Tormented births: passages to modernity in Europe and the Middle East
al-Khafaji, I.

Citation for published version (APA):
al-Khafaji, I. (2002). Tormented births: passages to modernity in Europe and the Middle East

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Introduction: Posing the Problematic

"(T)he trouble with history is that it is largely concerned with brute facts, which, insofar as they are discoverable, have a terrible way of revenging themselves on the practitioner who pretends that they are not as they really were."

(de Ste. Croix 1985: 24)

The theme of this study is to question many of the assumptions upon which a huge edifice of ‘third world’1, development/underdevelopment, and/or area studies, studies on the paths to modernity and ultimately our understanding of modern world history rests.

This endeavor has become more than necessary today, because of the almost general consensus among social scientists, historians and economists that ‘third world’ studies are in a deep crisis. New approaches to tackling this issue have become, moreover, more promising given the ever expanding literature, much of it producing fresh insights over the past two decades, on processes of social, economic, political and cultural change and transformation in Europe as well as in other parts of the world.

It is the view of the present author, that in order to overcome the impasse in development studies, one needs to take a novel comparative approach to the history of modern Europe, rather than rejecting in advance any comparison between the former on the one hand, and the present day juncture of many non-industrialized societies on the other. A formidable task, indeed, yet the many profound contributions to the making of modern Europe, as well as many still compartmentalized studies on particular regions, histories and societies in the third world have made it possible today.

But before proceeding with this, let’s pose the fundamental (and ever recurring) question: why should we make Europe our point of reference?

The question is, obviously, not novel. It has been posed from various perspectives, but mostly as a protest against attempts at carrying such a comparison. The reasons behind that protest are not difficult to discern. The first and most important objection comes from those who would immediately label such an attempt as Eurocentric. According to those, the fact that Europe was the first to industrialize and to play the role of the world’s hegemon for a long while does not mean that any other region aspiring for a more equal share in world power and/or wealth will emulate its path. This objection takes various forms: one is ‘cultural’, so to speak, in the sense that it implies that Europe’s development has to do with its cultural, historical, as well as particular

1 Throughout this study, I will not go into the age-old debate on what to call those countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America that had not been part of the ex-socialist system. Aware of the deficiencies of all of the proposed, and used, denotations. I will arbitrarily use the widely used term: third world.
social structures, and that its path is not open to others simply because the latter have their own specific cultures, histories and structures that will unfold differently.

The second objection is the radical one most clearly associated with the dependency/world systems approach, but is by no means confined to it. This approach does not view the advanced capitalist ‘core’, or ‘center’ in cultural terms, but as a socio-economic system which has arisen first in a certain geographical zone, and by establishing itself there it has deformed the social structures of all other regions in the world, via exploitation, and surplus appropriation. As development in the core is inconceivable without the underdevelopment of the ‘periphery’, there is an inherent impossibility for the latter to turn into a capitalist center. The only possibility is to transform the whole world system and do away with capitalism.

Yet a third objection to the comparative approach with Europe comes from what I will call a romantic and humanistic approach. While the first two approaches base themselves on, supposedly, structural and historical factors, this one is more of a policy implication. It does not necessarily depart from the premise of the impossibility of ‘catching up’, but questions its desirability, given the negative outcome of capitalist development, in terms of exploitation, environmental and ecological costs as well as the internal and world inequalities that it inevitably bring.

The last approach will only be touched upon marginally and implicitly in this work, because its point of departure is not necessarily the existence of some essential difference between various societies, whether these differences are inherent, as in the first approach, or are the product of some perceived historical process, as in the second. The romantic approach belongs more to the domain of policy, while the first two approaches deal more with historical analysis, and/or with the analysis of present-day social and economic structures.

The present work does not have the pretension of adding to a growing body of critique of the cultural specificity theses, nor to the critique of the dependency/world system theories. Over the past two decades some seminal works have appeared in both fields. Suffice it to mention Edward Said’s “Orientalism” (1978) and Robert Brenner’s “Critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism” (1977) as two outstanding examples in each field. In order to examine the presence or absence of some similar patterns of evolution across different regions one has, obviously, to go beyond the general description of the processes involved and to link them to a conceptual apparatus that can have an explanatory power. To the best of the present author’s knowledge, this task has not been addressed satisfactorily up till now. I will argue that the reasons for this can be attributed to ideological bias and/or to the ever-expanding compartmentalization, even within each of the social science disciplines.

