

Introduction: ‘Oriental despotism’ in world-system perspective

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Central to the establishment of Western domination over the ‘East’ is the writing of the history of the ‘East’ in terms of Western hegemony. This practice is particularly manifest and developed in the case of the Ottoman Empire, which encompassed large areas of the Middle East, North Africa, and the Balkans for nearly four centuries until the outbreak of the First World War. The Ottoman territories, because of their proximity to and long-standing military, diplomatic, commercial and cultural contacts with Western Europe, felt the tremors of European expansion more immediately and intimately than other ‘Eastern’ world regions. In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, at the ‘historical moment’ of direct European penetration of Ottoman lands, there developed a body of beliefs – assumptions about the history and the social structure of the Ottoman Empire.¹ Part of the European *Weltanschauung* formulated by the Enlightenment writers and by Hegel, this discourse is premised on an essential duality or oppositionality in the historical developments of the East and the West.² As such, the West is viewed as the privileged domain of world-history characterized by change and development, and the East as the non-privileged, unchanging therefore the *ahistorical* domain. On the one hand, this notion embodies a Western self-definition that requires conceptualizing the ‘Other’ (the East) as its opposite or as a contrastive backdrop to its own development whereby the history of the East becomes that of the West in negation.³ In practice, it has served as the ideology of Western domination that was conceived as the primary stimulus to change in the otherwise stagnant East. On the other hand, implicit in this dualistic conception of world history is a mode of analysis that is ahistorical. The East and the West are conceived as ideal-type societies locked in their respective cultural and geo-political specificities. In this context, ‘historical’ analysis is one of contrasting ideal types: dynamic, rational, democratic West versus static, irrational, authoritarian (despotic) East.⁴

This European world-view finds its concrete expression in the nineteenth-century Orientalist tradition of studying art, history, literature and religion, in the Marxian concept of the Asiatic Mode of Production (AMP) as well as in the

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developmentalist literature in social sciences of the post-World War II period. In the past two decades the fundamental assumptions of these perspectives on the Ottoman Empire are questioned by an increasing number of scholars.⁵ In essence, such questioning represents no less than an attempt at ‘decolonizing’ Ottoman history, dissociating it from the self-image of the West and restoring the Ottoman Empire its place in world history. It means the rewriting of Ottoman history.

The essays in this volume are a part of this attempt at rewriting Ottoman history. In doing this, first, they attempt a new conceptualization of Ottoman history and society that primarily derives from the world-system perspective formulated by I. Wallerstein.⁶ What the world-system perspective does is to challenge the ahistorical and dichotomous views of world history and seeks to place the historical development of the Ottoman Empire in the context of a ‘singular transformation’ process – that of the European world-capitalist system. As such, this perspective rejects the notion of culturally or geo-politically determined ideal types in explaining the historical development of different world regions. Instead it explains the differential development of the Ottoman and the Western European societies in terms of the ‘fluctuating reality’ of the world-capitalist system as it expanded to include the Ottoman territories after the sixteenth century. This process termed ‘incorporation’ describes the transformation of Ottoman structures after they came in contact with world-economic forces. How individual authors conceptualize the transformation of the Ottoman society incumbent on ‘incorporation’, I will discuss later. Parallel to its conceptual emphasis, the volume includes a significant body of micro-historical research on social-economic structures and trends. This trend in Ottoman historical writing reveals the influence of the *Annales* school of historians, most notably of F. Braudel, and is pioneered in the works of Ömer L. Barkan and Halil İnalçık.⁷ It stands in sharp contrast, however, to the conventional studies of the Ottoman Empire that focus on political–military–cultural institutions.

