Tormented births: passages to modernity in Europe and the Middle East

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Chapter 4

Social Formations
in Historical Perspective

"[I]t is not necessary that the concepts we use in the study of social groups should be familiar to the members of these groups themselves: the fact, if it be a fact, that the concept of income was not familiar to the people of the Middle Ages before the fourteenth century is no reason for not using it in an analysis of their economy."

Schumpeter 1954: 34

Put in the simplest form, a person’s position within the system of social reproduction will be taken as his/her class position. Belonging to a particular social class within society determines a series of moral, cultural and social obligations that a member of the class is expected to fulfill.

“In its broadest sense, class refers - if in the Marxist conceptualisation only indirectly - to the structured and cumulatively unequal distribution of the objects of near universal desire: of the material necessities of life and other economic resources, of respect and honour, and of power and influence.”

Rueschemeyer et al 1992: 47

But as is well known and as was stated earlier, it is only within the capitalist system of social reproduction that people come to identify themselves in terms of belonging to a social class or become aware of their class positions as an individual trait not assigned to them a priori.

Although the concept of class was known and used in ancient times - in Athens or Rome for example, the incident of being a free citizen or a slave was contingent upon a priori assigned positions; i.e. upon the incidence of being born as an Athenian or of being a ‘foreigner’ enslaved through war. Under other formations, for example France on the eve of the Revolution or early twentieth century-Mashreq, social positions were assigned in such a way that people could hardly distinguish their primordial identities from their social standing. And it is this qualitative difference in assigning and legitimating class positions under capitalism and precapitalist formations that this chapter will examine.

Can we analyze precapitalist formations in terms of socio-economic categories? And if so, how can we disentangle people’s subjective views of their positions from the dynamics that actually assign them these roles? How and why does a certain formation legitimate social divisions in one way and not another? And, no less important is to ask why should we carry an analysis in socio-economic terms if people do not view their positions in this light?

Class divisions have mostly been treated in terms of the exploitation of one dominant class by another. Undoubtedly, the process of exploitation, i.e. appropriating the surplus from the working classes by the dominant classes is the crucial source of class divisions and is therefore essential to understanding social dynamics. But precious little research has been carried on the other side of the

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1 But class awareness needs not be an exclusive identity even under capitalism. Nationalist feelings take their full sway in this era too, and religious and regional identities are far from extinct even in the most advanced capitalist societies.
process; namely how do the dominated classes view exploitation and how do they acquiesce to it for relatively long spans of time? In other words, how do exploiting classes appear in the eyes of the exploited as fulfilling indispensable functions and how the former’s exploitation is therefore legitimated? Here is where ideology comes into play as a major component that makes the reproduction of a social formation possible. That is why an analysis of class divisions that confines itself to the economic processes inevitably produces ridiculous conclusions.

The need to carry out a composite analysis of classes that incorporates politics and ideology is naturally not a novel proposition, and most contemporary authors would readily agree to it (Poulantzas 1968, Wright 1978, Rueschemeyer et al 1992, among others). However, because the existence of two separate instances: political and economic under all social formations has almost always been assumed, the problem of defining the relationship between these two instances presented a perennial stumbling block for many authors following the historical materialist traditions. Statements like ‘feudal exploitation takes the form of political coercion’, or ‘surplus extraction under the ancient empires is mediated through religious ideologies’, only compound the problem. In the first example, the statement still assumes the existence of two different practices, while in the second, the assumption is that ideology only legitimates exploitation under one form of civilizations.

My argument is that the root of the problem lies in the classical analysis of Marx and Engels, and not in some ‘misinterpretation’ of their texts. According to this analysis, the starting point in human history is a primitive communal society, which is a classless society that knows no exploitation, nor political authority. Rising productivity allows some people within this society to lay their hands on the product of others, and social classes emerge. The division of a given society into those who own the means of production and those who produce wealth through their workforce plunges social classes into a permanent process of antagonistic class struggle. It is at this moment that political authority appears in order to harness these struggles and secure the reproduction of the class system, thus preventing society from an all-out devastating war, and the dominant class from withering away under the blows of the oppressed majority (Engels 1875, 1884).

This line of reasoning, however, fails to address several questions: how could a tiny minority manage to appropriate the surplus product of the majority of a given society, and how can the majority be expropriated? Given that physical coercion alone cannot sustain a social system over a relatively long period of time, how did a ‘third’ party, namely political power, interject itself in between the contending classes, act on behalf of the dominant class, and ensure the acquiescence of the laboring classes? Empirically, how can we explain the rise of several early civilizations with a relatively developed political structure, without in the meantime witnessing the rise of affluent classes outside the ruling dynasty and its entourage?

The arguments presented below regarding the legitimization of class positions will closely link the concept of class to those of political/ideological authority. And in the context of this analysis it will become clear why classes and political authority cannot be dissociated in the analysis of any formation, and especially precapitalist formations. Hence I will begin by showing how a one-sided emphasis

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2 Despite the recurrent attacks on Engels by many Marxian authors on the grounds that he had ‘mechanized’ the profound and dialectical analyses of Karl Marx, it should be stressed here that this critique cannot hold as far as Engels’ account of the rise of classes and the state. It is a well-known fact that Marx thoroughly read and ‘approved’ Engels’ 1875 work.
on the coercive nature of political authority had far-reaching consequences for our (mis)understanding of classes and class positions.

4.1 Social Positions and Social Imagery:

In the current usage we tend to use the two notions of ‘political authority’ and ‘state’ interchangeably to denote the structures that govern and “regulate” our everyday lives through codifying the rights and duties of people living under their jurisdiction and having the authority to punish those who break these codified norms. Yet while the concept of ‘state’ may convey the images of power and oppression, that of ‘political authority’ tends to be more associated with persuasion and moral influence. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines authority as “the right and power to command” but reminds its readers that this right and power is derived from another meaning “an accepted source of expert information and advice”. The root of the word is, after all, auctor: author. On the other hand, state is defined by the same source as “the supreme public power within a sovereign political entity. The sphere of supreme civil power within a given polity” (Morris, 1980: 89, 1259).

The two overlapping and apparently contradictory aspects of the sources and nature of state power: power = violence on the one hand, and authority = persuasion on the other, are perhaps best reflected in the two divergent views on the state that prevailed among social scientists and philosophers since at least the nineteenth century. In The Philosophy of Right, Hegel had sought to present the state as the ultimate development of the Spirit, the embodiment of the general instrument standing above particular interests, and as being therefore able to overcome the division between civil society and the state and the split between the individual as private person and as citizen (Miliband 1983: 464 - 65).

By contrast, Marxists have until recently stressed the oppressive nature of the state as it has almost always been shown as an instrument in the hand of a minority, the dominant class within a given society. Although the working classes have made relatively big successes in gaining political freedoms and social and economic rights in the West during the nineteenth century, classical Marxists did not find it difficult to talk about the camouflaged dictatorship of capitalists then, because the various European states often resorted to physical violence and oppression in order to suppress the many revolts and rebellions they faced from their working classes until the outbreak of WW1.

Lenin’s emphasis on the coercive role of the state, almost to the exclusion of all else, was a very powerful instrument in mobilizing the workers and intelligentsia suffering from the brutalities of a Tsarist regime. But since Lenin’s pronouncements came to enjoy an immense authority in the world of Marxism as a result of the Bolshevik Revolution, they imposed a dilemma on progressive social thinkers who came to see an ever expanding range of political rights extracted by the workers of the advanced countries since the end of WW1. The only ‘theoretical’ explanation available at the time was one that, in retrospect, seems to have played a damaging role.
to the image of ‘historical materialism’ instead of saving it, namely the idea proposed by Lenin and pursued and theorized by Lukacs on the ‘falsification of consciousness’ through ‘bribing’ the upper sections of the working class and drawing them into a chauvinistic consensus (Lukacs 1971).

In his well known pamphlet *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1918), Lenin, bitter of the social democrats in the major capitalist countries who voted to support their national governments in the war efforts, explained that the transfer of surpluses from the colonies and semi-colonies by the capitalist monopolies has made it possible for the ruling classes of the West to use a tiny part of these profits to bribe the leaders of the working class movements, thus creating an aristocracy within that class that betrayed the interests of the class that it belonged to, and was supposed to represent and defend. But this politically powerful statement was not capable of explaining why was a substantial portion of the non-capitalist classes positively responsive to their ‘national’ leaders. George Lukacs was to provide the famous formula adopted by most of the Marxist movements (and astonishingly later by the post-modernist anti-rational thinkers), whereby ideology is contrasted with *truth*. Rather than viewing human knowledge as an ever evolving and improving exploration of the world, Lukacs came with the concept that there is some essential truth that human beings may or may not be aware of.

With Lukacs, and then the mainstream Marxist thought, a crucial conceptual distinction was introduced, the distinction between reality or *truth* or *science*, which can only be grasped by the elite on the one hand, and *ideology* or *false consciousness* on the other. This distinction was ultimately epitomized in the 1960s by Louis Althusser who waged a relentless war against empiricism, historicism and positivism, considering them non-scientific. Borrowing Gaston Bachelar’s notions, Althusser reserved the realm of scientific thought for a Marxism that has constituted itself through self-critique and produced an “epistemological break” with all prior knowledge (Althusser 1972, 1975). Despite Althusser’s rejection of the concept of false consciousness and his insistence on the materiality of ideological practice, ideology still represented for him the “imaginary” relations of individuals to their “real” conditions of existence (Althusser 1971: 162–5). And despite his rejection of the epistemological basis for the distinction between true (scientific) and mystificatory (ideological) discourse, he still made a distinction between “objective knowledge” about *theoretically designated* objects and “knowledges” that function as practical norms governing the attitudes and concrete adoption of positions of men with respect to the real objects and problems of their social and individual existence, and of their history”. Neither of these “knowledges”, according to Althusser, has an epistemological claim to absolute truth (Amariglio, Resnick, and Wolff 1988: 494).

Not surprisingly, Althusser’s positions were harshly attacked by many critics on the grounds that by not defining ‘ideology’ and ‘science’, he has disposed in one stroke with the problem of what constitutes science by merely “stating that science cannot be bounded by any ‘external’ criteria of truth, but creates its own ‘scientificity’ in its own ‘theoretical practice’” (Kolakowski 1978b: 484).

The distinction between “objectivity” constituted on the subjective preferences of elites and ‘ideology’, or ‘non scientific knowledge’ was to have far-reaching consequences for Marxist thought, as well as for the left-wing political movements all over the world. From then on, classes as objectively existing social categories were rendered passive recipients of ideas that may or may not emanate from their own
social conditions. In the meantime, ideology was divorced from material conditions and turned into an all-powerful deception machine manipulated by an all-powerful dominant class. The logical consequence for admitting the existence of a distinction between true and false consciousness is to accept the presence of a faculty of reference which has the ability to decide what is truthful and what is not, i.e. an avant-garde, or an elite. Moreover, the Leninist concept of a class-or a fraction of a class-being bribed, and thus ‘betraying’ its ‘true’ interests was to find a sound theoretical substantiation with this ‘theological’ conception of historical materialism.