Despite the many breakthroughs in studies concerning the rise of modern Europe, or of capitalism on the one hand, and the socio-economic structures of various regions of Asia, Africa and Latin America on the other, scholars and students of early modern Europe brushed aside in advance the possibility of extending their findings to non-European societies. In fact, this tendency was shared by many scholars from disciplines far removed from history who saw that ‘pure science’ is that whose ‘laws’ are derived exclusively from the contemporary capitalist reality. A prominent economist like Sir John Hicks expressed his serious doubts on whether “the problem of developing of the underdeveloped” should be studied within the framework of the theory of growth,
suggesting that the former issues should better be dealt with by sociology, but not economics:

“I begin with one meaning that I shall set, quite firmly, on one side. “Growth Economics” is often taken to be particularly associated with the problem of ‘developing the underdeveloped’. The appearance of a branch of theory called growth theory, at a time when the economics of underdevelopment has been a major preoccupation of economists, has made it look as if there must be a real connexion. I much doubt if there is. Underdevelopment is a vastly important subject, but it is not a formal or theoretical subject. It is a practical subject which must expect to call upon any branch of theory (including non-economic for instance sociological theory) which has any relevance to it. If there is any branch of economic theory which is especially relevant to it, it is the theory of international trade”

(Hicks, 1969: 3)²

But besides those westerners following the traditions of Max Weber on the ‘uniqueness’ of the West, there are many others, who tend to take for granted that the processes of state, society, nation, or economy formation, or consolidation in today’s third world are radically different from the ones that prevailed in early modern Europe. Despite the wide differences between the various authors who share this view, one or more of the following is almost always assumed to lie behind the differences: the revolutionary changes in communication, information or technology, or the radically different political setting of today’s world, or simply imperialism, globalization, multinational institutions and transnational processes. Charles Tilly, for example, warns his readers that “...the fact that European states formed in a certain way, then imposed their power on the rest of the world, guarantees that non-European experience will be different” (Tilly 1990: 16 italics added).

This approach is much more pronounced among the other group of scholars. Development students, as well as anthropologists, historians and economists have shown a remarkable aversion against comparing their object of investigation with any European context. Any attempt at carrying such a comparison was seen as an apology for the view that the gap between developed and underdeveloped regions is only a diachronic one; i.e. that Europe's advantage lies essentially in its earlier passage to capitalism, and that all that the peoples of the third world need in order to become like them is time. Such attempts were therefore doomed from the outset as turning a blind eye to the deforming effects of colonialist and imperialist hegemony on the social structures, and therefore, on the economic prospects of the colonized, semi-colonized and newly independent countries. Over the past three decades, all sorts of ‘designs’ for autonomous growth paths, ‘authentic’ modes of production were tried. Even those who believed in some kind of universal and common patterns were led to believe that such universal paths were more of policy options than historical processes that have their internal logic and dynamics. Thus, universalism was transformed -especially during the cold war era- into an option between following a ‘socialist’ or a ‘capitalist’ path. This option, moreover,

² The Euro-centrist view of Hicks also shows in his advice to treat the problems of underdevelopment within the framework of the theory of international trade. Third world problems are important only insofar as they influence the developed world.
was thought to be no more than a good and resolute choice lying in the hands of the political leadership of third world countries.

There were exceptions to this, to be sure. On the one hand, a statistical-structuralist approach initiated by Simon Kuznets and pursued by Hollis Chenery and others has contributed to give a more profound knowledge on the relationships among various quantifiable variables over the long term and across various regions (time-series and cross-sectional analyses). Kuznets’ and Chenery’s works have shown that there is some correlation between changes in population growth, foreign trade patterns, consumption, investment and saving levels and national income growth (Kuznets 1966, 1971. Chenery, 1975). Because these profound and meticulous studies had no pretensions of presenting theoretical causal explanations on what triggers all these series of changes (and thereby to study the ‘origins’ of capitalist growth), in addition to their concern with observing certain correlations rather than trying to explain them, they were, obviously, insensitive to the fact that some unquantifiable variables can not be simply kept aside. Moreover, the fact that these studies appeared at a time when development studies were being heavily ‘terrorized’ by the radical environment of anti-imperialism contributed to their confinement to scholarly institutions.

