Chapter 5

Community, Authority and Identity:
Some Methodological Considerations

"Beyond the rational, there exists a more important and valid category, that of the meaningful, which is the highest mode of being of the rational."

Lévi-Strauss 1978: 67

The last chapter tried to show that until the dominance of capitalism social classes appear in the eyes of most people as non-socio-economic categories, as distinct groups who are rendering services to the entire community. Defense against threats -perceived or actual- is a function that is normally performed by a group of people before they are accredited with titles and special privileges that turn them into a dominant social class. Pierre Phillip Rey and George Dupré concluded their studies on several African societies by observing that class functions arise before the rise of the classes that would later specialize in performing them. They showed how this applied not only to societies whose structures were based on lineage relations, but:

“We believe that this problem of a class function which is not supported by a constituted group can also be found in other socio-economic formations, thus, before the emergence of real feudalism as it is understood by Marc Bloch, the nobles and various magnates took on some of the class functions of the future feudal lords before becoming a real class.”

Dupré and Rey 1978: 197 (italics added)

What the two above authors call class function is actually what we have labeled as ‘rendering services’. This may look absurd in the case of feudalism, since we are (rightly) accustomed to viewing this class as parasitic and coercive. However, if one thinks of a formation where sovereignty is dispersed, then free peasants or tenants on a lord’s estate have no other choice but to look for protection of a local magnate, whose ‘service’ is nothing but to allow them to till their land in relative peace against a rent. In the historical cases that we dealt with, the ‘services’ rendered by dominant classes can be summed up as providing protection to the dominated groups and thereby to the whole community. Short of a typology of the diverse forms of ‘protection’, I am using the word to cover a wide range of cases: protection from natural disasters by communicating with god, gods, or the spiritual world in general; protection from invading groups, protection from the excesses of central authority by defending the interests of the community and lobbying on its behalf, protection from the encroachment of rival or competitive groups living alongside the community or performing similar jobs, etc. In exchange for the protection services, the bulk of the working community accepts the authority of the leader(s) and concedes to pay the expenses of this protection from its own work.

The prestigious position conferred upon those destined to play the role of leaders of the community, with its concomitant material privileges, is actually what we call political authority in our present usage, whence the conclusion reached that political authority is the first embryo of class division, rather than being a medium to
regulate already existing class conflicts. For the protection function to be performed efficiently, members of the protected community would acquiesce to a series of prohibitions and taboos. Supervision of good behavior and punishment of ‘evil’ would be entrusted in the hands of that protector.

Thus we have all the basic elements of political authority amassed in the hands of the exploiting/dominant class, including the famous principle which we normally associate exclusively with the modern state: monopoly of violence. Coercion, as we noted, begins as a threat, which requires that the leaders of a given community decide that the guilty has breached the accepted moral codes. Execution of punishment is enforced by the ordinary members of the community and not by a specialized coercive apparatus. In principle, the means of coercion are not the property of tribal chiefs, feudal lords or a local urban notables, but the latter enjoy the rights and privileges of sanctioning/legitimating their use against others on account of their acquired role in defending and protecting “their” respective communities.

But how far can a ruler or a ruling class go in its demands from its subjects? What determines the magnitude of exploitation/protection fees? And how can variations in protection fees account for the different state trajectories across space?

5.1 Costs of Protection:

Schematically, two overlapping functions are required to ensure the reproduction of the social relations of production: the first consists of securing ‘internal’ favorable conditions such as those related to bringing rain, protection from epidemics and floods, while the second set of functions is defense against invaders. The two functions roughly correspond to those fulfilled by ‘knowledgeable’ men (wizards, magicians, men of religion) and warriors respectively and are ‘rewarded’ by various forms of tribute, rent and taxes from the subjects/citizens. As these two strata fully detach themselves from the production activities of their communities, a sufficient level of surplus is required to make for their (often lavish) living. But how far can an authority go into taxing its population?