To distinguish between ideology and science, or between false and true consciousness at any given moment of time requires the existence of some acknowledged authority at each particular period in order to define the ‘correct’ set of truths. Or to put it differently, this requires a teleological conception of history whereby human beings of today would be viewed as the guardians of true science and they would judge all past knowledge and history as irrational, or at best steps towards the realization of today’s rationality which should be seen, by definition, as the ultimate truth. Otherwise we can not judge past experience (or any other experience for that matter) as false.

A serious problem then arises regarding our understanding of the role of political structures and their persistence and viability. If one is to reject the ‘false consciousness’ thesis, how do we explain not only the viability of structures that can be shown empirically to be exploitative, but also the support given to them by those that are exploited by their functioning?

Much of the present day dominant writings tend to argue their departure from the ‘old fashioned’ modes of thinking, by emphasizing the ideological basis of our knowledge, that is the false and biased consciousness of people. Yet this is not only a replica of the Lukacs/Althusser theses, but it also tends to ridicule all human knowledge. In social sciences, such pretensions seem too easy to prove when one contrasts, say the attitudes of ancient Egyptians towards the Pharaoh (ideology) with today’s voting behavior of the various sections of any advanced capitalist society (rational choice). But suppose we were to take two sets of ‘scientific’ thought, upon each of whom whole sets of social and philosophical conceptions were built and which served, each in its own right and time, in progressing our knowledge. Would it be tenable to label Newton’s physics or Euclidean mathematics, for example, as ‘ideology’ or false consciousness simply because the physics of Einstein has demonstrated their limitations and therefore, their inapplicability beyond certain limits? Half a century ago, Joseph Schumpeter argued that:

“The temptation is great to avail oneself of the opportunity to dispose at one stroke of a whole body of propositions one does not like, by the simple device of calling it an ideology. This device is no doubt very effective, as effective as are attacks upon an opponent’s personal motives. But logically it is inadmissible. ...[An] explanation, however correct, of the reasons why a man

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4 In an early period of his political career Lenin had indeed this conception that the working classes cannot develop ‘true working-class consciousness’ from their own experience and that transmitting this consciousness to them was the task of professional revolutionaries (who were ironically petit-bourgeois intelligentsia). See his “What Is to Be Done?” originally published in 1902 (Progress Publishers, Moscow).

5 Half a century later, post modernism would triumphantly proceed with its pretensions of presenting an alternative to Marxism. A closer scrutiny, however, would show the affinity between post-modernism on the one hand, and such idealist versions of Marxism as those of Lukacs and Althusser on the other. Although this subject goes beyond the scope of this study, one should note that one of the forefathers of post modernism, Michael Foucault, was himself a disciple of Lukas Althusser.
says what he says tells us nothing about whether it is true or false. Similarly, statements that proceed from an ideological background are open to suspicion, but they may still be perfectly valid. Both Galileo and his opponents may have been swayed by ideologies. That does not prevent us from saying that he was ‘right’.

Schumpeter 1954: 36-7

Without subscribing to any form of naive evolutionism then, one can reject the distinction between ideology and science by accepting the idea that human knowledge is relative and is true to the extent that it improves our understanding over time, while at the same time will be shown to be wrong, or limited, after it paves the way for the perfection of better methods, tools and techniques of approaching nature and human societies.

If the above conclusions are valid then we can proceed to ask whether classes have a functional role to play when individuals do not recognize their class belonging. In other words, can their ‘ideological’ representation of their positions be taken as the determinant of their social behavior, or can we still define them according to their ‘objectively’ defined existence as classes?

4.2 Pillars of Power: Knowledge and Acquiescence

In the 1920’s, Antonio Gramsci introduced his concept of hegemony to show that the domination of the ruling class is not only achieved via recourse to physical violence, but is also elicited by a process of legitimization allowing for governance by consent (Gramsci 1971: 245 - 246). The concept of hegemony was rarely used in the social science literature until the 1960’s. One of the reasons for that, it seems, was the lack of interest in tackling the issue of the state and a general preference to concentrate on the economic mechanisms and ‘laws’ of capitalism which were thought to represent the keys to understanding and deriving all other aspects of life. Another no less important factor for the reluctance (and sometimes the hostility) to the use of the concept of hegemony and its theoretical repercussions may have been the fear of most Leninists- the dominant trend within Marxism for most of this century- that it might be taken as an apology for the persistence of the capitalist state, since consent and hegemony entail not only coercion but also some concept of ‘acceptance’ by the oppressed strata of the rule of capitalism.

The debates on the mechanisms of capitalist political domination have produced highly original breakthroughs since the 1960’s. But that old distinction between physical violence and consent still looms on these debates. Rarely is the question of whether physical violence itself needs to be legitimized and therefore whether the violence/consent dichotomy is a valid one been raised. Philosophical investigation has dealt with this issue since the pioneering study of Foucault (1975). Social science, on the other hand, still shows an aversion to addressing the questions related to the means of achieving consent. Put in other words the question should be posed as such: what makes people see the application, use, or the threat to use physical coercion a normal, or even a necessary, means for guarding their well being and securing the reproduction of their everyday norms, while in the meantime, other forms of coercion are denounced and seen as ‘dictatorship’, ‘tyranny’ and so forth?

A standard textbook answer would refer us to the liberal ideals emanating from a social contract among the constituents of a particular society, whereby these would delegate part of their personal freedoms to a public authority that defends their
'common interests'. But unless one subscribes to some variant of culturalism, this 'explanation' fails to explain what makes liberal norms of governance only acceptable at very specific moments in history, or why are other norms that are totally different from liberal modes equally acceptable at other historical moments or in different circumstances. A tribal society or a medieval urban society for example would find the concept of equal human beings totally untenable morally and lethally destructive to its foundations.

The mere fact that only under specific historical conditions do liberal norms appear to the majority of people as the "ordinary" way of life should warrant against any simplistic way of portraying the cycles of ideological domination over history. Seen from another perspective, or under other historical conditions, liberalism would not appear as merely a system of tolerant governance or economic rules; but also as an ideology that is no less 'totalitarian' than any other major world view, because it dictates the 'good' norms for individual behavior, the rules for 'correct' political choice, the 'right' ways to conduct relationships, etc. But even the incidence of tolerance would not look as abstract and absolute as liberals would like us to believe, if one was to take into account not only the intolerance that liberal colonialists have shown towards the cultures of their colonial victims, but also the calls of early liberals to banish, and even persecute, not only non liberals, but also those belonging to some groups that liberals considered to be outside the realm of worthy opponents (Jews, gypsies, non-Catholics or non-Protestants, and so on depending on the circumstances) (Mann 1999: 23-4).

The example of the rise and dominance of liberalism in the modern times is very significant in pointing out that a dominant ideology must be able not only to codify and legitimate the existing social relations, but to make them functional. And it is plainly evident that liberalism cannot be functional in a society whose members have no reason to believe of their equality. Since social conditions are in perpetual change, it follows that dominant ideologies, the way people perceive their relations to one another – especially the rulers and dominant classes – and the way they tend to identify themselves must go in tandem with these social changes. The question is how and why do people accept the rule of a certain authority?

Maurice Godelier has advanced the important hypothesis that consent towards a specific ruling authority is achieved through historical processes which make this authority appear in the eyes of its subjects as rendering necessary services for the perpetuation and reproduction of life and conditions of survival in the face of internal and external threats alike:

"I am attempting a theoretical understanding of the fact that dominated groups can spontaneously 'consent' to being dominated. My hypothesis is that, for this to be possible, the dominators must appear to be rendering some sort of service. It is only in these conditions that the power of the dominating group can be regarded as 'legitimate', so that it becomes the 'duty' of the people dominated to serve those who are serving them. It is thus essential that dominators and dominated should share the same concepts, for there to be consent based on recognition of the 'need' for society to be divided into several groups, and for one of them to dominate the others."

Godelier, 1980: 610-11

The concept of consent here is related to the domain of consciousness not in any idealistic sense of the word, but to designate a level of human knowledge at a

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6 See the chapter on Economic Nationalism.
particular moment of history. Without pretending to present a full account of the determinants of human knowledge, let's just assume that human beings, at any given historical moment, share a common frame of thought irrespective of their social, economic, and political standing. This common frame, which obviously does not exclude the existence of a wide range of differences in the level of scientific and/or educational sophistication among individuals, societies or groups within a given society, is determined by the level of scientific knowledge common to all of them. Therefore, consent has to do with the perceived dangers (whether they are real or fictitious is irrelevant here) to which a community feels vulnerable on the one hand, and the faculties of its leadership that are capable of protecting them from such threats on the other.

In order that consent develops among the dominated, there must first be a sense of unity between dominated and dominants, an aspect which has been overshadowed by the coercion thesis that emphasizes the internal struggles among and between the components of the community. While conflicts may well play a determining role in the development (or degradation) of a community, they must be carried within a common framework of reference to what is right and wrong, otherwise one can not talk of a society, a community, a social formation or a nation, but of inter-communal wars, where each class or social group would form a society of its own. The general level of human knowledge determines the scope of people's perceptions of the universe, and in the meantime, determines the ways their perceptions of leadership, authority and relationships form. In other words, this level determines the modalities of social organization that are considered acceptable or even optimal at a particular moment. In fact it is the general level of human knowledge at a particular historical moment that determines how basic norms, values and data are not contested by the major parties composing a given community. The conflicts would revolve then on who serves these norms, fulfills them, and/or represents them best.

If that is the case, then we can understand, for example, why and how the major struggles in Medieval Europe, or the Islamic world until the late nineteenth century, could not go beyond the limits dictated by a general acceptance of a dominant religion (Christianity and Islam respectively) as the regulator of everyday life. Obviously, social struggles did take place under such conditions. One needs only to recall such bloody episodes as the revolt of the slaves under the Abbasid Empire or the peasant wars in Germany. But the conflicting parties would try to show that their version of religion, e.g. Protestantism or Calvinism vs. Catholicism under Christian Europe, or Shi'ism, vs. Sunnism under the Islamic empires was the 'true' religion.