The organization of the volume reflects, to a degree, its dual focus on conceptualization and empirical research. The first part includes general theoretical discussions about the Ottoman social structure, its internal dynamics and its transformation under the impact of global economic developments. The remaining three parts consist of case studies on agrarian, industrial and commercial structures and their transformation in different areas at different time periods. The distinction between the ‘theoretical’ and the ‘concrete’, however, is more for organizational purposes than real. The case studies either directly address themselves to theoretical problems or provide ‘facts’ that inform the general interpretative schemes, suggesting new avenues of conceptualization. Conceptual models, in turn, serve to place the specific research in the context of the ‘larger picture’ and define new research problems. Before attempting a discussion of individual contributions, a few remarks are in

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order on the prevailing conceptions of the Ottoman Empire since the critique of these approaches provide a starting point for new conceptualizations presented in this volume.

Ahistorical conceptions of Ottoman history

For the nineteenth-century Orientalist tradition,⁸ 'Islamic' civilization, of which the Ottoman Empire was a part, constituted the object of study. This civilizational unit was then defined in cultural essentialist terms. Not only was a highly heterogeneous entity, the 'Islamic' world, made uniform by the existence of an Islamic *geist*; diverse institutions or cultural expressions were assumed to be concrete manifestations of this primary cultural essence. Initially focusing on the philological deciphering of such cultural forms as literary, philosophical, religious, and legal texts, the Orientalists viewed the history of the 'Islamic' civilization as one of 'decline' or 'stagnation' following a 'golden age' in the classical period between the ninth and the twelfth centuries. While decline was explained in terms of a flaw in the Islamic cultural essence, the rise of the Ottoman Empire constituted an anomaly in this unilinear downward path of 'decline'.⁹ To accommodate it, on the one hand, the Orientalist emphasis shifted from a textual to an institutional mode of analysis; on the other hand, the cultural entity of the 'Islamic' civilization had to be juxtaposed with another nineteenth-century intellectual construct, that of 'Oriental despotism'.

The analysis of Ottoman 'despotism' as an antithesis to European monarchy was very much part of the European political discourse since the Renaissance. Beginning with the Enlightenment thinkers, especially with Montesquieu, however, the notion of 'despotism' acquired a more general denotation. It came to describe all Asian polities including that of the Ottoman Empire whereby geographical determinants of social-political structures were emphasized.¹⁰ At the same time, the contrasting of political structures, the relationships between the state and society in the East and the West became an indispensable intellectual exercise in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries.¹¹ This was also the theoretical context in which the notion of the AMP was formulated by Marx and Engels. The story of the AMP is familiar and need not concern us here.¹² Moreover, the AMP was not a theoretical model generated solely for the analysis of the Ottoman Empire. What needs to be stressed, however, is that the AMP embodies the central assumption of 'Oriental despotism' – that of the existence of a gap between a mammoth state and an unintegrated social structure. Hence, in Marx and Engels' formulations of the AMP, the defining feature of Asian society was the absence of intermediary structures of classes (i.e., landed aristocracy, merchant class) between the hydraulic state and the undifferentiated agrarian base. This meant the absence of any limits to the authority of the state; it meant the absence of 'civil society' and the

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preponderance of the state. It was explained in terms of Asian geography (climatic aridity) or of the cellular organization of society in self-sufficient village communities. The Asian society without classes and therefore without class conflict was then assumed to be stationary, without history. As such, change could come to the East only from without, more precisely, through Western intervention.

That the AMP is theoretically inadequate and empirically inaccurate is amply demonstrated.¹³ Yet, the assumptions of the AMP about the stationariness of the East and its despotic political structure rooted in geography and agrarian social structure are carried over to the post-World War II analyses of Asian societies – those of Soviet Russia and China, as well as the former Ottoman territories of the Middle East and North Africa.¹⁴ In these analyses the AMP serves at times rather too explicitly the ideological function of underlining the superiority of the West *vis-à-vis* the East. On the one hand, this takes the form of cold-war rhetoric, pure and simple.¹⁵ On the other hand, it serves to legitimate Western colonial penetration of non-Western areas by stressing the beneficial effects of such penetration in the development process. Shlomo Avineri's study of Arab society provides an excellent example of the latter case.¹⁶ Avineri traces the despotic militarism of the contemporary Arab elites and the social-economic underdevelopment of Arab societies to their allegedly stagnant and classless origins under Ottoman despotism. He then proceeds to show how direct Israeli colonization of Palestine has helped to eradicate the past relics of the AMP and to launch this region on the road to modernity.