Fredric Lane introduced the concept of “protection costs”, which may shed some light here. Arguing that the state had played a significant role in encouraging growth in the seventeenth century, he compares the state to an economic enterprise producing a commodity called “protection” (Lane 1975: 8-18). The costs of protection are met by pricing and selling this commodity to those to be protected, i.e. economic enterprises. But the peculiarity of this commodity, according to Lane, is that it is a monopoly of the state since the outset. And this allows the state to overprice its product by imposing taxes that exceed the requirements for the reproduction of protection. This “requires an analysis of the impact the state has on capital formation and the formation of potential capital, both of which constitute the social surplus” (Ibid. 10-11) Lane calls that part of the surplus that the state extracts tribute. Whether this tribute will turn into a capital producing tribute or not depends on the way it is expended. If it were spent on building roads and drainage systems, it will contribute to the future increase in capital. But if it were spent on building pyramids

1 When local communities coexist within a wider polity, violence is admittedly not a monopoly of the local chiefs. But unless the central authority intended to punish the whole community—which was not an exceptional case—it had to find ways to exercise its violence via the local chiefs themselves, thus acquiescing to some form of power-sharing with them. A typical example of this problematic relation is the way nomadic tribes were subjugated in the Mashreq from the eighteenth century onwards.
or cathedrals, or on riotous living, then it will not contribute to economic growth (12-13).

This important contribution can be extended to show why do protection costs differ according to the degree of maturity or dominance of a mode of production within a social formation. Also one can use this analytical tool to understand how states in physically vulnerable regions in the Middle East and the Balkans, e.g. have assigned higher protection costs. But in order that this undoubtedly original concept of protection, being a commodity produced by a monopoly, be applied to a wider range of cases, we need to discuss it in more detail and introduce some qualifications to Lane’s generalizations.

Lane seems to take the contemporary state’s monopoly of violence as a given, thus what needs to be explained is presented as an explanation. The question that needs to be addressed is how could this organism: the modern state, take over the functions that used to be in the hands of multiple bodies and organisms over history, tribes, street gangs, barons, feudal lords, etc.? This should be analyzed in terms of 1) the efficiency of this monopoly compared with the previous systems of ‘protection’, that is of political authority, 2) the availability of the means to enforce this monopoly, 3) the existence of social interests that make this system desirable by an influential section of the population.

Monopoly is only possible when these conditions are fulfilled and the absence of alternative providers of the commodity is only a product of long historical struggles, thus it was not always given. Until the era of state consolidation, competition and fierce struggles between invaders and conquerors presented an outlet for competition, whereby lowering the subsidies levied on subjected populations would be a means of gaining acquiescence from the subjected populace. But even after the state has consolidated its sole authority, rulers knew that no matter how greedy they were, they couldn't go beyond a certain limit in imposing dues and taxes for fear of rebellion among their population^2. Hence rebellion was in a sense, an a posteriori vote on the fairness of a given taxing system. As for modern democracies, the electoral competition among political parties revolves partly around who provides various public goods- protection foremost- with cheaper prices.

Lane’s analysis is conducted on the assumption that capitalist rationality is the regulating mechanism for all social systems. For one thing, protection is not only ‘sold’ to economic enterprises, be those capitalist ones, feudal demesnes, or any other historical form. What makes protection a unique ‘commodity’ is that it is consumed and demanded by all, making demand for it highly price inelastic, which is a precondition for monopoly. Security, in the bare physical sense, is the minimum protection requested by all whether they conduct a profitable economic activity or not. And that is what makes the calculations of a political authority regarding pricing protection and the ways to expend the revenues different from the calculations of an individual enterprise. While the latter is concerned with maximizing its revenues, political authority must establish the conditions for the overall reproduction of the social system in which these enterprises function, as well as its own prosperity and survival depend. An economic analysis may lead to the conclusion that building

^2 Rebellion should not be equated with our modern conception of revolt, naturally, given the wide span of historical cases that we are covering. It can take the form of outright violence against tax collectors, the rise of a local chief who advocates secession of the particular community from the state in exchange for lower tribute under the would-be formed polity, or it may take the form of ‘peasants’ or artisans’ strikes’, i.e. when the demanded tribute is so high that the livelihood of the victims is threatened, they may desert the land or their crafts.
cathedrals or pyramids does not contribute to economic growth, however no system can function without some kind of ideological legitimacy, and the symbolism of cathedrals, pyramids and even present-day statues lies exactly here. Ancient Egyptians, European serfs, or Hindus would not have toiled for centuries under the pressures of physical coercion alone, and the belief that they were offering these sacrifices for some spiritual and transcendental cause must have been among their main motives. Thus assuming that ‘productive’ investment for the sake of perpetual enlarged reproduction is the only efficient means for state expenditure means turning the state into a redundant body whose functions are no more than those of the individual enterprises. Moreover, perpetual investment is a phenomenon that is specific to one socio-economic system: capitalism. Before that, it is either impossible, or unnecessary or both.