Similarly, a social setting consecrating individuality and contractual relationships among individuals would produce two visions that may seem diametrically opposed at first sight: i.e. liberalism versus Marxism. But both sets of philosophies belong to a shared world view, in that they both depart from the premises of equality of human beings, democracy as a goal to be fought for, and freedom and justice in the sense of equal access of people to the sources of wealth, power and progress. Such premises, which are taken as basic principles in today's world, would be destabilizing to any pre-capitalist structure and are unthinkable under such circumstances. Now the conflict between the two opposite philosophies of the bourgeois era, Marxism on the one hand and liberalism on the other, revolves around the 'true' meaning of each of these uncontested notions and norms. Can democracy be achieved through the ballots or must there be equal access to resources? The same applies to concepts like liberty, equality and justice. This unity in the visions is what
defines a given social formation; the presence of common visions that are not the product of any one single faction or group within that formation, but of the general conditions under which the major groups coexist and conflict in the meantime.

How then does a dominant group acquire its recognized status within a community?

Relying on anthropological inquiry conducted by Charles and Elizabeth Laughlin on the So, an agricultural people living in Uganda, Godelier notes that not only the elders dominate that community of some 5000, but that among the elders, each of which representing his lineage or clan:

"[A] small minority of men ... dominate the rest of the society: those who are initiated in kenisan, who have the power to communicate with the ancestors...and to obtain from their benevolence everything that makes life happy- good harvests, peace, health, and so on. The ancestors themselves communicate with a remote god."

Godelier 1980: 61

Following similar inquiries, Claude Meillassoux drew important conclusions on the relationship between authority, knowledge and age. When living labor constitutes the main, if not the only, source of surplus product within a community, then controlling and regulating this labor; that is men, women and their reproduction, becomes the real source of authority and power. But in such societies, where fixed assets (dead labor) have not developed yet, human knowledge of weather, good or bad herbs, expected rain or draught, etc ... can only be acquired with time; i.e. with age.

Naturally, not all men are equally qualified to obtain knowledge. First, seniors enjoy a special status because they have the potential to have more expertise on everyday life and the conditions for reproducing the community. Second, among the seniors there occurs a distinction initially based on the selection by the members of the community of someone whose talents can only be accounted for by divine, or supra natural powers, given the technical level of development of the community. The ability to communicate with ancestors of the community- the main supra natural trait laid upon an individual- is then the reason behind assigning such a prestigious value to age, ancestry and grandfathers:

"In order to perpetuate their authority, the seniors must extend their knowledge beyond fundamental subsistence skills to new fields.... They will try to make their knowledge their exclusive province by setting up barriers to regulate its transmission.... Later the granting of titles or rank to individuals versed in certain "sciences" will also identify them with the senior group which possesses authority."

Meillassoux 1978 a: 138

This is because knowledge in this sense is not confined to producing foodstuffs or tools. This knowledge, though very important and controlled by the seniors, is perishable and therefore does not definitely establish the senior’s authority, as Meillassoux observes (Ibid. 139). Rather, it is the knowledge of geography, climate and topography on the one hand, and herbs and medicines on the other which confers a divine mantle on the practitioner. And it is this knowledge in fact, that gives practitioners their authority: telling people when to travel and when not, when and

7 The ideas developed above on the relationship between classes and ideologies might look similar to, but are not identical with those developed by Ernesto Laclau. In his “Theory of Populism”, he argues that ideologicaI and political elements do not necessarily have class contents, and that non-class contents constitute the raw material upon which class ideological practices operate (Laclau 1979: 158-171).
what to hunt or harvest and what to use when they are struck with 'devilish' fevers, etc. And it is this what makes age and wisdom related because this knowledge is acquired, in such societies by experience and repetition (trial and error)§.

By erecting barriers in the face of the free transmission of knowledge, various religious taboos would then be introduced, such as the ones among the So of Uganda, where any non-initiate who dares to communicate with ancestors would be struck at once by madness, begin to devour his own excrement, behave like an animal, and die. Of these taboos, perhaps the ones regulating marriage codes and defining incest would play a crucial role because they bear direct influence on the reproduction of human beings, and thus on surplus producers.

Several conclusions can be drawn from the above:

1. Rather than a faculty whose origin is to be found by the need to regulate domestic class conflicts, as classical Marxism views it, the first embryos of class divisions themselves take the form of political authority. Political authority as the "the right and power to command" following the definition of the Heritage Dictionary, or the authority to regulate the affairs of a community is the first form of 'specialized service' which members of a community accept. And those who practice this service are given a special status within the community. Hence, it is the embryo of an early class formation within a yet classless community. In other words, the political level is still inseparable from the social and economic ones, simply because the degree of surplus extraction does not permit the rise of specialized coercive instruments. Those whom the community assigns the role of protection begin to acquire additional resources, though they may still participate in the productive jobs of the community.

Leadership of a communal society is not only a matter of convention and prestige, as many authors on the Middle East assert. Leadership implies an important passage towards a class society from the outset. The seventeenth-century formation of al-Muntafiq, one of the strongest tribal confederations in the south of Iraq, is very significant in this context. This confederation was formed among three distinct tribes which had been in constant war with each other until Shabib bin Mani', an immigrant from Najd agreed to assume sheikdom of the newly formed confederation. In this episode, knowledge in the form of a supranatural trait of wisdom was behind bin Mani's rise to this prominent position. For, according to legend, he was the only one who could transform the three warring factions into formidable alliance. Al Jawahiri emphasized the role of tradition and symbolism in the leadership of bin Mani' (al Jawahirî 1978: 64-5). Yet most authorities agree that the latter had initially posed the condition that in each spring he would be awarded two lambs from each house, one slaughtered, the other alive (for example, al Sharqi 1929: 13-15). Given that the Muntafiq's dira covered an area of some 10,000 square miles, and had a population of 200,000, and assuming that a house had an average of 10 persons, this means that 40,000 lambs were given to the shahkh annually.

2. We labeled the structure of a community that has assigned a distinct status to its chief an embryo and not yet a class society, because class positions have not

§ Note in passing that this divine facade of knowledge persisted well into the medieval (and post-medieval) era. In his penetrating piece on the intellectuals, Antonio Gramsci distinguishes one category, "possibly the most important after the ecclesiastical for its prestige and the social function it performed in primitive societies". This is the category of medical men. Gramsci reminds the reader of "the connection between religion and medicine", which "in certain areas still is". "Many great religious figures were and are conceived of as great 'healers'" (Gramsci 1971: 7fn.). Until recently, many Arabs referred to a doctor as "hakim": wise man.
become yet the monopoly of a lineage, or of a family; i.e. the reproduction of class positions is not ensured yet. In fact, it has been shown that the elders, or the seniors would in a subsequent stage try to pass their knowledge and secrets to their descendants, and in other cases hereditary positions would pass from the elder brother to the second in age, until this hereditary line is exhausted by the death of the last brother, when the leading position passes then to the sons (Cocquery-Vidrovitch 1969: 75-76).  
3. But in order that a whole leading group takes firm roots within the community and reproduces its dominant status from one generation to the other, labor productivity must reach a certain level capable of sustaining the group of non-working seniors. In fact, the number of 50 seniors in a community of around 5000 -a ratio of 1 percent- must be an indicator of the level of technical development of that community.

4. Beyond a certain level of advancement of productivity and when a community begins to acquire sources of wealth, prestige and valuable goods, there comes a decisive shift in the composition of leadership and rulers of a community. The role of protecting a given community, which is the raison d’être for the rise of chiefs, is no longer confined to insulating that community from nature’s wrath. Wisdom, or supranatural powers is essential for thwarting (or minimizing the losses from) such adversary conditions as epidemics, floods, draught, etc. However, as a community begins to devote most of its activities to sedentarized agriculture, a different kind of protection becomes necessary: protection against raiders. And it is here that Warriors begin to acquire the most prominent roles within the hierarchy of the community subjugating thus the Wizards. More often than not, the new warrior leadership of a community was originally a community that threatened the peasant community, a fighter or nomadic tribe. The role of leadership may take the form of imposing periodic taxes on peasant communities, or subjugating them and becoming part of that community. 

   The particular form of subjugation that warriors impose depends on the potential and extent of surplus that the subjugated community can afford to produce. As neighboring communities communicate through trade and war, they discover each other’s potential. It has often been the case that victors, under circumstances of very low productivity of labor, have had to kill members of a subjugated community simply because the available resources and the level of productivity did not permit the realization of a surplus to feed the newly enslaved population. More accurately put, enslaving the subjugated community and engaging it in work will not make a net addition to the resources available for the victors, or feeding the enslaved would deduct from these resources. But more important is the relationship between those sedentarized agricultural communities on the one hand, and those who are still in a nomadic condition. From Mongols to Arabs and from the Teutonic Knights to the Abyssinsians and the Zulu’s, it was those warriors whose appetites were aroused by relatively more prosperous agricultural communities who had lost their capacity to fight and defend their wealth.

5. In order that this decisive shift towards the social triad of: warriors, ideologists and producers be established within a society that is relatively more organized
than that ruled by the elderly sage, knowledge must be neutralized and turned to the service of the warrior lords. Meillassoux describes this process as follows:

“A social group which becomes the holder of knowledge on behalf of the reigning families appears. But because they control the instruments of power, these “wise men” are also subjected to measures aimed at neutralising them politically. They will either be recruited from a lower social class or made into a caste.”

Meillassoux 1978 a: 155-56 (Italics added)

The Hindu civilization presents a crystal clear image of this transformative process. The initial principles of Hinduism, established around 500 BC, stipulated a social scalar of four grades at the apex of which stood the Brahmins: the religious chiefs. A century later, a fifth scale was added where the Rajas: kings now occupied the apex while Brahmins came second (Mandelbaum 1970: 35-54, Mitra 1978: 45 passim.). Naturally, such radical shifts in the structure of communities must have entailed significant conflicts, but as we will show in the next chapter, it is not only by coercion that kings or warriors impose themselves on a community. When members of a community develop a common perception of vulnerability towards military or physical threats, then they will acquiesce to paying a ‘protection fee’ to those groups that appear capable of defending them.

We will discuss how political power developed from these embryonic stages in more detail later, but we are approaching here the domain of what a community is and how a perception of belonging to a community develops, which we should discuss now.

As was noted above, the existence, or the belief in the existence, of a common grandfather and/or ancestors constitutes a necessary condition for early class formations within communities that depend on animal breeding and/or hunting, i.e. non sedentarized populations, because superior knowledge can not be ascribed to any other factor than the contact with the dead and therefore with gods or god. Put more precisely, such a belief is necessary to legitimize the existence of a leading or dominant group within a community that is not differentiated yet. Thus perceptions of common identity are different from the perceptions of equality or homogeneity among members of the given community. A sense of common belonging does not preclude a sense of predestined differences between bloodlines destined for leadership and others destined to perform manual jobs. Perceptions of homogeneity and those of commonness ensue from two different historical processes that only coincide under particular historical conditions; those giving rise to bourgeois society.