Another contribution came from a totally different field and motivation. Bill Warren, basing himself on what he saw as Marxist traditions, tried to show that colonialism and later imperialism were, and are, far from harmful to development of the third world. His arguments were developed through a heated debate with Bob Sutcliffe in the early 1970’s (Sutcliffe 1972, Warren 1973), but his main work was published after his death (Warren 1979). Warren produced many innovative arguments, but his conclusions and main arguments tended to be very apologetic, even to the imperialist plundering of the third world.

Such an a priori ideological bias against linking the history of the third world with that of the rest of the world was, in the present author’s view, behind the almost total ignorance of the processes that led to the formation of modern Europe (and capitalism in general) among third world scholars. A deliberate ignorance of European (and capitalist) history has made it so familiar to begin with a few paragraphs replicating well known (and unfounded) generalization about a stereotyped European history to show where and why “we”; i.e. the third world could not, cannot, and will not become one of “them”. A standard contrast would involve the following statements:

- **Unlike Europe**, the role of “external factors”; i.e. incorporation in the world capitalist and/or colonial annexation, has been crucial in:
  1. shaping and creating an arbitrarily defined national space in the third world;
  2. transplanting modes of production that are more favorable to the needs of the world market;
  3. the formation of local class structures in the dependent countries; and
  4. causing dependency/underdevelopment.

- Because of the above, the relationship among domestic social structures is different from the one we find in Europe, in that:
  1. Whereas a rising productive bourgeoisie entered into conflict with the feudal system in Europe, third world bourgeoisie originated from the feudal landlords, and thus entered into alliance with that system;
ii) Whereas the bourgeoisie captured state power in Europe and transformed the existing institutions into democratic and pluralist ones, a dependent state in the third world had a stake in perpetuating dependency on the world capitalist market, and hence in perpetuating underdevelopment and authoritarian rule;

iii) The national revolutions of the third world were not the product of processes similar to those of Europe. They reacted against capitalists as well as pre-capitalists in the meantime and installed étatist regimes in place, and therefore;

d) Unlike Europe, third world states shape domestic classes and give rise to dominant ones and not vice versa. The ‘classical’ and ‘normal’ relationships between dominant classes and states that existed before the revolutions, i.e. affluent classes harnessing the state apparatus to their interests, were ‘inverted’ now.

The final conclusion of such typical approaches is that it would be futile, or at least irrelevant to study the structures, struggles and evolution of third world societies in terms of ‘western’ categories, such as classes, class interest, and class based ideologies, for these are simply inapplicable to the third world context.

What this work aims at is to show the non-uniqueness of the third world path to modernity, which means by implication the non-uniqueness of the point of reference: Europe’s path to modernity. However, a huge edifice of theory/description and speculation on a priori contrasts rather than comparison made it almost impossible to proceed without critiquing several standard works on several topics. And I must immediately try to put this critique in perspective. No serious author would venture into writing if s/he were completely satisfied with the existing literature in her/his discipline. This implies that every attempt to make a contribution is in fact a critique/elaboration/expansion, and/or extension of the body of analysis contributed hitherto, whether the author makes a reference to what s/he is critiquing or not.

Obviously, the more authoritative and established the criticized authors are –and naturally, the more sound and scientifically legitimate the critique is– the more innovative one can aspire to be. For it would add a little –if any– to our knowledge to criticize works of secondary –or no- importance, or works that a given discipline has long surpassed. Hence, the present author’s attempt to critique some established authors in the fields of state and identity formation, state/class theory, the theory of imperialism and development, trajectories of capitalist/bourgeois development, and Middle East studies, is in a way an expression of tribute to those authors who produced thought-provoking and influential studies. Were these works judged of little value, I wouldn’t have spent much time and effort in exploring what I saw a deficiency in some aspects of their methodologies or analytical framework. My own analysis, which undoubtedly will be subject to the harsh critique of others, could not have been produced without these criticized works. And it is my view that no discipline can develop without this successive cycle of questioning the basic assumptions.