One cannot analyze the rationality of a specific form of expenditure, nor its contribution to growth, only in terms of its direct economic contribution. This applies not only to expending the revenues of selling protection, but also to the price paid for protection. From an individual enterprise’s point of view, military conscription or sacrificing brides to the Nile may look a waste of labor power, but seen from the prism of the overall system, war making is a no less ‘necessary’ function for survival. Even under capitalism a firm’s expenditure for public relations and advertising purposes does not contribute directly to production, nevertheless it is essential for the firm’s survival. Pyramids and Cathedrals are essential for the legitimacy of a system. Without ideological symbolism and legitimation, no economic system can survive. And a system deriving its legitimacy, and thus forcing acquiescence on the populace, from the ruler’s divine nature or mandate cannot only extract resources to make wars or enrich the ruler. Even under today’s ‘rational’ calculations, people expect the state to ‘invest’ in statues and other artistic expressions aimed at forging a sense of legitimacy on the working of the social system.

Broadly speaking, the ‘costs of protection’, i.e. the degree of surplus extraction by a ruling class, will be proportional to the internal and external threats that a community faces, or imagines it is facing. Probably, thwarting internal threats could be more rewarding for a ruling authority, because protecting a community from the wrath of nature would have almost immediate effects on the lives of the subjects, and would even confer some divine character on the ruler who manages to rescue his subjects several times. In fact, success in this field could be the leverage that a certain ruling nobility acquires in making bold demands on its economically dominant classes and ordinary subjects. Because as we have noted above, from the point of view of sedentary populations, all the warring parties trying to conquer their lands are equally foreigners. What really counts for the former is which invader can ensure the more or less smooth functioning of their reproduction conditions with the minimum extractive and/or human burdens weighing on their shoulders.

As for the rulers and/or warriors aspiring to be rulers, such constraints are not absent from their calculations, i.e. the presence or absence of other competing forces threatening to encroach upon their domains, the extent of extraction that they can impose before the whole reproductive cycle of the community disrupts, and so on. So, although protection ended up as a monopoly of the state, it does not follow that the state can arbitrarily price this commodity. Theoretically, its lower margin is the minimum required to sustain an idle, non-productive elite and the upper margin is the maximum that people can dispense with before their life patterns disrupt or revolts.

But in a capitalist setting, even this is not necessarily true because it can be a form of a Keynesian recipe of public works aimed at invigorating effective demand and creating employment opportunities!
take place. In fact, we can portray the rise of the modern centralized state and its monopoly of ‘protection’ as an outcome of fierce struggles not only among competing states, but also among ‘central’ authorities and the various local groupings, which strongly resisted being disarmed by the state. This struggle, which ended up with the invention of direct rule, was in a sense a struggle on the meaning of representation/protection on the one hand, and on the efficiency of domestic protection on the other hand. The fact that standing armies took shape long before the establishment of police and internal security forces is very significant in that rulers were not automatically perceived to be representatives of the respective local communities that they dominated, and therefore were not trusted with the job of protecting them.

With no pretensions to formulating a general theory of state/society relationships, let’s state in conclusion that all these calculations are meaningful in their own right, that is, from the perspective of the functioning of the system under consideration. In other words, capitalist rationality is certainly not rational when applied upon forms that are not capitalist. Therefore, a theory of a system’s functioning must, first and foremost, develop an understanding of the forms of economic calculation of that system, the logic behind these calculations and the historical setting of that system, and not judge it by present day calculation methods and dismissing pre-bourgeois calculations on the ground that ‘economics’ does not play a role in such societies.