Before that however, perhaps until the rise of nationalism between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe, the history of sedentarization and the gradual rise in importance of the principle of territoruality - has been marked not only

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10 Interestingly enough for our previous discussion of the social status of merchant in precapitalist formations, these and the peasants occupied the second lowest grade in the Hindu social scale.
11 Warriors or ‘political’ leaders need not be viewed as negating the religious or supranatural authority of the wizards. On the contrary, they have to legitimate their rule by appealing to the same normative rules which the subjected community consider as sacred.
12 The Arabic word for genius “abqari” comes from a valley in the Arabian Peninsula: The Valley of ‘Abqar, which great pre-Islamic poets, looking for insight and solitude, used to visit. But ordinary people thought that they were contacting devils that made them come back from these adventures with such rich poetry. Perhaps this explains why early Islam was so hostile to poets. After all, Mohammed, Islam’s prophet, himself a young man who was recognized for his knowledge that saved powerful tribes from bloody fighting, acquired his prestigious position from the fact that he used to spend a month every year, contemplating in a cave where God’s messenger: Gabriel brought him the Koran, as Muslims believe. He did not become a poet, but ‘came out’ with what is considered by any authority on Arab literature the first and most magnificent texts in Arabic verse: The Koran.
by “foreigners” dominating locals, but by a shifting definition of who is a foreigner and who is not to the advantage of distinguishing rulers as belonging to some other group than the subjects (even inventing such distinctions) in order to show that they had been “naturally” endowed to lead. Whenever rulers descended from the same ethnic origin as their subjects, they either used a ‘cultured’ language other than the one(s) used by the commons: the high language of the time, e.g. Latin which was the language of the Church during the Medieval Times, French in the British Court until the fourteenth century, Arabic for the Spanish elite and rulers until the beginning of the fourteenth century, Turkish in the Ottoman controlled Arab, Kurdish and East European territories, Persian in Afghanistan and North India, or even some form of “invented language” when the cultural level of the elite was not sophisticated enough to enable it to identify itself with a “leading” and distinct culture.

What from our vantage point is incomprehensible can thus be explained: the Normans in Britain, the export of Habsburg kings, princes and queens from Spain to Austria, and the Bourbons in France, Spain and Italy. But even where kings came from within the polity itself, certain houses/regions would be ‘naturally’ destined to lead and subjugate/unify the rest: the Gaulle in France, Holland in the Netherlands, descendents of the prophet Mohammed in many Arab countries. Belonging to a superior line of nobility took precedence over common belonging with the ruled subjects in legitimating authority. More accurately put, authority must achieve two apparently contradictory goals at one time: to have some common trait with its subjects while in the meantime to stay aloof from them by showing that it has some natural empowering trait that its subjects do not have. Common bloodlines or common religion are usually what binds authority and subjects, while distinctness is achieved through relation to the supranatural, which will be reflected in the authority’s adoption of different cultural codes.

Three conclusions follow from the above:

1. That political authority is the first embryo of a class differentiation within a community, rather than being a product designed to regulate already existing class conflicts. Put differently, the legitimacy of the earliest class division is derived from the political role that the ruling class fulfills. The validity of this statement/conclusion rests on the premise that appropriating surplus product must be legitimated, and that this legitimization is derived from the protection services that a distinguished group is thought to provide to the community. That this appropriation falls in ‘private’ hands is only meaningful when we look at the matter from the vantage point of modernity because the separation between public domain and private economic sphere comes only much later in history, the common or public sphere having precedence in time, as this separation itself is the product of the rise of the market and individualism. Let’s remember that the root of the word private is the Latin “privatus” = to cut from, a deduction from the “normal” aeger publicus: public domain.

2. That after a certain level of productivity is attained, it is more the rule than the exception that rulers demonstrate their ‘natural’ difference from the subjected

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13 Until the early 1940’s, Shi’ite religious ‘ulama in Iraq, who had to wander among tribes in the southern part of the country, used a peculiar “language”, which was nothing, in fact, but a skillful switch of pronouncing words in an opposite direction, so that in a conversation among two ‘ulama the phrase: “Paul wants food” would be pronounced: “Luap snaw doof”, a practice that would add some holy aura to those speaking the language of the divine (Author’s interviews and experience).

14 Apart from the early Islamic empires and Kingdoms, the two ruling dynasties in Morocco and Jordan, as well as Iraq (1921-1958) are direct descendents of Prophet Mohammed.
community, or they even invent their difference from the subjected people in order to erect barriers to the free claim for the throne or chieftainship by others. In the meantime, the subjects 'need' this distinction, so to speak, in order to preserve the holy, and thus non-human, nature of the services rendered. The following lengthy quotation demonstrate this point:

"It can thus be imagined that, when conditions have given certain men, certain groups, the opportunity to personify on their own the common good or to have access to supernatural powers supposed to control the conditions of the reproduction of the universe and society, these men and groups have raised themselves above common men and become closer to god, going further than other men into the area, which since earliest times, has separated men from gods. Out of this arises the fact that, in many societies in which there are hereditary chiefs who have no means of physical coercion over their dependents...the form of ideological justification of these chiefs' powers are due primarily to the fact that they control the great rituals of fertility of the Earth and Sea, and that they appear as intermediaries between the clans, their ancestors and their gods. To keep aloof from men and dominate them, to get closer to gods and be obeyed by them may be no more than two simultaneous aspects of the same process, that which marks the beginning of the road towards class societies and the State. This road is marked by the immense figures of Assur King-God of his town, or Shinti the Inca son of the Sun... But this time, what began by a peaceful domination has become ideological oppression and economic exploitation, supported or extended by armed violence. May be it is unnecessary, therefore, to see whether it is the political that takes a religious form or the reverse, since these are only two forms of the same process, two elements with the same content."

Godelier 1978c: 111-12

3. From the above follows a crucial and third conclusion regarding the classical understanding of the rise of social classes and contradictions within societies. For as is well known, the classical Marxist concept, formulated by Fredrich Engels (Engels 1884), portrays a primitive communal society in which class divisions begin from 'within', due to the development of the productive forces and the rise of economic surplus which allows for the rise of an exploiting class. This idea also echoes that of Hegel, who explicitly stated that:

"[C]lasses can not exist from outside, but they only evolve from within. I mean that from within the internal life of a nation, and not vice versa."

Hegel 1900: 211

Similarly, we find such concepts with contemporary thinkers, like Godelier who begins his first-cited article with the following passage:

"Traditionally, a distinction is drawn between two processes which govern the formation of the state, one exogenous to society, the other endogenous. The term 'exogenous' is used when one society conquers another... the term 'endogenous' when one part of a society gradually establishes its predominance over the other members."

Godelier 1980: 609

Yet, it is only from a contemporary perspective of people living within nations, as the 'natural' space or setting for politico-economic and social activity, that such a distinction could be meaningful, but it is simply a formal one, or non-existent within a pre-bourgeois context. The famous Greek definition: "The barbarians? They
are those who live beyond our borders,” summarizes very well the concept of identity in pre-modern times. But what are ‘our borders’? In the preceding chapters, I have tried to show that until the full domination of the market economy what a community considers its own domain or space does not correspond with the public space of the polity to which the community belongs; be that an empire, a kingdom, or even a city-state. The reason for that is that the full domination of the market economy itself, which we stipulated as a precondition to the identification of community and nation, is a historical process whose achievement is contingent upon several preconditions. Broadly speaking, the full domination of the market, which includes not only the free exchange of commodities in the market but also the full mobility of labor and capital and the transformation of the former into a commodity, requires the existence of two sets of preconditions. First, this domination must be technically possible (the feasibility preconditions), and second it must be in the interest of some powerful group in society (the desirability precondition).

In the absence of the technical and social conditions for the domination of the market, the levels, extents and rules of interaction between different social groups will necessarily take different forms. First, the low levels of productivity and the primitive means of transport and communication define the limits of exchange between communities including those who happen to live within a wider polity: an empire or a relatively large kingdom. Second, even in the case of artisans who obviously do not consume what they produce, we cannot speak of a market regulating production activities. Production is carried more on the basis of personal negotiations and contracts between the consumer and the producer, and in the case of the long-distance trade this only played a marginal role in the overall life of societies. A third consequence following from the above two is that barriers are set to prevent the mobility of people across activities or in search of more profitable opportunities.

In the absence of the market that gives a semblance of equality and individuality to the various agents and regulates prohibitions via the work of economic forces (the availability of capital, or profitability, for example), groups of people practicing similar activities cluster together geographically and pass the secrets of their trades only to the next generation. Whether they originated from some common descent or not, the outcome is the consolidation of a sense of identity among members of a community. This defines a person not only as a member of a guild, but also as an inhabitant of a suburb, a follower of a particular Sufi school specific to each craft (Damascus and Cairo) or of the saint patron of the trade (Paris), and in the meantime separates him from others. This form of social structuring is necessarily a hierarchical one whereby people are brought to believe that there is a natural scale among unequals, each group is destined to occupy its natural place in the ladder. In the meantime, this form of social structuring sets each ‘vertical’ group apart from others and conditions their awareness of these others.

This explains why protests are not numerous under such systems and when they occur they are mostly local and limited in scale, as Bergier aptly describes the situation prior to the French revolution:

“Apart from a few popular revolts that remained strictly local - such as the camuts (silk workers) in Lyons -or a few purely platonic protestations... no group reactions and, especially, no sign of solidarity can be detected. Solidarity in the ancien regime societies was not horizontal but vertical. There was solidarity between the worker and his employer and the men with whom he worked, but not with those doing the same job as himself in the workshop next door. The serf might hate his lord, or the tenant his landlord, he nonetheless
remained attached to him by bonds of custom that were even stronger than human rights. Hence it was almost unnecessary for the pre-industrial governments and bourgeoisie to resort to repressive legislation with regard to this mass.”

Bergier 1980: 420

4.3 From Stratification to Hegemony:

The conclusions reached above should enable us now to proceed with a question raised above concerning the double sense that a subjected community develops towards its rulers/oppressors in a precapitalist setting: a sense of unity that ensures and preserves the cohesion of a social formation on the one hand, and a sense of alienation from the rulers on the other.

A tribe needs to ‘find’ a common ancestor: a blood or kinship relationship that binds its members together, but at a certain stage the chief that is supposed to have the capacity to intermediate between the living members and the great dead ancestors has to be distinguished from the rest of the community, otherwise any member could challenge his position and aspire to be in his place. A free Athenian, whether a slave owner or not, would share the sense of not belonging to races that are not ‘ours’ and are therefore destined to slavery. Even in relatively homogenous societies, such as France, the rulers used a different language: Latin, in order to distinguish themselves from the mobs. And in perhaps all the above examples, the ‘mobs’, whether they were-or are- peasants, slaves or kinsmen of a tribe considered such an affair as ‘the’ normal or natural setting. How?

