribal Arabs, Kurds, Tajiks, and Afshars. The northeast was an amalgam of Persians, Qajars, Turkmen, Kurds, Afshars, Tajiks, Afghans, Hazars, Shahsavans, Arabs, Timurs, Azeris, and Baluchis. Some of the linguistic groups, such as the Kurds, were further subdivided into local dialects.

Even when neighboring communities spoke in the same dialect, they were often set against each other in religious rivalry. The population was fragmented by three major types of religious cleavages. First, Muslims sharply differentiated themselves from Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians. Second, Shi'i Muslims separated themselves from Sunni Muslims, who were mostly Kurds, Baluchis, and Turkmen. Third and most significant, Shi'is, who formed the vast major-

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39 Ibid., p. 188.
40 Bhatier, op. cit., p. 19.
41 Ibid.
are formal or informal leaders, their authority survives only if they are able to protect the group and mediate internal conflicts. Having no coercive machinery, they have to rely mainly on “compromise, persuasion, and a keen awareness of the drift of group opinion.” Otherwise, a disagreement can easily result in the breakup of the unit. “The maintenance of a camp as a social unit,” notes Barth, “thus requires the daily unanimous agreement of all members on economically vital questions.”

Among the Basseri a group of separate camps forms a tribe—the next level of social organization. Among larger nomadic communities, however, sub-tribes intervene between the camps and the tribe. On this level, the group is led by either khan or kalantar. The title of khan is usually given to the heads of all the leading families, but the office of kalantar is reserved only for the head of the most prominent family.

Together all the Basseri tribes form the Basseri confederacy. In the nineteenth century they were led by a chief who was invariably the most suitable male member of the ruling house. Unlike other nomadic communities they did not have their own ilkhan since they were members of yet another larger entity known as the Khamseh confederacy. The tribal chief carried out three important functions, similar to those performed by the khan on the sub-tribal level and the kadkhuda on the camp level. First, he led the annual migrations, mapping out the route, and allocating pasture among his tribesmen. Second, he arbitrated disputes among his men—among different tribes, sub-tribes, camps, families and, if necessary, individuals. His tent became the “court of justice,” where decisions were determined not so much by custom or religious laws as by the expediency of what was best for the whole tribe. Finally, the leading chief used diplomacy—and when necessary, warfare—in order to protect the interests of his tribe in its relations with the outside world. Barth writes:

Perhaps the chief’s most important function is to represent the tribe in its relations with the Iranian administration, and in conflict with sedentary communities or persons. . . . Where conflicts arise between villagers and tribesmen, the chief can represent the interests of his tribe, just as the

Landowner or local administrator can represent that of the village. They can meet as equals before the Provincial Governor, or in court, or directly. The two parties have thus on this level become comparable and their conflicting interests amenable to negotiation and settlement in a political or a legal framework. The chief’s role in mediating relations with the sedentary society, in protecting the nomadic herders’ interests vis-a-vis the often formidable and always confusing organizations that structure parts of their environments and encroach on their life, is correlated with a strong respect and dependence among the tribesmen. They explicitly recognize that without their chief they would be helpless in a number of recurring situations.

The social organization in the villages was in many ways comparable to that in the tribes. Some villages were former tribal settlements that had retained their original structures long after giving up their nomadic way of life. Others had evolved into autonomous communities with their own kadkhudas, who were invariably small local landowners, long before the appearance of large landholders in the ninth century. In heading their group, the kadkhudas were often helped by such local officials as the mirab (in charge of cleaning the intricate underground canals known as qanats); the mulla of the village mosque, if one existed; the pakar, who carried out the decisions of the kadkhuda; and the dashtan, whose primary duty was to watch over the crops, fields, and cattle. Invariably absent from the village was the large landlord, who was either a major proprietor, a tribal chieftain, a prince, or even a religious foundation. The absentee landlord, while exploiting the peasantry by taking a major share of the product, gave in return: financial loans in time of need; economic assistance for the building and upkeep of the underground canals; and, most important of all, political protection from local tribes, neighboring villages, and state officials in the provinces.