5.2 Contextualizing Spatial Variations:

We may proceed from the above to attempt an account for the historical differences between West European political units and those that prevailed among other places in the Mashreq. The much larger average size of the latter’s political units and the apparent strong authority that the emperors wielded have given rise to many unfounded myths, such as that on “oriental despotism”, or the ‘Asiatic mode of production’. So, if we were to reject the essentialist or culturalist accounts, how can we use the above analysis to explain the authentic differences mentioned above?

Our point of departure must be an emphasized reminder of the similarity in the basic characteristics that all precapitalist formations share, of which we singled out the fact that politics and economics are inseparable as instances. Therefore to say, for example, that the wealthy in the Middle East had no way of preserving their fortunes if they lost favor with the Sultan is a doubly mistaken statement. First, because by confining this statement to this region, one gets the impression that this was not the case in Western Europe. However, if we keep in mind the nobility were first and foremost political leaders, i.e. de facto rulers of their own regions, who presented themselves to the sovereign as the men capable of controlling the peasantry, and to the peasantry as those capable of protecting them from banditry or other masters, and as such made their fortunes, then the distinction will lose its meaning. In this respect, Marx notes in his *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law*:

“In the Middle Ages there were serfs, feudal estates, merchant and trade guilds, corporations of scholars, etc.: that is to say, in the Middle Ages property, trade, society, man are *political*; the material content of the state is given by its form; every private sphere has a political character, or is a political sphere. ... In the Middle Ages the life of the nation and the life of the state are identical.”

(Marx 1843, cited by Wolfgang Müller and Christel Nesüss 1978: 37)
Second, we have seen in the preceding chapters that the central or local rulers in the “East” were not as freehanded or detached from the wealthy as the oriental despotism thesis would want us to believe. Fattah’s conclusion regarding nineteenth-century Iraq is very pertinent here:

“The local machinery of government was, in many ways, oiled by provincial notables and merchants, to whom Mamluk and later Ottoman officials turned for the indispensable assistance and succour. If the vali were to recompense himself for having paid a large badal to Istanbul for the post of governor of Baghdad or Basra (an important priority for all officeholders in nineteenth-century Iraq), he had to enter into local alliances; for without local support, no government official could hope to extract the bare minimum of revenues from the provinces of Iraq.

... In terms of economic influence, the vali was far less influential than local merchants in any number of economic activities. For instance, the control of grain-producing districts adjoining Baghdad was in the hand of grain merchants and rural shaikhs; if the vali were to make any sort of profit from the grain trade, he had to choose his local allies well. Even then, he was invariably at a disadvantage. The evidence relating to Najib Pasha’s tenure in government shows that the vali was only one of many taxfarmers/monopolists of the province, and not necessarily the richest one.”

Fattah 1997: 209

Then why did Western Europe end up with political units that were much smaller and less centralized than the Mashreq?

To begin with, rulers’ ambitions and urge to form as vast an empire as possible was not less than elsewhere. Charlemagne and Napoleon – let alone Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great- are just a few examples. In the short intervals when this endeavor seemed possible the internal organization of European empires was similar to the ones that prevailed in the Mashreq. Under the Carolingian unification of the west around 800 A.D.:

“an elaborate and centralized administrative grid was laid down over the whole land mass from Catalonia to Schleswig and Normandy to Styria. Its basic unit was the county, derived from the old Roman civitas. Trusted nobles were appointed as counts with military and juridical powers to govern these regions in a clear and firm delegation of public authority, revocable by the Emperor. There were perhaps 250-350 of these officials throughout the Empire; They were paid no salaries but received a proportion of the local royal revenues and landed endowments in the county ... a competent noble could successively be transferred to different regions, although in practice revocations or shifts of countship were infrequent.”

P. Anderson 1974: 138

If the interests in forming big empires were present in both parts of the world, then the swift dissolution of West European empires and the persistence of these in Asia and the Mashreq must be explained by their divergent protection functions. However, proving the functionality of erecting such political systems only tells part of the story; for in addition we have to show that erecting such structures was technically and socially feasible at the time. One can assume that the larger a precapitalist political entity is, the more costly are the protection costs levied on the various sections of the population, especially the working classes. This is because such an entity requires a standing army and bureaucracy, and the existence of multiple layers
of intermediaries—each extracting its share of the surplus—in order to enforce the rules of the center on the local population over a relatively vast territory. It goes without saying that under such systems the only way to extract more protection costs is carried by squeezing additional sums from the direct producers since a continual rise in the productivity of workers is only possible under capitalism.