We have seen that even in those countries that have managed to construct a more or less unified state system long before their subsequent attempts to modernize and impose direct rule (England and France in Europe, but most notably China and Egypt), the imperatives of geography, the levels of agricultural productivity and the transportation techniques available until two centuries ago have intertwined to produce localized economies within the formally unified country. The low levels of agricultural productivity determined the maximum numbers of those who could make their living from non-agricultural activities (including the rulers and landowners, of course) The available techniques of riverine, maritime, and especially land transport determined how far agricultural products could be carried away from the sites of production and thus determined the potential locus of the markets, i.e. the cities or towns. These two factors combined determined the limits to human communication, and the limits of the division of labor that could be established within a given community. These limits could not go beyond a circle with a radius of twenty miles until the advent of steam technology (Anderson 1974 b, Schwartz 1994).

But this state of affairs should not be treated only from an economic point of view; the social consequences need to be examined too. Could people living in such a segregated space develop a sense of identity with others simply because they belonged to the same empire? The apathy with which rebellions in a particular region were met should be seen as a characteristic trait of precapitalist regimes, as the above quote from Bergier, as well as the absence of solidarity between urbans and peasants, which we noted in the preceding chapters, clearly demonstrate. How did the Lyonnaise perceive of their Parisian ‘conquerors’? In countries that have been only recently united, such as Germany, Italy, or those in the Middle East, would it make much difference if the ‘foreign’ rulers came from another city or tribe from ‘within’, i.e. from what we call today their ‘own’ country, or if they came from some faraway
While the division of labor within a precapitalist local economy must be based on the recognition, at least by some influential strata\(^{17}\), of the social and necessary function of each craft or profession and therefore on the need to regulate the rules governing their practice and the rules of communicating with those practicing them, these functions would necessarily be scaled according to their levels of importance. By implication the social status accorded to members of each sect / profession would vary accordingly. What we have here is a complex system of exclusion - regulation and communication, which by forbidding intermarriages across sects for example, or by giving the exclusive rights of acquisition of certain objects (salt, tobacco, etc.) to the Sovereign establishes a degree of equilibrium between the needs of society to certain jobs, while at the same time restricting unchecked entrance to these fields of activity.

Within such a system then, whether the dominant class (or any other social group for that matter) belongs to the same ethnicity of others or not is an irrelevant issue. The ‘legitimacy’ of domination will be judged by the social functions that the rulers perform, or pretend to perform, to the subjected community. Urban classes will take the form of orders rather than that of classes, because of the localized nature of the economy as a whole. Orders in this sense are non-hegemonic classes: classes that play roles within their towns (or even suburbs) and the hinterlands lying around it, but are unable to extend their influence beyond their original constituencies, or in cases of

\(^{15}\) Naturally, it would make much difference if the rulers cannot justify their rule by some common cause that they and the ruled people share, such as religious or national belonging. That is why European colonialism could not be viewed in the same way as, say the Ottoman rule of the Middle East.

\(^{16}\) Yet one must note the existence of a layer of trans-communal bureaucracy in virtually all of the precapitalist systems, i.e. a layer of ideologues, warriors or administrators who saw its realm as belonging to the whole kingdom or empire. Describing the autonomy of the church from the nobility (despite the close alliance between both), Schumpeter reminded us of the trans-communal structure of the former:

“All those monks and friars spoke the same unclassical Latin: they heard the same Mass wherever they went: they were formed by an education that was the same in all countries: they professed the same system of fundamental beliefs, and they all acknowledged the supreme authority of the Pope, which was essentially international: their country was Christendom, their state was the Church. Their internationalizing influence was strengthened by the fact that feudal society itself was international. Not only the Pope’s, but also the Emperor’s authority was international in principle and, to some varying degree, in fact. The old Roman Empire and that of Charlemagne were no mere reminiscences. People were familiar with the idea of a temporal as well as of a spiritual superstate. National divisions did not mean to them what they came to mean during the sixteenth century: nothing in the whole range of Dante’s political ideas is so striking as the complete absence of the nationalist angle” (Schumpeter 1954: 75-6 italics added).

Similarly, those religious ‘ulama, military leaders and bureaucrats who were moved from one place to another under the Ottomans must have developed such a sense of belonging to the ‘House of Islam’. Although this does not preclude the possibility of chauvinism and bias towards one’s kinsmen for example, but the fierce resistance that some of those had shown to the British and the French during WWI must have been an indicator of their trans-communal sentiments.

\(^{17}\) Obviously, this doesn’t mean that all members of a community would agree on recognizing the social functions of each profession/craft. Merchants, long identified with Jews, would be viewed differently by rival would-be merchants, or by the poor.
established monarchies or empires, to the whole territory of these political units. Only with the centralization of the public space and the invention of a national space, can such modern concepts as equality, civil society, national leadership and, consequently, democracy arise.

Before that, it should be stressed, inequality emanating from one’s primordial belonging is, and must be, an accepted norm in order that such a precarious balance among the components of the urban centers, as well as between urban dwellers and peasants, and serfs and landlords can be preserved and maintained. In other words, there must be a general recognition that certain groups are ‘naturally’ endowed with superior or inferior traits, which predestine them to fulfilling certain functions within society.

While the above observations can be safely applied to relatively small occupational strata, the problem arises with the larger ‘primordial’ divisions within precapitalist societies. The most obvious examples are the followers of the dominant confession within a state: the Catholics in France and Iberia, or Sunnī Muslims in the Ottoman Empire. While it is true that all other things being equal, a member of the dominant confession had easier access to the sources of wealth and power within their respective societies, it is equally true that social cleavages cut deep within each of these communities. This also applies to the Jews and Christians in the nineteenth-twentieth century Mashreq where members of these communities were among the richest of the rich, while others were among the poorest of the poor, as we noticed earlier. Even when a community was traditionally seen as occupying a prestigious social position, its numerical expansion beyond certain limits would put it in competition with other members of the society because of the limits to the expansion of the economic system itself.

The sada (claimants to be descendants from the prophet Muhammad) in Yemen provide a good example for the case in point. Attempting to reconcile class analysis with the modalities of Yemeni social structure, Umar noted that:

“[C]lass division [in Yemen] took a sectarian and hierarchical form within each of the upper and lower classes (the sada and akhdam respectively) and [class positions] were hereditary. . . . Individuals inherit their social positions. Mobility from one stratum to another, or from one class to another was unfamiliar except in extraordinary times like wars.”

Umar 1970: 28

Eickelman went further by asserting that this type of stratification is not a class system because the system of production:

“was correlated with a complex evaluative process involving wealth, religious status, and the honorable behavior of family members, and links within society tended to be vertical, patron-client ones.”

He therefore concludes that:

“In many instances, a whole range of people engaged in transport, crafts, and mercantile activities that are not enveloped by the class system.”

Eickelman 1981: 287-8

Yet, basing his study on empirical data pertaining to the 1960s, Gerholm estimated the number of sada in Yemen at 200-300 thousand, that is around five percent of the total population. He noted that the sada did enjoy a prestigious position in Yemeni society, but they were not all wealthy. Under equal opportunities a member

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18 I have used the label ‘modern’ intentionally, because such words as ‘democracy’ had a radically different meaning under the ancient Greeks: similarly ‘equality’ is a word used by Moslems, but just like Athenian democracy, it means equality among Moslems, and good Moslems exclusively.
of the sada was more likely to be privileged than a non-member, but many of them actually belonged to either the middle or lower classes (Gerholm 1977: 119).

The above example (and many other similar cases can be cited here) can shed light on our understanding of the ways status/wealth/authority interact in a premodern society. Initially society confers certain functions or positions to a group of people due to their perceived role in defending or saving that community from spiritual or material evil. The group thus gradually transforms into a distinct social class whose size must be commensurate with the working people’s ability to feed them on the one hand, and with the perceived importance of their functions to society on the other. Yet beyond a certain point the physical expansion of this group induces a process of differentiation within it-normally through violent splits whereby a certain lineage or selected stratum defines itself as the “legitimate” bearer of the position conferred upon the entire group by society.

The above explanation should help us in explaining two remaining problematics in our research on the transformation of precapitalist formations: first, how can kinship/confession/common regional descent become the determinants of social relations of production, and second how authority and wealth intertwine to form a social class.

4.4 The Political, Ideological and Economic Levels:

It has often been stated in the debates on the history and evolution of socio-economic formations that in each given formation one level plays a dominant role (Althusser 1970, 1971, Amin 1976, Godelier 1978a, Mouzelis 1978). Thus we have the ideological level playing that role in formations where kings and emperors were seen as gods, or as fulfilling some divine role, while we have the political level dominating under feudalism, because it is pure coercion that forces peasants to hand their surpluses to the landlord, until we finally come to capitalism, where the economic level is claimed to play that role because here people see their ‘real’ relationships based on economic rules.

This view, I would argue, is a direct descendent from an unfortunate coinage of terms by Marx, whereby social formations are viewed statically in terms of architecture-structures versus superstructures: the base (structure) determining all other levels of a given mode of production, while the superstructure (Überbau) reflects the relationships developed within the structure.19

Given that ideologies are not mere reflections of the economic sphere, but are major agents that define—among other things—the forms of social organization, we will try another analogy from a more dynamic field: that of biology. In this case, we do not have to view a social formation in terms of domination/determination, but as a complexity of more or less equally important instances. In biology, it may look rather absurd to try to decide whether it is the circulatory system—with the heart at its center—that plays a determinant role in the functioning of a biological system, or the nervous system with the brain as its center; for in a complex and organic system there is no such term as ‘determinant’ or ‘dominant’. If we can carry on with this analogy, then we will have the ideological and cultural instances playing the role of the nervous system which, through the actions of its sensory nerves, is responsible for analyzing the raw information and data that the various systems and senses bring to the body while sending signals and responses via the motor nerves.

19 Some authors emphasize that Marx only used the “base/superstructure” dichotomy “a handful of times, suggesting that he felt uneasy with it. See, Kiernan 1984: 97. and Gandy: 1979: 153.
Here we will have several types of information and signals, out of which let's single out only two sets: micro signals and macro ones. The first: micro signals, are dealt with by the autonomous nervous system, which responds even before the central nervous system has the time to analyze what has happened. A typical example is a sting of cold ice, or a pinprick touching one's hand. The feeling conveyed does not have necessarily to be 'truthful', that is, the signal conveyed is heat resembling that of flame touching the hand. But the response of the hand is 'correct': an instinctive and immediate withdrawal of the hand from the source of pain. This is a micro response resembling the millions of everyday calculations and responses carried out by ordinary people. They do not necessarily have to have 'exact' knowledge of the wider frame that conditions their lives, nor of the mechanisms of the capitalist, feudal, or whatever system under which they happen to live.