The social organization of the towns was more complex. Each mahaleh had its own ward kadkhuda. He was usually chosen by the prominent families in the ward and then confirmed in office by the town or provincial governor. The urban kadkhuda, like his namesake in the countryside, led his community in two major ways: by mediating internal conflicts within his group; and by protecting the

44 Ibid., p. 81
45 Ibid., p. 28.
group in its dealings with other wards, with the government, or with the local rural population. The kadeh was often helped by dignitaries who resided in the same mahaleh—by a prince, an ilkhani, a landlord, an imam jum'eh, or, if he was fortunate enough, by a mujahid. The kadeh, moreover, could take advantage of such local institutions as the ward mosque, the qahveh khaneh (coffee house), the hammam (public bath), and the zur khaneh (gymnasium). Closely attached to the latter were a caste of wrestlers known as lutis. While working in the town bazaars as tradesmen, the lutis played prominent roles in the wards by administering the gymnasiums, raising money for orphans, organizing flagellation processions, patrolling the streets, and keeping a watchful eye on strangers. As a part of their elaborate code of chivalry, they vowed to protect their own community against the outside world.49

In towns where the ward organization was weak, guilds acted as the main social cement. One nineteenth-century tax collector's report on Isfahan describes how the various craft and trading occupations in the city were structured into some two hundred separate guilds. All had their own kadhdhas and rish safis. Some had their own symbols, religious affiliations, and law courts. A few even had their own secret dialects designed to widen the gulf between themselves and outsiders.49 Lambton writes: "Fellow craftsmen formed a closed community, which both answered in a body for any of its members involved in a punishable offense and also offered its members protection in times of insecurity."50

The social structure of traditional Iran, therefore, was a complicated mosaic in which each inlay was of different shape, texture, and design. If one term had to be chosen to describe this social structure, it would be communal diversity. There was geographical diversity between the self-contained economic units. There was religious diversity between Muslims and non-Muslims, Sunnis and Shi'is, and between Persians and the non-Persian peoples. And there was diversity of way of life between urban citizens congregated in their town wards, peasants isolated in their small and inaccessible villages, and nomads in their segmented and scattered tribes.

Communal diversity was transformed into communal divisiveness by two major economic pressures. The perpetual struggle for scarce resources, especially for water, pasture, fertile soil, and valuable underground qanats, created constant friction between neighboring groups. Meanwhile the chief system of taxation, levied not on classes but on communal units of villages, tribes and town wards, tended to pit one group against another. These economic factors were further aggravated by the generally accepted notion—a notion which has considerable validity in any stagnant economy—that gain could come not through overall growth but only through the deprivation of someone else. One group's profit was another's loss, one group's loss was another's profit. Life, consequently, was a zero-sum game.51 Thus, a society which appeared on the surface to be a colorful mosaic was in reality a hotbed of communal rivalries. As Lambton has aptly put it, "Factional strife, in one form or another, has been a marked feature of Persian life."52

Nineteenth-century Europeans who visited Qajar Iran invariably emphasized three forms of factional strife: the obvious religious friction between Shi'is and non-Shi'is, the historic struggle between the "desert" and the "town"; and the linguistic differences (focused upon by racist writers like Count Gobineau) between Persians, Turks, Arabs, and Kurds.53 These generalizations, however, completely distort the complexities of factional conflicts. They disregard the regional, sectarian, and tribal conflicts within the same "races." They ignore the multiple divisions among both the pastoral and the nomadic populations. And they gloss over the sectarian cleavages that divided the Shi'i majority. The country was split not into a few large blocks, but into many small competing fragments: often village against village, village against town, town against town, town against

51 Malcolm narrates how one tribal chief, after diligently listening to an account of prosperity in England, exclaimed: "What a number of plunderers you must have there!" On being told the wealth was not booty, he asked in astonishment, "What then can be the occupation of so numerous a population?" History of Persia (London, 1829), Vol. II, p. 456.
52 Lambton, Islamic Society in Persia, p. 18.
tribe, tribe against tribe, tribe against village, and, at times, town ward against town ward.

Bearing witness to communal conflicts were the walls protecting not only cities, as in medieval Europe, but also most villages and many wards within the cities. As Sir John Malcolm wrote in his monumental History of Persia, which he completed in 1829 after extensive travels in Iran, cities were invariably torn apart by rival Ni’mati and Heydari factions. Each had its wards, fortifications, armed bands, and obvious incentives for gaining control of the important city posts—such posts as the mirab, in charge of water distribution; the mustawi (scribe), responsible for tax assessments; and the kalantar (official), watching over the various ward and guild kadkhudas. A twentieth-century Iranian historian, Ahmad Kasravi, has sketched an account of these sectarian conflicts as he observed them in Shuster, the administrative center of the southwest under Qajar rule. He described how the city, totaling no more than 2,500 households, was geographically segregated into Heydari mahalats in the east and Ni’mati mahalats in the west, with both sides continually striving to control the crucial administrative offices. A Qajar chronicler has described how the rivalries in Shiraz were institutionalized into street battles at specific times of the year: “It was a tradition for the people of the Heydari districts to gather at special times to fight the people from the Ni’mati districts. The blood of those who were killed on both sides was to be considered as a gift.”

