

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND HISTORICAL SPECIFICITY

Political narratives and detailed case studies dominate the field of Iranian history. Ahmad Ashraf, in his article on "Historical Obstacles to the Development of a Bourgeoisie in Iran," published in the last issue of *Iranian Studies* (Spring-Summer, 1969), deserves praise for his ambitious attempt to apply a sociological theory to Iran and to "provide a structural view of a total society and its historical development." The theory he chooses to apply and the difficulties he encounters, however, deserve some comments.

The central theory of the article is derived from Karl Marx's observations on "Asiatic societies," from Max Weber's concept of "patrimonial government," and from Karl Wittfogel's controversial book on "Oriental despotism." Using these three sources, the article stresses the "structural differences between the pre-modern history of Persia and the pre-modern history of the West," and argues that the Iranian bourgeoisie, from the beginning of the sixteenth century until the present, has failed to develop because of "the superimposition of a traditional bureaucratic machinery over the economic structure" of the country. The article emphasizes that even now "the patrimonial nature of domination over the whole society obstructs the development of a modern bourgeoisie."

The author, having introduced this central theory at some length, suddenly in two brief sentences injects into the discussion two other factors which have no logical connection with the central theme: "the existence of powerful tribal groups" and "colonial penetration." Thus, an article which had begun with one sociological theory for why the bourgeoisie has failed to develop, soon turns into a multi-factor explanation.

In order to test the validity and the importance of the central theory we must first look at some economic factors that have prevented the growth of the bourgeoisie, since the term "bourgeoisie" refers to a social class produced in certain stages of economic development; and, secondly, we must look at the "bureaucratic machinery" and see how far it was responsible for preventing the growth of the bourgeoisie.

The problem Ahmad Ashraf has dealt with is an integral part of the wider question of why the Middle East has experienced a slow and prolonged economic decline from the twelfth century until the nineteenth century (see Charles Issawi, The Economic History of the Middle East, 1800-1914. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967, p. 3). In general, economic decline can be caused either by shortage of concrete economic resources, or by socio-political obstacles, or by a combination of both. Ashraf's article makes the first element unimportant, and the second all important. Thus, we are given a detailed discussion of the bureaucracy, but we are told nothing about natural resources, geographical and technological factors that have hindered development. One cannot theorize about underdevelopment in Iran without mentioning such obvious obstacles as aridity, the lack of low cost water transportation, and the vast inhospitable distance between urban centers. And one cannot deal with the problem without taking into account technological factors, especially since economists agree that technological progress (production, distribution, and application of new knowledge in economic activity) is an important factor in economic development. Between the twelfth and the nineteenth centuries, technology in the Middle East not only stagnated but even retrogressed. For example, the windmill--a source of low cost motive power--was originally invented in Iran in the early Muslim or even pre-Muslim times, but while it was imported into Europe and extensively used in the Low Countries, it gradually disappeared in the Middle East. We are given no explanation as to how and why any of the factors used by Ahmad Ashraf caused this disappearance.

The hypothesis that bureaucratic machines prevent the growth of the bourgeoisie can be challenged both on theoretical and empirical levels. On the theoretical level, one can argue that bureaucracies help the bourgeoisie. The household administrations created by the Tudors in England and the Bourbons in France contributed towards the expansion of trade and paved the way for bourgeois revolutions. Both of these administrations were more like "patrimonial governments" rather than like Weber's feudal or modern political systems. Moreover, the article itself shows that the Iranian bureaucracy has been strong in the three periods when the Iranian bourgeoisie has prospered: during the Safavids, under Reza Shah, and in contemporary Iran.

On the empirical level, one cannot prove that the bureaucracy has prevented the development of the Iranian bourgeoisie from 1500 to the present, mainly because there was no bureaucracy worth mentioning in most of these four-and-a-half centuries. As the article correctly and at length describes, the Safavids, at their height (1587-1667), created a strong

centralized state with a bureaucratic machinery and a standing army capable of enforcing the shah's authority. What the article does not mention is that they were unable to finance these instruments of absolutism, and consequently, their power was in sharp decline after 1667. (see Ann K.S. Lambton, Landlord and Peasant in Persia. London, 1953. pp. 105-129). The bureaucratic machinery was not recreated until the time of Reza Shah, two-and-a-half centuries later. Thus, we are left with the long period between 1667 and 1925 when there was no bureaucracy, and yet the bourgeoisie failed to develop. To account for this wide gap, the author resorts to his two other factors--the tribes and the colonial powers--but by doing so he relegates his main theory to a minor position in the essay.

Finally the only sign of the usage of the economic discipline is a collection of statistical data in the concluding part of the paper. It should be clear that to measure is not to understand; what is needed is an interpretation of the empirical data.

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THE AUTHOR REPLIES:

My essay on "Historical Obstacles to the Development of a Bourgeoisie in Iran" has, fortunately indeed, generated some controversy which I believe will help to clarify a number of vexing issues in this important area of Iranian history. I should like to assert at the outset, however, that the comments made by Parvin and Abrahamian reflect their misperception of the central theme of my essay as well as some of its key concepts.

Contrary to Parvin and Abrahamian's characterization of my essay as an "ambitious attempt to apply a sociological theory to Iran," the main objective of the paper, as discussed in some detail in its introduction, was the application of the principle of historical specificity to the course of the historical development of a social phenomenon, i.e., the bourgeoisie, in Iranian society. This principle transcends both nomothetic and idiographic methodologies and thus, my work, which is an illustrative example of its application, is neither nomothetic nor idiographic. In fact, some of its features are entirely idiosyncratic--the result of a unique history.

Taking the principle of historical specificity as a guideline, I started my essay by clarifying the meaning of the