What about macro responses? Macro responses are those responses related to the central nervous system with a coordinating (commanding) organ playing the crucial part in decision making: the brain. The central nervous system as a whole is the regulator of life and activity in this case. Via macro decisions, the organism does not only respond, but actively behaves in the direction that could alter the surrounding atmosphere. But here also, a 'correct' explanation is not a necessary precondition for taking the right decision. A body infected by a virus will respond, through the central nervous system 'correctly', in the sense that vomiting or fever will take place. A sophisticated human being would act additionally to change the atmosphere, warming his/ her house, taking a pill, etc. Macro responses in social systems can be revolts, strikes and demonstrations, or formulating and adopting reform policies.

Similar to the biology analysis, peasants revolting against overexploitation by their landlords, workers striking in a factory, or even government officials formulating new strategies, do not necessarily have to perceive the class nature of the systems they are revolting against in the first two cases, or are trying to reform in the third case. In the first case, they may be driven by a general acceptance of the basic rules of feudalism, but view the landlords as 'deviating' from the 'just norms' that the church had sanctioned, or that the monarch had been deceived by his bad advisors, or in the third case, that governments should adapt to some 'natural' and blind crisis. Nevertheless, such acts can be 'correct' because they have the potential of affecting the desired and efficient changes.

This view of a SYMBIOTIC, rather than a MECHANISTIC relationship between the components of a social system should not give the impression that the question of the primacy of production over other instances is overlooked, but that the meaning of primacy should be revisited.

Primacy of the material production sphere is asserted through the fact that the ideological sphere (the nervous system) can not be developed without some prior functioning of humans being passively adapting to nature first, and engaging in the transformation of their nature later. The ideological instance then, just like the nervous system, is not a given, but is a historical complexity that develops with the development of those actions aimed at transforming nature with the aim of maximizing the fulfillment of specific needs. Social systems are, after all, historical systems just like ideological instances. Put more accurately, the development of social systems reflects (and enhances) the development in the general level of knowledge and therefore the structures that people used to consider as legitimate before would look irrational under more complex social systems. Therefore a more sophisticated social system is not only one whose reproduction mechanism is more complex but also one whose ideological instances are more sophisticated and specialized. But just...
as the nervous system is not a mere passive reflector of what a biological organism experiences, the ideological instance will react to invent, innovate, and imagine objects, perceptions and ideals that do not yet exist. This is where human purposive action differs from other biological organisms (Lange: 1963: chapter 1).

The other aspect of the primacy of the material sphere over the ideological one is a temporal one. This can best be illustrated by the fact that while biological organisms can dispense with any sort of consciousness, passive or active sensing of what lies around them, they would not be living organisms without an elementary metabolic mechanism that adapts them passively to nature. An amoeba composed of a single cell (or even some more complex living organisms) does not have a differentiated organic structure, yet it has the basic traits of living organisms: passive interaction with nature. Hence the primacy of the material productive aspect in any human social organization, in the sense that a primitive Homo Sapiens may have not developed his/her consciousness yet much beyond that of a developed ape, however s/he still has to satisfy her/his material needs, through hunting and living within a herd of primitive human beings. Asserting the primacy of material productive spheres over the ideological ones, however, should not be confused with a cause-effect relationship, since what we have been trying to show above is an interactive relationship, where the material sphere has primacy but not a causal position. What I am trying to suggest here is not a different version from that of Marx, but simply a different way of formulating the working of a given socio-economic system, in the sense that ‘primacy’ should not be confused with ‘cause’, and ‘reflex’ with ‘passive effect’.

If the above formulation is valid, then the question raised by several authors (Althusser 1971, Mouzelis 1978, Taylor 1978) on the determining instance within the various social formations should be seen as the product of a historically given perception of society, i.e. the product of living in a capitalist age, where the only authentic truth is perceived as “economic calculation”. According to such perceptions, history is driven, in a teleological way (just like Adam Smith’s invisible hand) by an innate logic, from religion (antiquity) to politics (feudalism) to the real understanding of human relations under capitalism: economics.

By contrast, the present study tries to show that ideology plays an intermediary, but crucial role in all social formations. As much as contemporaries consider economics as the ‘natural’ legitimating principle of life, a medieval or Middle Eastern peasant of the nineteenth century looked at protection and the need to pay for it as natural. Therefore, what we see as ‘extra-economic’ compulsion mediated by politics is actually a system mediated by ideology, an ideology that determines the primacy of politics, just like today’s systems, which are not mediated by economics, but by an ideology that determines the primacy of economics. It is the technical, organizational and economic level of development of people that gives them the feeling that it is some political contract, some divine logic, or some so-called ‘objective’ necessity that dictates the rationality of their actions. Under capitalism, economics is not the real Messiah unfolding before the eyes of people, rather it is the ideological instance of economics which gives the impression that each and every individual is, and must be presented as a commodity and that s/he is equal to her/his ‘fellow capitalist’: one has labor and demands its ‘price’, the other has capital and demands interest: its price. The end result is the outcome of good bargaining between equals. Evidently this is no less an ideological perception than that of viewing a tribal chief as sacred, or the monarch as the representative of God. The difference is that the legitimating ideology under capitalism is an economic ideology, i.e. that capitalism,
just like any other social system, requires an ideological legitimization which takes an economic form derived from the concepts of equality of individuals that arise with it.

The fact that human beings are approaching a better understanding of the primacy of material life does not thus warrant the conclusion that ideology is what influenced their decisions before and is no longer influencing their calculations, perceptions of their place in society, or their means of forging alliances and adopting survival strategies today. Whether one is analyzing capitalist or precapitalist formations, it is almost impossible to understand the processes of the functioning of these formations without analyzing the forms that consent takes within them, and explaining the variety of means by which the ideological instance intervenes with their functioning. In other words, symbolic values and moral codes are neither simply means designed by a ruling clique to deceive its subjects, nor are they merely means intended to give a transcendental form to the otherwise mundane activities aimed at satisfying everyday’s needs of the humble people. Moreover, these values are not mere illusions and/or superstitions that a social scientist should either discard as ‘irrational’, or fancy as some exotic ornament that ‘our’ societies lack.

4.5 Situating Social Classes:

“A fact is a holy thing, and its life should never be laid down on the altar of generalization.”

The cognitive framework of a given society is determined by its dominant socio-economic system, via the ‘overdetermination’—to paraphrase Louis Althusser, of the technical-material level of that society20 (Althusser 1971). Let’s reiterate that just as a whole can not be reduced to any of its parts, a socio-economic system is not only composed of the economic sphere, but of a whole complex of social relationships, the relations of property are major among them. This means that divisions within each community (and between communities) are shaped and seen accordingly. The dominant cognitive framework defines the forms that these divisions take, though it does not define the divisions themselves naturally. A logical corollary is that although the division between propertied classes and working classes and within each of these classes is independent of the cognitive apparatus, the latter will determine how a society will assign class positions and how it will view them and view the relationships between classes and fractions of classes. Accordingly, it should be natural that while classes have always existed, and class actions have driven the course of events, members of these classes have rarely been aware of the final outcomes, or the long term consequences of their actions, and they have, more often than not, viewed their collective identities and actions in terms other than class: a

20 Let me reiterate that this generalization should not be misread as a negation of the possibility that individual geniuses can appear at some time or another envisaging what their contemporaries would not take seriously. But the mere fact they are treated as eccentrics, mad, corrupt or even criminals signifies that in conceptualizing its collective aspirations or projects, a given society departs from the cognitive apparatus given by its time. In fact the whole distinction between what we conventionally have come to call ‘revolutionary’ on the one hand, and ‘utopian’ on the other, seems to rest upon the following concepts and inventions that take as their point of departure the present modes of thought or applications and try to develop them from within this structure with the aim of change are considered revolutionary, because they can gain acceptance from (at least) a significant portion of the population, while the same ideas, concepts and or designs could be subversive and utopian if they are developed by, say, some far-sighted genius when the dominant modes of thought are not ripe yet for them.
micro - response if one borrows the analogies drawn in the last section. And it is for this reason that class analysis is of paramount importance in both capitalist and precapitalist formations provided that it takes into consideration the ideological representations of a given society of its internal divisions without, in the meantime, necessarily adopting them as the valid analytical categories.

"[The] objective conception of class must be completed by an analysis of the subjective mentality, ideas and dispositions found among members of a class and, equally important, by an analysis of the conditions of collective organisation and action on the basis of class position. Neither class consciousness nor class organisation and collective action follow with any simple necessity from class position. Nor do collective organisation and action have a one-to-one relationship to the ideas and attitudes found among class members. This means: not all classes are collective actors in history; nor do they become eventually such actors with any generalised necessity. It also means that the interests pursued by organisations acting on behalf of a class are not with any necessity "the" interests of that class."

Rueschemeyer et al. 1992: 53

This conclusion is of particular importance even today when the social relations within advanced capitalism were thought to be more transparent than before, i.e. that people realize their positions as economic agents and members of social classes whose positions are determined by their economic status. However, we must point out to the fact that apart from a handful of cases of explicitly class driven actions all over the world and throughout history, most of the significant social movements are (and were) conducted under different banners: nationalism, religion, ethnicity, etc.

The obvious question that arises then is why should we care to study societies and systems in terms of class analysis? This question is not novel and we can see that the trend in social theory (even among some Marxists) has been to abandon that 'old fashioned' category for various reasons, most conspicuous among them perhaps is that today's capitalism has introduced such radical reorganization of the world and domestic economies that we can no longer discern horizontally stratified societies in a clear manner, and -by consequence- we can hardly find mass actions, if any, taking explicit 'class' forms.

I will argue that such conceptions confuse class with class consciousness, a problem that has plagued Marxist debates and has contributed to rendering the concept of class a futile one. The fact that people wage their struggles or are driven to them under nationalist, religious, sectarian or ethnic slogans does not make these struggles any less social than explicitly class-driven ones, and it is therefore a mistake to talk about 'social and religious' or 'social and national' movements as if each belongs to a different category. The obvious example is the social force that came to shape the present day world and is commonly referred to as "the bourgeoisie", a class that has often been associated in our minds with the enlightenment, liberalism, antagonism with the feudal monarchies and landlords, and industrialization. A standard text book narrative on the bourgeoisie is that of a Third Estate acting in unison and solidarity to overthrow the ancien régime and to establish a secular bourgeois system as best exemplified in France.

The outcome of the French Revolution has been undoubtedly a bourgeois system. In other West European countries, the numerous upheavals, revolutions, wars and insurrections led to the establishment of such systems at varying points of time. But while the trend towards the almost unrestrained domination of capitalist relations
and forms of surplus extraction has been the obvious result of this “great transformation”, to paraphrase Karl Polanyi (1944), we can hardly speak of a massive class that had been conscious of its homogenous interests and aspirations in advance, such that the consequences of its actions had been already intended and calculated. The Dutch revolution of 1568-1609 was carried under nationalistic and Protestant slogans; the 1640-1688 English uprisings were waged under Calvinism; and the sixteenth-century German reformation was carried under Protestant banners (Gandy 1979:39-42).