The question then is how could the Mashreq (and Asian) societies acquiesce to paying such high tolls, while the West Europeans did not?

Two basic hypotheses can account for the Mashreq’s need for a ‘megapoltiy’. The first is that much of its territory depends on large rivers—the Nile, Tigris and Euphrates, in addition to smaller ones—that extend over long territories, which makes it imperative to centrally plan the supervision of irrigation schemes and carrying large-scale maintenance projects for the large hydraulic basins (Wittfogel 1962). The paucity of rain in the Mashreq, moreover, made the livelihood of the population critically dependent on these rivers. Under these circumstances, the micro-efficiency criteria, i.e. the ability to run and cultivate separate demesnes, could not be a substitute to the overall management of water resources as leaving small parts unattended could result in major damage to the entire civilization.

The second reason behind the need to preserve large political units lied in the topographic vulnerability of the Mashreq to recurrent massive nomadic attacks. mainly from the Mongolian steppes and also from the Arabia Peninsula (and the Libyan and Sahara in the cases of Egypt and North Africa). In a sense, the need to defend the area against these invasions could be viewed as derived from the need to preserve the relatively sophisticated irrigation schemes that were in place. The threat was not from invasion itself, for invasion was tolerated as long as an invader could take proper care of the irrigation systems on which human lives literally depended. After all, those who came to rule the region since time immemorial had been all invaders. The difference laid in the fact that the Moguls, for example, were nomads who did not have the slightest idea of what the maintenance of agriculture required, and thus caused the long-term devastation of the whole region when they conquered it in 1258 A.D.

Driven out of their native land by drought and other ecological calamities, the Moguls went in huge waves to conquer and devastate large areas to the west, reaching into the Balkans and Eastern Europe. It was thanks to the latter region, in fact, that West Europe was shielded from these invasions. Perry Anderson remarked that:

“[T]he slow growth of the agrarian Slav communities in the east towards stable State systems was repeatedly interrupted and shattered by successive waves of nomadic invasions from Central Asia... For not only was it territorially adjacent to the Asian frontiers of pastoral nomadism, and therefore repeatedly bore the brunt of nomadic military assaults on Europe, from which the West was by its interposition buffered, but much of it also shared a topographical similarity with the Asian steppe-lands from which nomadic peoples periodically poured outwards.”

P. Anderson 1974a: 217

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4 It may seem ironic that we are using the argument presented by the proponents of the ‘oriental despotism’ and ‘Asiatic mode of production’ theses. However, it is not the basic argument that makes these theses ideologically biased and factually mistaken, but the speculative conclusions drawn from them, such as claiming that unlike the West, all land in the ‘orient’ was in the hands of the supreme ruler and/or that this state of affairs froze the social dynamics of societies and gave the allegedly omnipotent rulers a free hand in shaping their societies the way they desired. See below.
By circa the fifteenth century, Eastern Europe was finally shielded from the threats of nomadic invaders from Asia. Ironically, the shield was provided by the Ottomans, who themselves had been nomadic invaders that occupied the vast region extending from Central Asia in the east to North Africa in the west, and from Eastern Europe in the North to the Arabian Peninsula in the south. The Mashreq required the strong Persian and Ottoman states to prevent the Moguls from coming again. However, these states were not very effective in combating the threats of “internal” nomadism, i.e. herds from desert regions from within the existing polities who periodically attacked and sacked the settled population in countryside and towns. The threats of internal nomadism persisted until the twentieth century in most of the Mashreq. And the need for a strong state with a strong army was strongly felt by both the rural and urban subjects of the Persian and Ottoman states.

Thus we can conclude that ecology and geography made the minimum size of a viable political unit in the Mashreq (and Asia in general) much larger than that of Western Europe. This implied that the costs of protection, or the powers invested in the central authority, were higher in the Mashreq than in Western Europe, as the minimum defendable territory in the latter was smaller.