Orientalist descriptions of Islamic polity and society closely approximate to the conceptions of 'Oriental despotism' that dominated the Enlightenment and the nineteenth-century European intellectual discourse. True to their culturalist orientation, however, Orientalists explain the phenomenon of Oriental despotism in terms of Islamic cultural properties and *not* in terms of geography or social-economic structures. Thus, in this conception Islamic society is viewed as a cellular structure in which village communities, tribes, guilds, ethnic and religious groupings constitute separate and autonomous units that are integrated only on the level of religious ideology and institutions. 'Oriental despotism' or the political structure is then superimposed by force on the society and, as such, it is external to the society's integration.¹⁷ Underlying this conception of the relations between the repressive state and the 'atomistic society' is the assumption that the Islamic society lacked a notion of 'political domination based on general consent'.¹⁸ On the one hand, the rule of the despot was uncontested by different social groupings whose rights and interests were not embodied in a rational body of law and who therefore could not claim a legitimate political existence nor bring about political changes in the existing legal framework. On the other hand, the ruler required no legitimation in the eyes of his subjects who were excluded from the polity. His authority lay in the sheer exercise of force and in the flawed Islamic political theory that recognized

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the legitimacy of the *de facto* ruler. Once again state and society relations thus defined read the absence of civil society. They also mean the absence of liberalism, humanism, and parliamentarism in Islamic society.¹⁹ These absences rooted in Islamic cultural traits (in law, moral code and customs) in turn explain the political and social stagnation of the society, its political instability and disorder as witnessed in the circulation of dynasties and in sporadic revolts, and, finally, in the indifference of the populace to the upheavals on the level of the polity. In describing this story, Orientalist research focuses on the study of repressive political institutions (army, bureaucracy) and on religious-cultural institutions (Islamic law, the religious scholars, *sufi* orders) that legitimate this repression. The 'decline' or the 'stagnation' of the Islamic Ottoman society is then traced in the history of individual institutions.²⁰ Thus, the 'golden age–decline', problematic is recast in the framework of 'Oriental despotism' whereby the Ottoman golden age in the sixteenth century characterized by institutional flourishing was followed by a period of institutional decline owing to a flawed cultural essence or to Islam.²¹

Finally, what needs to be stressed is the ideological function of the culturalist view of 'Oriental despotism'. To begin with, the assumption that the Islamic political theory recognized the legitimacy of effective *de facto* rulers served to legitimate Western colonial rule as long as it was more efficient than the 'corrupt' pre-colonial one. Second and most importantly, the assumption of the absence of structural links between the state and the society supplied the ideological argument that the overthrow of the 'despotic' state and its replacement by a more humane colonial state would in no way impair the functioning of the Islamic society.²²

Culturalist and 'stagnationist' assumptions of nineteenth-century Orientalism are recast in the developmentalist (modernizationist) literature of the post-World War II period.²³ Central to the developmentalist approach is the Weberian characterization of Islamic society.²⁴ Weber, like Marx before him, sought to explain why rational capitalism did not develop in Islamic society. In doing so, he concentrated on the absence of urban commercial classes which he attributed to the specific character of the Islamic ideological-political structures – Islamic ethics, law and despotism. This 'cultural essentialism' in Weberian garb takes the form of a dichotomous conception of tradition versus modernity in the modernization literature. Modernizationists take the individual nation-states that came into existence after the dissolution of the Ottoman rule in the Middle East and North Africa, and not the Islamic civilization, as their unit of analysis. But, in explaining the economic and the political 'underdevelopment' of these basically political units, they stress the essential Islamic cultural properties (traditionalism) embodied in the attitudes and beliefs of individuals and in institutions which inhibit the development of modern (Western) attitudes and institutions. Of the latter, secularist-nationalist world-view, entrepreneurial spirit, and parliamentary democracy are signalled out. 'Mod-

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ernization' ('Westernization'), on the other hand, is viewed as the end-state of development and, to achieve it, institutions and attitudes are to be refashioned or 'reformed' after Western models. In the implementation of 'reforms' modernizationists stress the centrality of Western-educated bureaucratic-military elites. More importantly, the theory provides legitimation for the use of force by these elites in the name of an 'ultimate good', that of modernization. Finally, this model of transformation from above is justified in terms of the 'history' (rather the 'non-history') of Islamic society which, not having a bourgeoisie, experienced no political reorganization or revolutions from below and therefore can generate neither indigenous nationalisms nor parliamentary democracies.