The endeavor to demystify the processes of rise to modernity and to show the non-exceptional history of the Middle East has been the preoccupation of several other authors and has gathered momentum since the 1980s at least following the publication of
Edward Said’s seminal work: Orientalism. Yet the powerful influence of this work, which applied Michelle’s Foucault’s methodology on the studies of the European discourse towards the “East”, has been contradictory because of the many ways one can read the book.

Said traced the roots of delineating, demonizing, or exoticizing a distinct universe since the days of Dante, thus he did not link that European discourse to any one particular social system. Obviously, the literature that Said had consulted is authentic and highly indicative. But by so doing, Said opened the door for a very risky reading of his work. While the author explicitly states that he wanted to show how mythical that “Eastern universe” is, one reading of Said’s work can argue that a distinct universe called the west that confronts the east does indeed exist, otherwise how can we explain the persistence of a culture that bound (and still binds, according to Said) a whole continent (plus its descendants in America and Australia) by mobilizing them against that “common threat” of the other?

The point, however, is not to ‘blame’ Said for this way of reading history. The book appeared at a time when celebrating authenticity was gathering momentum in most of the third world, especially in the Islamic world and the Middle East. Much of the culturalist, almost racist, approaches of the nineteenth and early twentieth century was now replicated by the ‘defendants’ of Islam. Hinduism, Buddhism, etc. who drew ammunition from Said’s work to ‘prove’ that there is indeed an ethnic or religious enemy called the west and that defending one’s own identity passes through showing the specificity and corruptness of the other as a culture and a system.

Another reading of Orientalism to which the present author subscribes, and the reader may justifiably accuse me of putting words in Said’s mouth, is that it is a celebration of universality and universal history and trajectories. Delineating others, and demonizing them was there in Europe long before the colonial era. But then, delineating ‘foreigners’ who do not share our norms and culture was (and unfortunately is) the alter image of identifying one’s community in Europe and elsewhere. Naturally, when others are far away and pose no threat to one’s perceived community, there is no point in delineating them since space and the absence of massive contacts make such an effort redundant. It is only natural that the two neighboring regions: Europe and the Middle

---

3 One work, which appeared in the same year as Said’s “Orientalism” and has been unfortunately eclipsed by this coincidence, it seems, should be singled out; namely Bryan Turner’s “Marx and the End of Orientalism” (1978).
4 Predictably, the reader would rightly assume that this statement refers to the Islamist trends which were on the rise in the second half of the 1970s all over the Middle East. Although this subject goes beyond the scope of this study, I would like to draw attention to a phenomenon that goes far beyond this and may have unwittingly paved the way for Islamism and other forms of introvert ideologies to gain the ground. The cold war atmosphere has turned the ideological struggle into a geographical and ethnic one. In the Middle East, Marxists who enjoyed huge popularity in such countries as Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon until the 1960s gradually moved from attacking capitalism to attacking the ‘West’. A painful history of plunder, aggression, and humiliation by western colonialism and imperialism provided a fertile soil for a Maoism that pitted poor nations against rich nations. Nationalist ideologies in the Middle East, especially Ba’thism, now no longer needed to embarrassingly quote the early Nazis, who in the 1920s declared that the “German proletarian nation was waging a struggle against the bourgeois nations”, but a “progressive” Marxist version. Yet it would be a gross mistake to confine the rise of ‘authenticity’ to a particular region. Suffice it to look at how the French and Russian communists attack the aggressive US policies today by invoking pathetic xenophobic instincts, just like their extreme right wing rivals.
East, or the world of Christianity and the world of Islam, each with a claim to upholding a universalist ideology single out each other as the target to be demonized. Competition and rivalry over territory and control of people made the loss of identity a real and imminent threat for each of the two adjacent regions. What gave Eurocentrism its particular aggressiveness is not the existence of these prejudices that have been floating in each region's culture since time immemorial. It was the fact that Europe gained its socio-economic hegemony since the sixteenth century and could now articulate all these ideological elements in a powerful colonial and aggressive discourse that would pervade other cultures, including the subjected ones, precisely because of the superior cultural development, techniques and means of communication. The regrettable absence of reference to the changing power relations with the domination of capitalism made Edward Said's book vulnerable to the first interpretation based on cultural specificity.