Mega-polities, however, while essential for the life of such civilizations, were hardly functional when it came to the efficient organization of local concentrations of subjects, hence our emphasis on the viable political unit, and not the socio-economic unit. And it is here that the myth of the omnipotent Oriental State becomes a mere ideological edifice.

I have tried to demonstrate in the preceding chapters that from a social and economic point of view, the Mashreq urban and rural structures were not much different from their counterparts in precapitalist Western Europe. In many cases the main traits of these structures were even identical. The existence and maintenance of a bureaucracy and standing army entailed payments of additional tributes by rural and urban subjects. But apart from that, there was not much that the “Oriental” state could do to enforce despotic impositions and regulations that the Western European polities could not enforce.

First, the desire on the part of state rulers to extend their authority to the remotest parts of the empire –or even to occupy more land- had to be compromised with the existing communication techniques. Each community, even those that felt the need to integrate with other faraway ones within or without the empire, enjoyed various degrees of autonomy in running its own affairs. But how much autonomy would each community enjoy depended neither on the good/bad will of the central authority, nor on the desires of the subjects themselves. It was constructed and reconstructed through incessant (and often bloody) struggles with every perceived change in the power relations between subjects and rulers.

Second, a general statement regarding the dependence of a region on central irrigation does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that a) all parts of the empire felt that necessity in the same degree (the Syrian coast or the Arabian Peninsula for example have no big rivers), or b) that some regions which depended on central irrigation could not form an independent a viable political unit of their own (Egypt and the Nile valley). Hence the six-century life cycle of the Ottomans was a continual struggle to suppress secessionist movements and attempts at autonomy by various regions of the empire.

The eighteenth and nineteenth century developments in military and communication technology and the opening up of the Mashreq to international trade intensified the trends towards autonomy and secession from the empire. Whereas
these developments laid the basis for the unification of national markets and the rise of nationalism, direct rule and centralized state machinery in the social formations that were ripe for capitalism, in the Ottoman case they invigorated the secessionist tendencies. Although nationalism was not explicitly invoked as an ideology to legitimate autonomy or secession from the empire, the trend towards forming more homogenous polities were at work. First, improvements in military technology signaled the beginning of end for internal nomadic threats especially to the major administrative and urban centers. More stable patterns of trade and land ownership could thus emerge as landowners and merchants enjoyed more security. Second, the vigorous rise in trading opportunities strongly contributed to the consolidation of dominant classes in the various wilayas and sub-wilayas of the empire. The newly emerging dominant classes, even the walis, who were the appointed representatives of the Constantinople in their respective wilayas, began resisting demands from the central authorities to contribute large sums of tributes to the central authority. The following are cases in point:

Between 1735 and his murder in 1775, Dhahir al Umar al Zaidani, a descendent from a bedouin family that worked as tax farmers for the Sultan, dominated most of Palestine and had more influence than the Lords of Mount Lebanon and the Walis.

The Mamluks of Baghdad established an autonomous rule over Iraq between 1747 and 1831;

The Jalile family of Mosul, though dependent on the wali of Baghdad, ruled the city between 1726 – 1834;

The Mamluks of Egypt reached the zenith of their power in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries until the suppression of Muhammed Ali’s rebellion against the Sultan

The Druze Hamdan family succeeded in controlling much of Syria’s south during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries;

The Christian Shihabi lords controlled Mount Lebanon and much of the coast during the same period;

The Kurdish Baban family were the de facto rulers of the Sulaymaniyya region of Iraqi Kurdistan;

In Western Tripoli, the Qaramanli family ruled between 1711 – 1836;

Many Bedouin tribes actually controlled their areas:

- ‘Iniza ruled the Syrian Desert since its arrival there at the end of the seventeenth century and ousting the Mawali tribal federation;
- The Muntafik Federation controlled Basra;
- The Hawara tribes in the south of Egypt;
- The eastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula witnessed the rise of ruling bedouin families which formed the embryo’s of today’s Emirates;
- In the heart of the Peninsula emerged the Wahabite movement, which criticized the Sultan’s weakness and his incapability of protecting Muslim territory.