While we have emphasized that a whole formation at a given point in time shares basic norms, values and conceptions, the particular backgrounds and material conditions of each group within that formation tend to color and influence the views of its members on how these norms and values should be served best. It goes without saying that these influences are not the product of an individual’s choice and they need not lead individuals of shared backgrounds and positions to take a unilinear position or to adopt a unique ideology, a position that many defendants of the “pure class-consciousness” thesis still adopt even today.

In one of the most powerful attempts to revive the Luckascian Marxist concepts of class and class conflict Robert W. Cox states his view that “... [T]he present work argues [that], the classical tradition remains valid. But past definitions of class that has some basis in mid-nineteenth-century European societies cannot just be taken over and applied mechanically and uncritically to a late twentieth-century world that manifests a great diversity of social class situations.”

Cox 1987:3

This claim of presenting a revised (and long awaited) definition of social classes, which has been a preoccupation of many dedicated Marxists, boils down to the following in Cox’ formulations:

“Class is to be understood as a real historical relationship and not as merely an analytical category in the mind of the analyst... The social basis for the existence of classes comes from the way in which people are positioned in production processes, but if the production process creates the potentiality for classes, it does not make classes. Social practices shaped by event give people the common experience of class identity and collective action.”

Cox 1987:355

The major conclusions reached by Cox from the above definition are:

1. “Not every dominant or subordinate group in each distinct mode of social relations of production necessarily forms a class; some may not attain the level of common identity and capacity for common action that constitutes class, they remain a latent or potential class.

2. Dominant or subordinate groups from two or more modes of social relations of production may combine to form a class, e.g., through the development of solidarity between established and nonestablished workers, or between small scale entrepreneurs and corporate managers.”

Ibid. 356 (underlines added)

Cox’ definition, in fact, contains no new elements. Its roots lie in the distinction made by Marx (following a Hegelian tradition) between “class in itself” and “class for itself”, a distinction that I have tried to show above, was developed to its extremes by George Lukacs and then came increasingly under attack by many Marxists during the 1960s and 1970s because of its elitist and voluntaristic conception.
of classes in general and the working class in particular. In a few words, one may criticize this conception on the grounds that it gives individuals the 'privilege' of belonging to a particular social class only if, when, and as much as their actions follow what a certain analyst or thinker considers a class driven action.

In the case of Cox the aim of reverting to this old definition, going even further to the point where a class is reduced to that 'class for itself' aspect only is stated clearly. The intended aim, according to Cox, is to bring Marxism to the contemporary reality of present day capitalism. The problem, however, is that by so doing he is not! By posing 'class' as a real relationship against it being an analytical category, Cox feels that class membership would be an effective means for carrying class based struggles. But by so doing, he is going exactly in the opposite direction, i.e. he is minimizing the role of classes and class struggles in history. First, because human awareness of the functioning of their muscular system (which is no less real than classes) may slightly make the functioning of that system more effective, but will certainly not change it. Similarly, the actions of members of social groups are indeed class-conditioned, whether they are aware of this fact or not. If awareness is 'implanted' among these members, to use a Leninist conception, these actions may or may not turn to be more effective, but that will not introduce a qualititative change. The second and more important objection is that according to Cox' definition, classes would have existed only over a very short period of human history and class struggles have played even a less important role. I will elaborate on this last argument because it is closely related to our topic.

Geoffrey de Ste. Croix, one of the (if not the) leading scholars on antiquity studied the structure of the class that probably the majority of scholars do not dispute the fact that it did constitute a social class: the slaves of ancient Athens (de Ste. Croix, 1981). Let me quote at length his Isaac Deutscher Memorial Lecture, which I think sheds invaluable light on the nature of classes and the repercussions of associating class with class consciousness:

"Marx and Engels always regarded slaves as a class; and yet of all those groups in history which seemed to have the right to be regarded as classes in Marx's sense, it was precisely Greek and Roman slaves who most conspicuously lacked the qualities which I had been led to imagine as essential ingredients in class: namely class consciousness and political activity in common... a Greek or Roman slave household was often quite deliberately drawn from slaves of very different nationalities and languages. [Acquiring an ethnically and linguistically diverse set of slaves is urged upon slaveowners by a whole series of Greek and Roman writers...]. The heterogeneous character of a given set of slaves would make it difficult for them even to communicate with each other except in their master's language and make it much harder for them to revolt or even resist. It is no surprise to find ethnic and cultural differences playing a major part in promoting disunity in the few great slave revolts... and which, incidentally, never involved more than a small fraction of the total slave population."

De Ste. Croix 1985: 25 – 26

After a lengthy analysis, the author concludes that a class:

"[I]s the collective social expression of the fact of exploitation, the way in which exploitation is embodied in a social structure. (By "exploitation", of course, I mean the appropriation of part of the product of the labor of others...). Class is essentially a relationship - just as capital, another of Marx's basic
concepts, is specifically described by him, ... as “a relation”, “a social relation of production” and so forth. And a class (a particular class) is a group of persons in a community identified by their position in the whole system of social production, defined above all according to their relationship (primarily in terms of the degree of control) to the conditions of production (that is to say, to the means and labor of production) and to other classes. The individuals constituting a given class may or may not be wholly or partly conscious of their own identity and common interests as a class, and they may or may not feel antagonism toward members of other classes as such.”

Ibid. 28 (underlines and italics added)

The significance of distinguishing two conceptions of class is not an academic exercise. Many writers with a militant attitude, such as Cox, depart from the famous eleventh thesis of Karl Marx, in his Theses on Feuerbach, which demands that “philosophers should not only interpret the world”. The “aim now is to change it” (Marx 1989: 8-9). The point, however, is that no serious change can occur before a full understanding and interpretation of the world is carried thoroughly.

Applying Cox’ framework for understanding the evolution, structure, and contradictions of human societies can lead to absurd results. Consider a society whose major classes view their contradictory situations in terms other than class. This, as we have seen, is the rule in precapitalist societies. But according to Cox’ definitions, the latter should be treated as classless societies, or at best societies with “potential classes”. So, a project that began with the intention of emphasizing the role of class struggle ends up minimizing the role of classes to the point that only a few episodes in human history (the Russian Revolution, for example) can fulfill the conditions laid by the author.

A logical corollary should follow from applying what I will call subjective methodologies in studying human societies, namely that different phases of development of societies cannot be subjected to any meaningful comparison, let alone generalization, since each structure has its own definitions of “status”, which we should take not as a set of images and discourses that need themselves to be analyzed and understood, but as expressing the “reality” of that system and/or social formation. And it is exactly here that one can find the close affinity between Max Weber and Robert Cox, despite the latter’s repeated reference to Marx. Weber’s definition of class situation, as is known, is based on the relationship of individuals with the market, a totally different view from that of Marx.

By deriving social classes from the market, we obviously reach a point where not only all classes under precapitalism are no longer treated as such, but also many fractions and classes of capitalist societies, because their positions are not exclusively, or totally determined by the market. Although Cox does not share the Weberian definition of class, his subjective method leads us, nevertheless, to similar results; to taking the dominant discourse of a particular formation at a particular historical moment as our point of reference. Whereas a class is an economic phenomenon derived from the market, according to Weber, a status group belongs to the social realm, which exists under non-market situations.

22 And even this is arguable because many people supported the Bolsheviks not so much for their socialist strategy as for their dedication to put an end to Russia’s involvement in WWI.
23 "But always this is the generic connotation of the concept of class: that the kind of chance in the market is the decisive moment which presents a common condition for the individual’s fate. ‘Class situation’ is, in this sense, ultimately ‘market situation’” (Weber 1968: 928).
In contrast to the *purely economically determined 'class situation*', we wish to designate as status situation every typical component of the life chance of men that is determined by a specific, positive or negative, social estimation of honor."

Weber 1914: 932

Whereas both the Weberian conceptual apparatus and the 'pure consciousness' thesis end up negating the existence of classes under precapitalism, the latter goes ironically one step backwards in comparison to Weber. Robert Cox, as we have seen, demes 'unconscious' members of classes in a capitalist society their entry card to the class, while Weber solved the problem by distinguishing class from 'class action'.

"For however different life chances may be, this fact in itself... by no means gives birth to 'class action' (social action by the members of a class). For that, the real conditions and the results of the class situation must be distinctly recognizable. For only then the contrast of life chances can be felt not as an absolutely given fact to be accepted, but as the resultant from either (1) the given distribution of property, or (2) the structure of the concrete economic order. It is only then that people may react against the class structure not only through acts of intermittent and irrational protest, but in the form of rational association."

Weber 1914: 929

Weber's distinction between class and class action provides a fresh contribution that can be very useful in explaining the conditions and motives under which the various social agents take positions on social and political issues. His insights on the way social change takes place are superior to those, which lump class, class action and 'true consciousness' under one category. Yet, I have tried to show that the superiority of Weber's conceptual apparatus lies partly in the fact that he disposed with the complex problematic of defining classes under 'non-market' situations beforehand. By treating classes as modern phenomena, one can easily look at the activities of trade unions and political parties to deduce from them the necessity of recognizing "real" class situations and "rational" association for class action to be effective.

The preceding pages, however, have shown that on the eve of the French revolution, ordinary people – including urbans- did not perceive of themselves as members of social classes –at least this was not their primary self-identification, according to Goubert. Nevertheless, the French revolution, as well as the peasant revolts carried under banners of religious conflicts, produced no less authentic 'bourgeois' transformations. What I have been trying to establish in the preceding pages is that until the dominance of capitalist relations of social reproduction, relations of production necessarily take 'primordial forms'. In other words, kinship, religious status, and belonging to a warrior race were not only individual traits, since we saw that the concept of the individual did not exist in the first place, but also regulators and legitimizes of the relations of production. Communities based on a shared religious belief would necessarily assign higher socio-economic status to those considered close to God. Where belief in a common grandfather that preserves

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24 This statement can actually be extended to apply to capitalist societies as well. For until recently nationalism was strictly associated with ethnicity and blood and therefore access to resources within a given capitalist society was (and until now is in many cases) confined to those with 'primordial' relations to a given country.
the community is dominant, kinship is the regulator and legitimizer of the relations of production.25

But if people were not conscious of their class situations, it should be equally true to state that their behavior, actions and reactions were, and are, class conditioned in the last analysis because class positions determine the ways people define and treat their saints, their sects and the contents of their beliefs. Without recognizing this fact, we cannot understand how the centuries-old isolation of each guild under the patronage of its saint suddenly came to an end when the urban masses joined hands during the revolution. In the same token, one can enumerate many such episodes in the Mashreq where people sharing the similar life conditions but had been living in relative isolation for centuries, launched mass actions that were class-conditioned par excellence, although they were obviously not aware of the class nature of these actions.