Nonetheless, attempts at showing the non-exceptional trajectories and structures of the Middle East have been under way for several years now. So, can the present work have any claim to originality?

Ironically, these contributions, many of which have advanced our knowledge of the working mechanisms of the region, have only privileged the region by incorporating it within the third world. This statement may look surprising. But the fact is that even when 'third worldism' was at its height, the Middle East (perhaps with the partial exception of Egypt) was rarely, if ever, taken as a representative case study in the sociological and economic works. Middle Eastern scholars, as well as specialists on the region, have almost always tended to find some peculiar trait(s) that prevented them from merging their object of study with other regions. When much of the third world, the ex-socialist camp, as well as countries like Spain and Portugal were under the rule of étatist regimes, Middle East scholars preferred to 'explain' the region's socio-political structures in terms of some historical traditions of 'oriental despotism' or 'Asiatic mode of production'.

---

5 The power to delineate, demonize and inferiorize others reached its zenith in Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as pseudo-anthropological and ethnological scholarship seemed to provide a powerful legitimating weapon for the colonial claim of civilizing 'barbaric peoples'. From 1874 to the 1930s, 'human zoos and ethnological exhibitions, where 'exotic natives' were displayed with animals in cages and enclosures, to a sensation-seeking public' were regularly organized in the major European cities. See, Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard and Sandrine Lemaire, 'Human Zoos: Racist Theme Parks for Colonialists', *Le Monde Diplomatique* (English edition), August 2000: 8-9.

6 One needs hardly to mention that each country and region has its own specific features. However, attempts at romanticizing or transforming these specific traits into unique characters have been almost always part of the ideological turmoil that nations face on the eve of their passage to modernity. Thus it is the view of this author that Arab nationalists who tend to exaggerate the specificity of Arab culture are not much different from the Russian narodniki or the German Historical School of the nineteenth century.

7 'Oriental Despotism' and its pseudo-scholarly twin 'the Asiatic mode of production' have been the subjects of countless studies. Their history date back to the period of European enlightenment when European thinkers invoked imagined stories about the east in order to legitimate their own views on how Europe should proceed. Voltaire's admiration of organized and civilized China, for example, led him to find the causes in the absence of landed property there. Conversely Montesquieu and Rousseau used the same argument to denounce despotic rule in Asia. This tradition reached its zenith with Hegel's 'Philosophy of History' and Marx's few and ambiguous passages on the 'Asiatic mode of production', which strongly echo Hegel's wording. Empirically, the idea of non-existence of landed property in Asia has been shown to be a myth (among others, see Thaper 1980, 655-71). The most powerful critiques on how the power of Western knowledge
Theories of underdevelopment went from Latin America, passed by sub-Saharan Africa and ended in East Asia over-flying the Middle East. Most, if not all, of the Middle East scholars were political scientists, some with qualifications of the highest caliber. They therefore had their aversion to socio-economic generalizations, comparisons, theorization, or testing a specific theoretical notion, even when they produced some of the best empirical studies—to which the present work is indebted. Hence, the attempts at rescuing the Middle East from its exceptionalism were aimed at demonstrating that the Middle East follows the same modalities that govern the rise, functioning and outcome of the other third world formations. As far as I can ascertain, no study has ever tried to compare the region, or aspects of its structures, with the developed capitalist countries, or with Europe. Such a comparison was not even made with Eastern Europe with which the Middle East has so much in common: both regions were parts of large and centralized empire, the Ottoman or Austro-Hungarian. Both were subject to the threat of invading nomads. In both regions “modern” state structures and independence came only around WW1.

The outcome of such studies, which attempted at putting theory in the heart of the study of the Middle East, was not hard to predict. Even when a given author did not explicitly adhere to the dependency/world systems approach, the notion that colonialism/imperialism have deformed the regions’ structures, diverted it from its ‘natural’ path of development, ‘created’ underdevelopment and dependence, and produced a peripheral capitalism that is radically different from the capitalism of the core almost always formed the backbone of the story. We will note that some of these more recent studies tried to show the inapplicability of these paradigms to the Middle East (Gerber 1987, for example), yet they unwittingly ended up endorsing them. Thus, the reader might rightly complain that the dependency/world systems theories are too old and discredited to be rehearsed once again, but I had to address some of the issues raised by them whenever they were applied to the Middle East.