In regions where Heydari-Ni’mati factions did not exist, other sectarian groups played an equivalent role. Kasravi recounts how, during his adolescence, most localities in his native province of Azerbaijan were divided into Mutashari, Shykhk, and Karimkhani sects. “They lived in their own mahalats, refusing to intermarry, to enter each other’s homes, to eat each other’s food, to wash in the same public baths, to drink at the same coffee houses, to buy from the same shops, or even to pray in the same mosques. During Mu-

harram, the Shi’i month of mourning, they battled in the streets. Whenever a vacancy occurred in the local administration, each vigorously supported its own candidate. In other regions, less structured factions also existed. One such typical case was an isolated valley in the far south described by a nineteenth-century visitor. This traveler relates how the inhabitants of the valley were continually and totally split into two rival parties, fighting not only over minor theological questions, but also over the vital political issue of who was to be regional governor. Lambton has summed up the whole problem of communalism in her work on Landlord and Peasant in Persia:

Rivalry between factions, which has been a characteristic of Persian life throughout history, has contributed in no small measure to the country’s misfortunes. . . At best the factions are forced to defend themselves in order to prevent their rivals gaining the upper hand, and at worst they adopt the offensive and despoil their rivals. Where the landowners are sufficiently strong to influence the appointment of government officials, the securing of office by the nominee of one group is frequently followed by the despoliation of the villages of the other group.

Communalism also revealed itself in its starkest form within the armed forces, especially within the mass militia, the cavalry, and the short-lived modern infantry named the Nizam-i Jadid (New Order). The militia was formed of regional contingents. Each was recruited from the local Shi’i population, was maintained by local taxes, and was led exclusively by local officers. Malcolm reported that these part-time soldiers often refused to leave their own neighborhoods and had no further discipline than that of obeying “those members of their own body who deemed their superiors.” The cavalry was composed of nomadic regiments officered separately by their own tribal leaders. The modern infantry, although created in order to alleviate the tribalism and regionalism of the traditional forces, fell victim to the same factionalism as a result of its recruitment methods. The troops in the capital were recruited predominantly from the Qajar tribes and select villages in Mazandaran. The contingents in Azerbaijan, on the other hand, were raised exclusively from particular local tribes. Malcolm reported that “the different regi-

55 A. Kasravi, Tarikh-i Fars, Sahih-i Khuzistan (Five Hundred Year History of Khuzistan) (Teheran, 1950), pp. 159-61, 246-1.
57 A. Kasravi, Tarikh-i Masr-ut-yi Iran (History of the Iranian Constitution) (Teheran, 1941), pp. 139-6.
58 Lambton, Landlord and Peasant in Persia, p. 265.
ments are willing to be commanded by Europeans but not by Persians of a different tribe. 60 Another European visitor noted after speaking to some of the foreign officers: “The soldiers are in general taken from the wandering tribes of Azerbaijan, who are bound to each other by the ties of clanship and are always ready to support each other upon the most trivial occasion. This produces a constant tendency for explosions.” 61 One such explosion occurred during the siege of Tabriz by the Russians in 1826. The local population, both civilian and military, distrusted the garrison from Mazandaran so intensely that they turned against it, destroyed its artillery, and, opening up the city gates, greeted the Russians as their “saviors.” 62 Communal antagonisms proved to be stronger than loyalty to either king or religion.

The communal structure of Iran, in a number of ways, prevented latent socio-economic classes from developing into active political forces. Obviously geographical obstacles, especially lack of communications, together with the lack of social networks and national organizations, hindered the formation of cross-regional class consciousness. But less obviously, communal conflicts inevitably reinforced the vertical connections between patrons and clients within each group at the expense of horizontal ties coalescing members of the same social class. As one sociologist of conflict has stated, group tensions tend to preserve communal cohesiveness and also strengthen the position of communal leaders. 63 Most members of the upper class in traditional Iran were practical protectors of local communities. The ilkhangs preserved their authority as long as they vigorously safeguarded their tribes. Otherwise they were replaced sooner or later by family rivals. The ‘ulama were able to mobilize religious support only by effectively expressing public views in their own locality. If they failed to do so, they became leaders without followers, or, even worse, religious notables without religious endowments. 64