One widespread reaction to the prevailing conceptions of Ottoman history and society has been to reject the alleged essential oppositionality in the historical developments of the Ottoman Empire and the West. Instead, these critics argue for the generalisability of the Western historical experience to the entire globe, in general, and to the Ottoman Empire in particular. The argument takes several forms. The first is the orthodox Marxist stance, which tends towards a position of quasi-universal feudalism in describing the Ottoman social structure. This view posits a unilinear model of historical development that sees in history a pre-ordained course along the stages of feudalism–capitalism–socialism which every society, each in its own pace, must take. By obscuring the specificity of development paths in different world regions under the undifferentiated rubric of feudalism, this approach, however, falls into the trap of 'ahistoricism' that plagues the modernizationists: 'ideal stages' take the place of Weberian ideal types.²⁵ A second criticism of the conventional views is one that generalizes the development of capitalism to the Ottoman ('Islamic') society. Inspired by the work of Maxime Rodinson,²⁶ this approach seeks to demonstrate that the capitalist sector (defined in terms of the existence of merchant and financial capital) was an integral part of Islamic societies throughout their history and that Islam as a culture system was not antithetical to capitalist development. This Rodinsonian view bears much too strongly the marks of reaction to the Weberian–modernizationist paradigm and to the Eurocentric conceptions of 'Islamic' history. This reactive posture then results in the search for 'capitalist' characteristics in lieu of those assumed by the Weberian lore as hindering capitalist development.²⁷ To begin with, by defining capitalism in terms of the mere presence of capital (merchant and finance), this approach renders capitalism an ahistorical category that can be spotted in nearly all societies one cares to look into. In the second place, this view does not question the validity of the ahistorical category of 'Islamic civilization' as the unit of analysis. As such, Rodinson seeks to refute prevailing conceptions of 'Islamic' history and society on their own terms without questioning the ideological function of their formulations or without leaving the conceptual domain they defined.²⁸

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In brief, what is primarily wrong with the AMP, nineteenth-century Orientalist and modernizationist conceptions of Ottoman ('Islamic') society is that they are ahistorical. The 'history' of the Ottoman Empire is explained in terms of essential (internal) therefore unchanging and ahistorical properties – culture or geography. Conceptions of cellular social structure underlie the stationariness, the ahistorical character of the Ottoman Empire. Historical development then becomes a function of Western penetration, to which is attached a positive value. As such, these conceptions cannot provide accurate analyses of the historical transformation, of the internal dynamic of the Ottoman Empire in the period both prior to and after Western penetration. Ultimately, their primary concern remains with Western development and in showing how and why the Ottoman Empire departed from the Western pattern. Hence, such questions as why capitalism did not develop or why liberal thought did not flourish in Ottoman lands are central to these discussions; these approaches serve to highlight the uniqueness (or the specific dynamic) of Western development as it is brought into focus through contrasting it with its opposite in the East.²⁹ More importantly, they fulfil an ideological function, that of underlining the superiority of the West *vis-à-vis* the Ottoman Empire, and therefore wittingly or unwittingly help to justify Western domination in the particular moments of encounter between the West and the Ottoman Empire (or the former Ottoman territories). On the other hand, the critiques of Orientalism, the modernization theory and of the AMP tend either to dismiss the specificity of Ottoman historical development in an attempt to fit it in the theoretical grid of a universal feudalism *or* repeat the ideological assumptions of their opponents in the midst of empirical bickerings over absences or presences of capitalistic or liberal traits. The world-system perspective seeks to move away from the essentially *ahistorical*³⁰ and *ideological* conceptions of Ottoman history (and from the approach of the latter's critiques) towards new categories of analysis.