The present work attempts at presenting a radically different account of the making of the contemporary third world. It argues that social change should not be viewed in terms of a false dichotomy: internal vs. external effects. Each and every community, society or entity cannot be identified without the existence of some other community, society or entity with which it interacts. The crucial questions are, however: how does a given community or entity internalizes the surrounding effects? And, why does it internalize them in a particular way at a given point of time? As I will attempt to show, neither early modern Europe developed in isolation, nor naturally, the third world. Yet it was, and is, the existing social relations within each society that determined and defined the outcome of this interaction, which entails the clash of two, or more sets of interests.

has constructed a mythical space called the East is naturally Edward Said’s seminal work “Orientalism.” (Said 1978, 1995) Grosrichard (1979) shows how the imagination of the classical West designed the fiction of Asiatic despotism, the monster that only the East is claimed to have begotten. Nikiforov work provides a very useful and critical survey of the history of the two concepts (Nikiforov1977: 99 – 120). Other important contributions to the concept of Asiatic mode: Hobsbawm ed. 1965, J. Chesneaux 1964, Suret-Canale 1964, Tōkei 1966.
This, as will be shown, is not to say that the power relations between the two, or more, clashing sets of interests are irrelevant, but that in order to assert its supremacy the more powerful set only acts within the constraints laid down by the existing set of social relations within a given community or society. In other words, one cannot reach any clear understanding of a particular society, or region by simply invoking such notions as "the interests of colonial or imperialist powers", "processes of globalization", "western plans", etc.

Despite the many above references, the present writer's ambition is not to produce a work on the 'third world', the theory of development/underdevelopment, nor on a particular area within this world, or a comparison between Europe and the Middle East. This work aims rather to contribute to the theory of social formations, especially to understanding the dynamics of capitalism: its origins, potential and modalities of expansion over time and space. In other words, I am trying to situate local histories within a general framework of a theory of capitalist expansion on a world scale. This naturally entails a study of the forms, institutions, instruments and mechanisms by which and through which capitalist relations of social production take root within various societies. Thus, Europe here will not be treated as a geographical area, as much as an abstract model. This may explain why England, which is conventionally taken as an exceptional case, has been deliberately chosen as a case for many comparison, in addition to other European countries. It goes without saying that many policies, processes and procedures that took place within a specific European context were not necessary ones to the rise and consolidation of capitalism. It is the common processes, or those that can be demonstrated to be necessary that will be dealt with in this work. Obviously, 'necessary' processes should not be viewed as those that all countries and societies have passed through. The 'Gerschenkron' effect, for example, is a necessary one for late comers to capitalism. A France with a relatively large free peasantry on the eve of its revolution underwent changes that Britain did not know. Fragmented Germany had to centralize in ways that many others did not need to experience.

In this research, the main arguments regarding the origins of capitalism, the causes of development and underdevelopment are basically those developed and elaborated by Maurice Dobb and Robert Brenner. However, whereas Brenner's powerful analysis covered the above mentioned issues, the present research tries to move from the deconstructive approach; that of refuting the basic premises upon which world-system and dependency analyses rest, towards a constructive one, whereby the dynamics of capitalist transformation in a particular third world region, the Middle East, will be compared with those that gave rise to modern Europe. But even here, I had to make some hard decisions on the specific area and span of time that this study should cover. The few theoretical studies on the Middle East normally take their case at quoting a sixteenth century fact, for example, to show their point regarding the nineteenth century, thus perpetuating the myth on the stagnant Middle East even when they want to prove the opposite. A certain fact pertaining to Cairo, for example, is assumed to be a characteristic of a Middle East that is the home of hundreds of other cities and towns. In order to avoid unfounded and sweeping generalizations, and/or broad categories that tend to hide the actual processes of change, the present study has chosen to forsake stretching the investigation in favor of concentrating on that part of the Arab world, usually called the Mashrek, i.e. Egypt, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, with frequent reference to other parts of the
Middle East, especially Turkey, Iran and the Arabian Peninsula. The period that this study will cover begins with the nineteenth century (sometimes sneaking a little bit earlier to lay the background), because the foundations of the dramatic changes that have been sweeping the region until today began then.