The landowners, moreover, carried out similar protective functions, even though their absenteeism made them appear more exploitative. If in the eyes of the peasantry the landlord was a burden, he was a necessary burden in a world full of armed nomads, greedy townsfolk, and water-thirsty villagers—all supported by their own patrons. As Lambton has remarked, in spite of the wide gulf between landlords and peasants, the latter needed the former to ward off additional hardships. 65 The whole relationship between the two is best summed up by an old Persian proverb: “A man without a protector is like a lost dog howling in the wilderness.”

Furthermore, class conflicts were mitigated and communal rivalries were intensified by a special feature of agriculture in the Middle East. In the manorial system of medieval Europe, landowners had often retained part of their estates in demesne, thus creating between themselves and their serfs constant points of conflict over land and labor dues. In the Middle East, on the other hand, landlords invariably rented out all their land, including irrigated fields, to customary tenant farmers. Consequently, any conflicts that arose between themselves and their peasants were dwarfed by those of the rival factions in the countryside fighting over the all-important issue of water, especially over wells, underground canals, valley streams, irrigated fields, and rain-fed pastures. Even as late as the mid-twentieth century, Kasravi wrote in his memoirs that much of his time in the Ministry of Justice was taken up with disputes involving rival peasant factions. “One group,” he wrote, “would claim a piece of pasture land. Another group would put in a counter-claim for the same land. And these claims would invariably result in bloodshed and in the intervention of the Justice Ministry.” 66

Iran, during the whole of the nineteenth century, experienced only two significant crises which can in any way be traced to class origins. The first was the Babi revolt of the 1840s. Although this was started by dissatisfied merchants and mullas, it rallied some support among discontented peasantry in the Caspian provinces. Significantly, these provinces are the only regions in the country with high rainfall, considerable population density, few nomadic tribesmen, and the beginnings of capitalist agriculture. After the failure of the

60 Ibid., p. 358.
65 Lambton, Landlord and Peasant in Persia, p. 265.
peasant uprising, the Babi movement gradually transformed itself into the moderate apolitical Bahai sect. Thus, it became another communal group in a country of communal groups. The second crisis with class origins occurred very late in the century when the shah's continual selling of economic privileges to European concession-hunters brought together the many scattered guilds in an extensive struggle directed at the government and its foreign financiers. This heralded the first of many upheavals to be initiated in the subsequent century by the traditional middle class. The impact of the West thus impelled the development of class politics in modern Iran.

The absence of class politics in nineteenth century Iran enabled the Qajars to rule as the grand manipulators of society. The shahs, in the words of a shrewd European visitor, "ensured their own safety" by continually "fomenting" and "nicely balancing" the existing "mutual jealousies." They systematically exploited, according to Lambton's appropriate phrase, the "constitutional inability" of the landlords to combine. They adopted as "instruments of state policy" the perpetuation of tribal feuds, but at the same time tried to prevent the escalation of these conflicts into widespread anarchy. They consciously took advantage of sectarianism in the towns to weaken potential challenges from the guilds and the religious authorities. As Malcolm observed, Iranian cities, unlike medieval European towns, were incapable of resisting the central government because of the sharp rivalries between the various wards.

For the Qajars, politics was the art of preserving their power by manipulating all the possible variations in the complex network of communal rivalries. By carefully balancing one community against another, they were able to play the decisive role in filling such important regional offices as governors, mayors, and chief tax-collectors. For example, they effectively exploited the conflicts between Heydari and N'i'matis in Shuster, Shaykhis and Mutasharis in Tabriz, and the rival peasant factions in the southern valley in order to place their own candidates, who were invariably members of the royal family, in the regional governorships. The Qajars thus succeeded in extending their domination into the distant provinces where they had neither a bureaucracy nor an effective army.