Ottoman Empire and the world-system perspective

Articles in Part I of this volume by Wallerstein, Decdeli and Kasaba and by İslamoğlu and Keyder are general formulations of the world-system perspective as it is applied to the study of Ottoman history and social structure. In general terms, the world-system perspective explains the differential development of Western Europe and the Ottoman Empire in terms of the historical development of the European world-economy beginning in the sixteenth century. In doing so, it stresses the historicity of both the 'underdevelopment' of the Ottoman territories and the capitalist 'development' in Western Europe. Hence, the central question is no longer one of why capitalism did not develop in the Ottoman lands or 'why can't they be like us?'; but how capitalist world-economy, once it developed in Europe, affected the development of other world

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regions. More precisely, the world-system perspective³¹ seeks to delineate the transformation patterns in the different zones of the world-economy as it expanded through trade and brought about an ever more efficient organization of production through an ever-increasing regional specialization. The three zones of specialization are the core, semi-periphery and the periphery. The trade-induced division of labour between these regions was then matched by the development of different modes of labour organization in the different zones (i.e., free wage labour in the core, share-cropping in the semi-periphery, 'coerced' cash-crop labour in the periphery) and by the differential strength of state structures (strong in the core and weak in the periphery). What this means is that not every region flourished or developed on an equal footing. On the other hand, the differential development of production systems, labour organizations and of state structures ensured the flow of surplus from the periphery to the core and the maximization of profits in the system, thus giving rise to accumulation of capital in the core and to 'underdevelopment' in the periphery. In this sense, no world region can be said to have been the innately 'privileged' domain of world-history nor is any region innately non-privileged. Moreover, given the specific nature of the world-capitalist development characterized by the 'unequal' development of different regions, one cannot talk about the beneficial effects of Western penetration (colonial or commercial) on non-Western regions. Thus, for instance, it is suggested that the unintegrated social structure and the 'backward' or 'underdeveloped' features such as stagnating peasant economies, enslaved or exploited rural labour, declining imperial commerce and the relative absence of an indigenous (Muslim) merchant class as well as the tenacious hold of religious ideology or 'traditionalism' and a 'weak' authoritarian state structure – that the nineteenth-century writers of the Ottoman Empire observed and their twentieth-century counterparts continue to unearth – were not after all innate to Ottoman or Islamic society. Instead, it is argued, these were 'transformed' structures of a society that was undergoing profound structural changes under the impact of Western penetration. Nor is there the possibility for non-Western areas to replicate the Western model of development or Western institutions. The so-called 'modern' institutions are peripheral structures that emerged under the impact of Western penetration and as such serve to reproduce the area's 'underdevelopment'.

The world-system perspective also stresses the 'historicity' of regions prior to their confrontation with the European world-economy. That is, it seeks to delineate their internal dynamic. In doing so, it differs from the Orientalist and modernizationist approaches in the choice of unit of analysis. Instead of the cultural unit of the 'Islamic' civilization, İslamoğlu and Keyder and Wallerstein, Decdeli and Kasaba take as their object of study the social system of the 'redistributive world empire' defined in terms of its internal division of