But in order to establish the existence (or absence) of any universal trend in development and social transformation across modern historical epochs and across different regions, we have to develop first and foremost a conceptual apparatus that can be applied to our object of study. This conceptual apparatus should not be confined to a redefinition of abstract categories, although this must occupy a prominent place in our research, but also goes further to questioning the meaning and significance of some structural changes that certain European regions have witnessed during their transformation and to see whether they had been of coincidental nature, or whether they had been necessarily associated with the modern bourgeois transformation. This, I believe, is an essential step towards reconstructing a model of capitalist change that would be verified in later stages in the light of the experience of late-late (perhaps too late?) comers, including the Middle East.

Such an approach, I think, would make it possible to answer the above posed question: why Europe? Why should we compare processes of change in any particular region with that of modern Europe? The need for such a comparative approach does not stem from a belief in the superiority of any particular system or culture, nor from a political concern of how to make a certain region emulate the European path. I will try to show that long-term processes of social change follow an internal logic of their own that is insensitive to policy prescriptions and that the job of social scientists is therefore not to be more “imaginative” in “designing” new paths, but to study the internal social structures in order to discern the likely paths that these structures would tend to take irrespective of the policy preferences of the researcher. This, naturally, does not mean that the scope of policy changes is null, but that it is not an open-ended one in the meantime. Since the end of WWII, many parts of the third world have been through processes that are almost identical to what modern Europe had witnessed in its formative decades. Therefore, it would be naive to turn a blind eye to such a comparative approach under any pretext. A more fruitful exercise would rather attempt to see how similar are these manifestations, whether they are symptoms of the same or similar phenomena, and whether the outcome would necessarily be similar to that of Europe.

Structure of this Work:

Ordinarily, the reader would expect an author to begin his/her work by stating the theoretical issues that the work is going to deal with. Following the “theoretical chapters” the empirical ones are expected to follow. Another conventional way is to lay your empirical data and end up with the theoretical conclusions. The structure of this research follows neither of these approaches. The reasons for this follow directly from the type of arguments that we have tried to develop throughout this work, which despite relying on a wealth of empirical data remains theoretical by nature.

Establishing the existence of universal patterns for the passages to modernity could not be made without addressing -at least- four intricate and interrelated topics:
1. The structure and working mechanisms of pre-modern systems in the Mashreq whose “peculiarity” has been almost always taken for granted by various authors and schools of thought. This alleged peculiarity takes two overlapping—but not necessarily exclusive—forms. One is assumed to be embedded in the precolonial history of the region and has produced the various forms of “oriental despotism” (Wittfogel), “Asiatic” (Marx), or tributary (Amin) structures.

The first three chapters of this book attempt to examine these hypotheses by comparing the precapitalist structures of the Mashreq on the one hand, and the supposedly normally functioning precapitalist formations of Europe on the other. However, deconstructing the myth of the particular Mashreq could not be carried straightforwardly by presenting an already existent precapitalist ‘model’ against which some concrete cases could be standardized to fit neatly within. That abstract model had to be worked out first. And this is where the second topic came to the fore.

2. The stylized textbook version of Europe’s precapitalist history and its diverse and complicated trajectories to modernity had made it necessary to reexamine some widely accepted “truths” regarding the class formations and identities under precapitalism, the relationship and conflicts among the major social groups, the relationship between political authority and property and the dynamics of transition to capitalism. Hence the first chapter begins with an analysis of agrarian class structures and relationships as they determined the social nature of the precapitalist systems. Agrarian class structures set their limits and constraints on the dynamics of the urban structures, which we dealt with in the two following chapters in order to verify the widely held opinion that the “third world bourgeoisie” differed from its European counterpart, the first being pro-feudal and parasitic, while the second was anti-feudal and productive.