The shahs, moreover, when threatened by a group or an alliance of groups, rarely confronted their adversary directly with their own weak forces. Instead, they either cultivated intra-communal rivalries, or capitalized on inter-communal weaknesses, especially among tribes segmented into competing branches led by rival members of their ruling family. If both failed, they sought allies by encouraging the traditional enemies of the rebellious communities. Typical of the first method was Fath 'Ali Shah's handling of a rebellion led by his son, then governor of Astarabad. Rather than mobilize unreliable troops, the shah, promising rewards, carefully inhaled the age-old antagonisms between the city administration and the local population, and between the local population and the neighboring Turkmen tribes that supplied the main contingents for the rebellion. Within a week the fortress town of Astarabad, led by guild masters and religious authorities, repelled the threatening tribesmen, arrested the governor, and had him delivered to the shah. The second method of dealing with opposition was common throughout the tribal regions. As Malcolm found among the Kurds, ambitions of one "independent tribal dynasty" were kept in check by continually "fomenting discontent within the ruling family." "More than once," Malcolm writes, "the Shahs have obtained temporary influence and power by aiding a discontented or revolted prince to overthrow the direct line of succession within the tribe." Typical of the third method was the formation of the Khamsheh confederation early in the nineteenth century. The Qajars, originally northern Turkic-speaking tribesmen, in their successful bid for power at the end of the eighteenth century, had left the southern province of Fars exposed to the Qashqai, a southern Turkic-speaking tribe. In their struggle for the throne, the Qajars had destroyed the Zands, who had been the previous southern-based rulers of Iran, and had seriously weakened the Bakhtiaris, who were the only other southern tribe capable of counter-balancing the Qashqais. Thus, finding themselves without existing allies in the region, the new dynasty

69 Ibid.
71 Morier, op. cit., p. 350.
72 Malcolm, Sketches of Persia, p. 287.
set out to create an ally. They found and brought together five small tribes—the Persian Basseri, an Arab group, and the Turkic-speaking Nafar, Ainalu, and Baharlù—all of whom were individually threatened by the expanding Qashqais. They then named them the confederation of the “Khamseh” (the Five Together). Finally they designated as their overall chief Qavam al-Mulk, the merchant governor of Shiraz, whose city and caravans were constantly endangered by the pillaging Qashqais. The Khamseh, in spite of being a purely artificial creation headed by a man who had no blood ties to his followers (some even claimed that he was of Jewish descent), continued to serve as an effective counterweight against the Qashqais throughout the nineteenth century and even into fairly recent times. As a European traveller to Shiraz in the 1840s commented, “The Shah and his minister hope to uphold their local authority by keeping alive the animosity between the two rival parties. In this respect they only follow the policy pursued all over the empire, and that which appears to have been the system of government from time immemorial in Persia.”

The fragmentation of Iranian society thus permitted the Qajars to “pose,” in Marx’s words, “over the lesser communities” as King of Kings (Shah-in-Shah), Shadow of God, Conqueror of the Empire of the World, Supreme Arbitrator, Guardian of the Flock, Father of Subjects, and even as the Asylum of the Universe. The shahs, as Kings of Kings governing rival community heads, were able to pursue a successful policy of divide and rule. As Shadows of God on Earth, their will was law as long as it did not specifically contradict the fundamentals of Islam. To cite a contemporary chronicler, “Wise men have said that when you have an opinion contrary to that of the monarch you must make a sacrifice of your blood.” When an English ambassador tried to explain the legal limitations imposed on his own monarch, the shah exclaimed: “Your King then appears to be no more than the first magistrate of the Statel So limited an authority may be lasting, but can have no enjoyment! I can elevate and degrade all the high nobles and officers you see around me. That is true enjoyment.” He often exercised this power: ministers were frequently dismissed in an arbitrary fashion and subsequently blinded, castrated, strangled, or even boiled in oil. As Conquerors of Persia, the Qajars exercised victor’s rights over the property of the conquered. They claimed to own all secular land. In practice they often reclaimed the land of those whom they disgraced, whether the lands were private or held in fief. “The greatest noble in Persia,” according to a Georgian visitor, “is never for one moment secure either in his person or property.” A nineteenth-century Iranian wrote, “I have never known or heard of the shah dismissing a minister and yet not confiscating his proprieties.”

As Supreme Arbitrator, the monarch in his palace held court both in the regal and the legal sense. The king mediated disputes not only at the highest level, between contending magnates, but also at the lowest level, even between brawling street lutis. This may explain why the notion of “royal justice” has played such a prominent role in the popular theories of kingship in the Middle East. As Guardian of the Flock, the monarch had final responsibility for defending the Shi’i population. Consequently, he formulated foreign policy, summoned his warriors to arms, levied new taxes when he deemed it necessary, nominally headed his troops into war, and, in victory, distributed booty among his followers. As long as he effectively protected the Shi’i kingdom, the various communal heads were morally obliged to serve him faithfully. If, however, he failed to provide this guardianship, they could seek another wardship. This partly explains the willingness of many magnates, even Shi’i magnates, to seek either British or Russian protection as Qajar authority weakened towards the end of the century. As Father of his Subjects, especially of his “Unfortunate Subjects,” the shah readily intervened in the economy. He regularly stored supplies as protection against bad harvests, periodically regulated prices to placate dangerous towns, and occasionally, if the budget permitted, built irrigation projects.