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labour or its mode of integration. Hence, in contrast to 'cellular' conceptions of the Ottoman social structure in which discrete parts reproduce their own stagnation, the Ottoman world-empire describes an integrated whole. It is characterized by political determination of the economic division of labour whereby the controls of the central state over the production, appropriation, and distribution of the surplus serve to integrate the different economic practices (agrarian economy of peasants, urban craft production, and trade). In identifying the mechanisms of integration, the world-system approach points to the extraction of surplus in the form of taxes and to the organization of trade and markets by the state. İslamoğlu and Keyder also employ the theoretical construct of the AMP in describing the Ottoman totality. In doing this, they attempt to avoid the main theoretical problem of the conventional AMP formulations – that of explaining the existence of a highly developed state structure in a classless society – by defining the state as the surplus-receiving class and by making the state the locus of both the intra-class conflicts among various claimants to the surplus and the inter-class conflict between the merchants and the recipients of the surplus. The article by İslamoğlu-İnan on agrarian class relations in Ottoman Anatolia included in Part II, however, contests this class reductionist view of the state that defines the state and its relationship to society simply in terms of the state's role as the extractor of surplus. Instead she argues that the basis of state power lay outside the surplus extraction process and in the political-judicial structures that constituted the basis for the legitimation of that power. Hence, through its political and legal practices, the state intervened in the economy and society and in the social class relations. This analysis seeks to refute the conventional 'Oriental despotism' thesis that views the 'gap' between the political structure and the society and the absence of intermediary structures, except for those mechanisms essential for the tribute collection, as the defining features of Asian society and that poses political power in Asia as absolute and arbitrary and therefore devoid of any legitimating principle. Finally, Sunar's article in Part I describes the internal structure of the Ottoman system as redistributive-patrimonial based on the domestic mode of production of peasants in which both exchange and production were state institutions. Viewing the society as an institution of the state, Sunar, unlike İslamoğlu and Keyder, does not attribute the integration of the Ottoman system to a class dynamic; instead he focuses on the dynamics of the state structure and stresses the vertical integration of social-economic units into that structure, whereby power and status and not economic class describe the system of social stratification.

Central to İslamoğlu and Keyder's conception of the internal dynamic of the Ottoman structure is the role of merchant capital and of internal trade.³² Empirical research also points to the primacy of trade and markets inside the Ottoman 'world-empire'. İslamoğlu-İnan's research shows that the collection

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of taxes in kind required an extensive network of urban and rural markets that served the recipients of revenues, who converted either part or the whole of the product tax into cash in these markets. In fact, she argues that surpluses appropriated in the form of taxes constituted the larger part of the marketed surpluses and therefore were the primary determinants of commercial activity within the Empire. Hence, the market involvement of the peasant economy was to a large degree mediated through the mechanism of taxation. Faroqhi's study of cotton and cotton-cloth production in sixteenth-century Anatolia shows that merchant capital directly penetrated the rural economy, providing the intermediary link between that economy and the larger society. On the one hand, Faroqhi argues that rural cotton manufacturing was carried out in close connection with the market. On the other hand, she shows that, contrary to the conceptions of autarchic village units embodying a unity of handicrafts and agriculture,³³ rural craft production was organized along the lines of a putting-out system in which the merchants provided the raw materials and purchased the finished products destined for larger markets beyond the locale of production. At the same time, the merchant class constituted an intermediary structure between the state and the larger society. The central state and its institutions was a major market for the products of both the agrarian economy and the rural and urban craftsmen. More importantly, as Faroqhi shows elsewhere,³⁴ the central state, through its controls over trade and markets, ensured the flow of goods to designated markets for the provisioning of towns and of those areas where certain goods were not produced. As such, the only mode of state intervention in the society was not through taxation. The state intervened to regulate the circulation of goods within the Empire and this presupposed the existence of a highly complex organization of trade and markets. Hence, on the basis of recent research, it can be argued that, contrary to Weberian formulations and those of their opponents, the problem is not one of the absence or presence of merchant capital or commercial development but that of how these were integrated into the system. In the Ottoman system such integration took place via the political controls of the central state.

Most importantly, however, the world-system perspective seeks to show how trade and market structures of the Ottoman Empire were transformed with the expansion of European trade after the sixteenth century. This process, which signalled the eventual dissolution of the Ottoman world-empire, describes its 'incorporation' into the European capitalist system (İslamoğlu and Keyder, Wallerstein, Decdeli and Kasaba). This meant the transformation of the Ottoman Empire into a raw-material-producing region, i.e., periphery, for the European core markets in exchange for manufactured goods. It also meant the disruption of the political unity of the Empire – that is the undermining of its integrative principle that focused on the state's ability to direct the flow of goods inside the world-empire. In more concrete terms, the increased demand for