3. The empirically-based analysis of the first three chapters provided the basic material to address the third topic; namely an analysis of the highly abstract concepts of social formation, power and authority, classes, class identities and class positions under precapitalism. Addressing this topic in chapters four and five allowed us to draw some major conclusions on the functioning, logic and structures of the Mashreq systems. The conclusion was that setting the latter in a qualitatively unique category that differed from the European formations is a product of a doubly mistaken (but unfortunately dominant) reading of history.

---

8 The statement regarding Samir Amin’s peculiarization of the Mashreq should be qualified. For in his overarching concern to ‘prove’ the applicability of the center-periphery dichotomy over time and space, he went so far as to lump all human precapitalist history under the rubric of tributary formations. The western European and Japanese variants of feudalism were thus easily portrayed as the peripheries of two respective advanced centers that were characterized by the presence of a strong state machinery, the Islamic and Chinese respectively. The ideological and formal urge in this portrayal is quite evident. Amin wanted to ‘prove’ his Maoist (and wishful) theory that today’s periphery is tomorrow’s center. (Amin 1976, and my critique of the lack of a theory of history in Amin’s work, al Khafaji 1995: 63-76)
The fourth major topic of our study dealt with the other variant of 'exceptionalizing' the Mashreq; namely the one emphasizing the role of colonialism/imperialism in 'distorting' the 'internal logic' of its development. Whether the proponents of the "original peculiarity" theses believe that the Mashreq formations had an inherent tendency to develop capitalism or not becomes an irrelevant question in view of the fact that almost all of them (in addition to many others who do not subscribe to these theses) agree that the era of colonialism, and later of imperialism, has radically reshaped the fate of the Mashreq and the entire non-capitalist world⁹. Now it was the 'core' industrialized countries that were 'underdeveloping' the rest of the world. The rise—or non-rise for that matter—towards modernity in the latter part was solely a function of colonial/imperialist interests, and the particular view of a given author on the modernizing or non-modernizing role of colonialism/imperialism. Chapters six to nine tried to carry the comparative journey of both the Mashreq and Europe from precapitalism to the rise of modernity. Although one would expect that the post-WWII Mashreq would be analyzed in terms similar to those applied to other third world formations, various authors still tend to shield this region by making various claims on its 'exceptional' traits, such as the role of Islam, or its alleged resistance to democratization. By contrast, my contention is that most arguments in chapters six to nine may be extended to other non-Mashreq cases. These four chapters try to situate the Mashreq's path to modernity within a universal path. The universal path is, once again, abstracted from the only historical pattern that we have up till now: Western Europe, Japan, the US, and now the NICs.

Although the supposed peculiarities of the Mashreq are treated explicitly and with detail in these chapters, the present author's overarching concern was to show that much of the exaggeration about the so-called specificity of the Middle East or Mashreq is actually non-specific if we carefully study the role of religion as an identity-maker in Europe's rise to modernity, or the role of politics in the rise to modernity. Hence the conclusions and methodology of chapters six to nine may well be tried on other parts of the third world.

At first sight, chapter ten may look somewhat peculiar in a double sense. First, it is not a summary of the work done and the main conclusions reached. But the second reason for its peculiarity is that while the entire book tries to establish the existence of universal trends in the paths of different formations to modernity, this chapter attempts to explain the irony that despite the strikingly similar processes that the Middle East and many parts of Europe have undergone, the former region today is now only second worst to sub-Saharan Africa in most wealth and human development indicators.

Chapter ten builds on the analysis presented in the previous chapters, especially chapter seven, where I tried to distinguish between modernization or bourgeoisification on the one hand, and capitalism on the other. In this chapter I suggested that despite the similarities between the Mashreq's path to modernity and many other successful cases,

⁹ The widely accepted thesis that colonial/imperialist exploitation created two qualitatively distinct sets of formations can thus be seen as a thesis that 'peculiarizes' Europe and the 'core' countries.
an entire social structure based on rentierism made any attempt at industrialization meaningless and unprofitable. The present author is quite aware that the methodological and empirical issues involved in analyzing rentier formations certainly require much more than a concluding chapter. However, my intention was to point once again to the fact that there was nothing in the Mashreq’s trajectories to modernity that implied a necessary perpetuation of underdevelopment, a reminder that similar trajectories and starting points do not necessarily lead to similar outcomes.