Last but not least, the Qajars, as Asylums of the Universe,
justified their despotism by arguing that only they stood between communal conflict and total social anarchy. One court chronicler, while claiming that the rulers derived their legitimacy from “divine” origin and “celestial rights of conquest,” continually harped on the theme that the dynasty had ushered in a new “age of harmony” by ending the previous civil war, by mediating between rival factions, and by channeling political differences away from the battlefield and into the peaceful setting of the royal court.79 The Qajar defeat of their rivals had supposedly “saved” the cities from tribal plunderers. The return of Azerbaijan had ended a long period of “poverty,” “opened wide the portals of security,” and ushered in an age of “ease and quiet.” The establishment of a new order had brought a bright era in which the “people could repose in perfect tranquility.” These glowing descriptions may not have fooled many, but they did provide, even for the skeptical, a justification for arbitrary rule in a sharply fragmented society. Malcolm, who was by no means a friend of autocracy, was nevertheless impressed when informed by a minor khan that his tribe no longer tried to wage a war against its rival tribe, as in the past, but instead safeguarded its interests through the ilkhan at the royal court: “You know this tribe and mine have a long-continued feud. Our lands adjoin; the government now is too strong to permit us to attack each other openly like brave men; so we endeavour, like sneaking rascals, to do each other all the damage we can by intrigues and plots at court.”80 Even James Fraser, a liberal-minded European whose Narrative of a Journey into Khorasan reads like a long indictment of Qajar despotism, concluded his visit with a Hobbesian apology for the Iranian type of Leviathan: “Persia, to live secure from internal and external foes, requires the control of a warlike and determined sovereign. A weak or pacific king, however good his disposition, will bring distress and ruin on the country.”81 The notion of constitutionalism remained irrelevant until the breakdown of the traditional economy and the growth of class consciousness in late nineteenth-century Iran.

80 Malcolm, Sketches of Persia, p. 156.
81 Fraser, Narrative of a Journey into Khorasan, p. 622.

Oriental Despotism as an Analytical Concept

The concept of Oriental despotism has fallen victim in the polemical struggles of the Cold War. Some, such as Karl Wittfogel, by elaborating on Engels’ comments concerning hydraulic works, have misused the term in order to denounce any past, present, or future government they may dislike outside Western Europe. Consequently, others, especially Third World scholars, have consciously avoided the term.82 They have argued that the phrase seldom appears in the later writings of Marx and Engels. They have pointed out that many Asiatic empires—such as the Ottomans in Turkey, Moghuls in India, and Sassanids in Persia—rarely undertook large-scale irrigation works. By making traditional Asia out to be only slightly different from medieval Europe, they have stretched the definition of “feudalism” to cover most pre-capitalist societies, not only in Europe but also in India, the Middle East, China, and Southeast Asia.

The present paper has put forward three major reasons why Marx’s—as opposed to Engels’—concept of Oriental despotism is a useful framework for analyzing some Asian societies before the impact of Western imperialism. First, it has argued that the power structures of medieval Europe and traditional Asia were strikingly different since monarchs in the former were by definition limited monarchs while in the latter they were invariably despotic. Second, it has stressed that the root cause of this difference in the political superstructure lay not in cultural “peculiarities” but in the socioeconomic structures of Asia—or, to use Marx’s own terminology, in the “Asiatic mode of production.” Third, it has demonstrated that the main feature of the Asiatic mode of production was not public works, but rather the small self-contained communities aptly described by Marx as “little worlds.” These communities—villages, tribes, and town quarters—sharply fragmented the population into “microcosms” which were separated from each other by geography, by the lack of commerce, by language and religion, by patriarchal organizations, and by a constant struggle for scarce resources—especially water and rain-fed land. By fragmenting the population,
the Asiatic mode strengthened the vertical communal ties while preventing the growth of horizontal cross-regional class consciousness. By preventing the growth of class consciousness, the Asiatic mode of production permitted the ruler—the oriental despot—to manipulate society unhampered by viable feudal estates.

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