Twice in the 1820s, the Mossulites revolted against their wali, Yaha Pasha al Jaleeli, himself a Mossulite merchant who monopolized cereal products and caused a hike in their prices. The revolt reached a point that forced al Jaleeli to take refuge with Baghdad’s wali, Dawood Pasha. The latter supported him and reinstalled him in his position. But the populace expelled him again and appointed Qasim al ‘Umari. The Sublime Porte had to acquiesce to this development (Nawwar 1968: 82).

Damascus witnessed a more violent revolt in 1831, when Wali Muhammed Saleem Pasha imposed new taxes on the crafts. Craftsmen, supported by the city inhabitants, installed barricades in the streets of Damascus, declared revolution and killed the wali (Na’isa 1986: 302-3). Our source cites the memoirs of a chronicler who was an eyewitness of the continuing revolt: “When ‘Allou Pasha was appointed as a new wali ... the manufacturing sons of the land rose in revolt because of the high prices of bread. The rifle-holders [the army] descended to the square wanting to arrest the demonstrators. They discovered that the crafts were revolting because they wanted an increase in wages to offset the high prices. The manufacturers took an increase.”26

Another episode regards the 1831 decree of the Ottoman Sultan to depose Baghdad’s wali, Dawood Pasha. Merchants and notables belonging to different sects, ethnicities and religions sent a petition to the sultan requesting that the rebel wali be kept and his authority extended to all of Iraq. In exchange the notables pledged to pay Constantinople all the expenses of the campaign to depose the pasha (Longrigg 1925:

25 Obviously, this analysis should not be taken as an answer to the more complex question that many anthropologists and social philosophers have spent their lives trying to explain- and which the present author obviously again has no claim to answer; namely, what makes a civilization take religion, politics, or kinship as its cementing ideology. To state—as we did earlier—that living labor counts more preciously than dead one and therefore that kinship plays a paramount role, is only to lay the basic elements of the problem, because until the industrial revolution, and actually until the dominance of machinery almost a century after, living labor counted much more than dead labor, yet that does not explain why kinship no longer played a crucial role in eighteenth century Europe or in structuring the Ottoman polity. For a recent discussion of this intriguing problem, see Godclerc 1998: 5-22.

26 These invaluable memoirs, whose author is unknown, and are therefore known in Arabic as “Mudhakkarat Majhouli (The memoirs of an Unknown)” contain very important details that shed much light on the relations between various sections of the Damascus society. Despite the validity of the general statement that little or no solidarity existed between urban and peasants, it seems that the severe conditions, which instigated the 1831 revolt was an exceptional case when Damascus hinterland joined hands. According to this unknown chronicler, the Damascenes alerted the peasant “he who has no rifle [must] buy one. He who has no arms [must] buy. And then all the people began to buy rifles and arms were in the hands of all” (Na’isa 1986: 308)
A very significant case of ‘horizontally’ driven mass action left its lasting imprints on al Suwaida’ province in Syria. This province (also called Jabal al-Duruz or Jabal al-Arab) is one of only two Syrian provinces where Sunnis do not form a majority of the population. The Druzes form an overwhelming majority of 87.6 percent, and relatively large Greek Orthodox and other Christian communities are also found. Sunnis are represented in al-Suwayda’ by less than 2 percent of the population, the least of all provinces. Traditionally, the city and its hinterland had been under the leadership of the big landed Druze family of al Atrash. Nevertheless, the Druze peasants waged a fierce anti-feudal revolt against the Durzi family in 1890, which forced the Atrashs to make a number of concessions including recognition of proprietorship of part of the land cultivated by the local peasants. Since that time, many Druze peasants have been small or medium-sized landowners (Van Dam 1980:24).

All these actions, and undoubtedly historians can add many others, were collective acts that cut across ‘vertical’ solidarities and mobilized people of similar social positions against those who exploited them, or in favor of those who enhanced their interests. With the coming of the twentieth century these actions multiplied.

While a class position does not imply that at each and every moment individuals should act with an eye to their positions, it does determine their outlook in the final analysis. Put differently, we can say that in ordinary circumstances the vertical group to which an artisan or peasant belongs forms the basic point of reference in his everyday calculations, judgements and consciousness. This is because we saw that not only peasants in one demesne live isolated from those of other demesnes, but also each group of craftsmen is spatially isolated, living in ‘their’ own quarter, having their own master, and ideologically delineated from other groups through their belonging to ‘their’ own saint or sufi brand. Hence it would be only logical to agree with Bergier’s remark - cited in section 4.2 above - regarding the absence of solidarity across crafts. This does not mean that craftsmen or peasants in a precapitalist setting are unaware of the existence of ‘others’ suffering as they do, nor does it mean that the social relationships within a vertical unit are harmonious. Rather, it means that in non-crisis situations craftsmen or peasants would try to negotiate solutions to their perceived problems within their own vertical unit, since that unit is almost an autonomous realm having its ‘judicial’ and disciplinary mechanisms. However, when perceived unjust actions are taken collectively, on behalf of more than individual merchants or landlords, or target the majority of the working people and the poor, spontaneous individual revolts could easily transform into mass revolts where the hitherto isolated groups share their grievances. This explanation applies to all the examples that we cited above on widespread revolts: monopoly of cereal products that put unbearable pressure on the living standards of the majority, burdens and exaction imposed on peasants across an entire province, or heavy taxes levied on all crafts.

Here - I think- is where we can posit the point where class is not only a category of investigation, but in the meantime is not necessarily an everyday identity. For in a precapitalist society, peasants - and especially serfs - do know that they are being exploited but they need not, and actually do not, perceive this exploitation as a socio-economic phenomenon. Rather, they may see their landlord as a blasphemous man, someone who is not fulfilling his religious duties, or someone forgetting the teachings of Christianity, Islam or Hinduism, etc. But they can, and do, act as a class when they wage an uprising to rectify these affairs in accordance with the ‘true will of God’. Similarly, depressed classes in a formation marked by the domination of an
alliance of merchants and landlords whose interests lie in intensifying trade links with western capital will tend to view their misery in terms of national vs foreign domination on resources. It is only when one subscribes to a Lukacsian framework of what I will call ‘Christian Marxism’ whereby a ‘true’ consciousness is confronted with, and contrasted to some ‘false’ one that non-Marxist, non-socialist consciousness is regarded as false, or when one adopts Althusser’s conception of Marxism as the only scientific world view, anything else being ‘ideological’ (Althusser 1975).

In everyday life, people may be “deceived”; many workers may have voted for fascism not merely because of the benefits that they would gain from an étatist regime, but also because the Pope had given his blessings to that regime. An Islamist may not see the relationship between his aspirations on the one hand, and assassinating a novelist on the other, but he will sincerely try to fulfill ‘God’s will’ at any rate. But at historical and transformative moments, moments that whole group interests are at stake, class determination of positions has proven to be most formidable. Whatever a shaikh or the Pope might decree, a capitalist believer will fight ferociously against confiscating or nationalizing his/her enterprise. This naturally applies to the working classes too. Plenty of evidence shows that in transformative moments they have followed their ‘class instinct’ rather than obeying the teachings of their traditional ideological leaders.

The above observations on how people perceive their sufferings and thereby how they act in order to change the existing situation directly follow from our analysis of the role of ideology in cementing various social formations. The ways people perceive their positions in this universe and their relationships with each other are conditioned by the general level of technical, cultural and economic development. These perceptions are decisive in shaping the legal, moral and political norms binding ordinary people together and regulating their relationships with their rulers and are decisive in shaping the type of politico-economic structures under which they live. Moreover, the intellectual framework given by the above mentioned determinants defines the scope of technological-scientific, intellectual, social and political change that a social formation permits at any given time. The statement that human perception is conditioned by the general level of knowledge available or by the level of technical-economic development should not be understood as either:

a) that human purposive activity, whether in the realm of science, or in the socio-political sphere aiming at improving the present conditions is impossible (the fatalistic view), or

b) that this statement concerning the collective behavior of people in the long term should be applicable to each and every individual within a given community.

The general level of knowledge, in brief, determines the limits of discoveries and inventions, as well as determining the possibilities available to people to transform their dreams into reality. The submarine of Leonardo da Vinci was only a magnificent fantasy by an individual genius at its time. Other geniuses were less lucky and either lost their lives or were considered mad because their “dreams” -some of

27 For example, when land was sequestered from big landlords to be distributed to landless peasants in the 1950s-1960 following the nationalist revolutions of the in the Mashreq (see chapter 6), several Muslim shaikhs issued fatwas forbidding peasants from owning land ‘robbed’ from its ‘legal’ owners. With the exception of very few cases, peasants showed overwhelming enthusiasm to the land reform acts.

A starker example is when the supreme Shi'i leader, Muhsin al Hakim, issued a fatwa in 1960 declaring communism blasphemous and atheist to stem the rising popularity of communism in Iraq, Iran and other parts of the Islamic world. Nevertheless, there is no evidence that this fatwa had a significant influence on the popularity of communism at the time.
which were to come true later—were too much ahead of the general level that the public would accept. But let us note that even dreams or fantasies are the product of the scope of one’s imagination which are, after all, only a few steps ahead of reality. Attempts at extending/improving human organs in order to emulate an already existing creature: fish or bird, or attempts at creating something similar to these already existing creatures were the expressions of genius in the pre-industrial era, but even dreaming of a computer would be impossible then simply because the limits of technical change are determined by the existing technical level. The same, though in a more complicated way, applies to people’s attempts at changing socio-economic and cultural norms. The forms of social organization and political structures that people aspire to create in a revolutionary period derive from their existing reality: their modes of thought, the forms of social organization under which they live, etc.

As we have seen earlier, change has occurred through conflicts between and among groups that could never imagine a society living without “good” Christianity, or Islam. The outcome has, more often than not, been radically different from what all the warring parties had intended to reach. In the age of “Reason”, a revolutionary change has undoubtedly occurred thanks to the French Revolution. But this change was far from the “Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité” that the revolutionaries had dreamt of. In sum, it is the social conditions that dictate their rules and limits of change, even if the “avant-garde” would work for something else. This should also be the lesson to be drawn from the tragic fate of the Bolshevik Revolution, which could not go beyond the limits of its time or the social and historical setting and the level of development within society, despite the ambitious dreams of the Leninist Party.

1. The mid-twentieth century transformative changes of the Mashreq were obviously no exception to the above mentioned conditions. The illusions and aspirations of the revolutionaries, the way these illusions articulated with the suffering of ordinary people, the tragic breakdown of the grandiose ‘modernization’ schemes and the ensuing multiple crises will be the focus of the coming chapters. But in order to carry our endeavor properly, we have to address the issue of authority and its relationship with property.