In Damascus the Azm family ruled for 60 years

To these we have to add the successful attempts to secession, especially in the European part of the empire: Hungary 1699, Crimea 1784, Serbia 1878, Romania 1878, Greece 1882, Bulgaria 1908, Bosnia 1908, Tripoli (Libya) 1912, Albania (Rafiq 1985: introduction, Nadhim 1984: 1913 91 fn., Nasr and Dubar 1976: 25).
We can discern two major determinants of the degree of independence a territory could gain: the first is the distance from the seat of power Yemen’s early secession from the empire and the successful attempts by the Wahabites to wrestle much of the Arabian Peninsula from Istanbul’s control are two cases in point. But distance alone does not explain the motives for seeking autonomy. It only explains why a region’s autonomy or independence could not be suppressed by the central state. The second determinant in binding a sub-region and driving it away from the empire seems to be in the main transportation means available to it. For one thing, regions depending on land routes differed greatly from those depending on water. But more important is the fact that the paths of those sub-regions that relied on sea transport were very different from those that relied on riverine maritime. Syria’s non-dependence on a main river may have contributed to the rise of two main rival centers: Aleppo and Damascus, each with its own trade routes and partners and therefore each having different political agendas and aspirations. By contrast, Egypt had long had its unique identity thanks to the Nile in the first place.

5.3 Precapitalist Authority and Protection Costs:

Despite the higher protection costs, larger political units and the consequently having to sustain standing bureaucracies and armies, the operation of the socio-economic units in Asia (including the Mashreq) did not radically diverge from that of Western European units. A pertinent question to be addressed now relates to the formation of precapitalist ruling classes in both areas. Did the different political structures of the Ottoman empire lead to a peculiar formation of the landed aristocracy in the Mashreq?

When discussing the general process of class differentiation above, we noted that the division of a community into a triad: politico-military leaders, spiritual-ideological leaders (whether they are men of religion, magicians or mandarin bureaucrats) and producers should be seen in the context of rising productivity and at least for the warriors, increasing means of communication and knowledge about potential rivals or the possibility of controlling a larger territory and thereby subjugating more men and women. Given the very limited (but not non-existent) rise in agricultural productivity under precapitalism, the only available means for continually raising the number of men under arms, as well as the standards of living of the non-workers, was through subjugating more men and controlling more territory and/or increasing the exploitation of the already subjugated peasants. In this regard, Therborn notes:

“Under feudalism land ownership (which includes a number of unfree peasants) was the main means of production, and consumption was directed towards fulfilling the nobility’s needs. The distinguishing social dynamic was the acquirement and occupation of more land and the extraction of increasing surplus from the already possessed land. Since free buying and selling of land in the market was not possible, military supremacy was the only skill distinguishing the ruling class. The main occupation of the state (whether absolute or not) was preparing for war.”

Therborn 1978: 71

A relatively prosperous community would not accord consent to its rulers unconditionally, because we have seen above that consent is contingent upon the perception of the ruled that their rulers are rendering them services, in exchange for which they would offer presents, tributes, rents or taxes. Thus war and war
preparation were essential for rulers in projecting their image as invincible and therefore for forcing others to demand their protection. But protection from whom?

It is well known that before the advent of feudalism in Europe, and the rise of sharecropping in the Mashreq, land was a communal property, and peasants were its free possessors. The war barons in the West could only force the peasant communities to relinquish their rights on land if the latter felt that they were under constant threat of plunder and pillage. The war barons, who were the major threat to the peasant communities, now came to provide their protection in exchange for rent. In this respect, Robert Brenner notes that the structure of West European feudalism, which dispersed force among the individual lordship, also tended to make it difficult for the peasants to secure full property as it obliged them to put themselves under the “protection” of some lord precisely in order to maintain their land against other lords. From a purely economic point of view, which we should bear in mind is only tenable under capitalism, peasants would not need to work on the lord’s demesne since most of them did possess plots of land and tools to work for themselves (Brenner 1985a: 229).

Thus we see that the ‘economic’ rights of the evolving feudal class were derived from their political role, or ‘services’ rendered to the peasants. A serf in the heyday of feudalism may have heard stories from his ancestors about the old times when they did not have to be constrained by a lord, but that does not ‘deligitimize’ the functions of the landlord in his eyes. For him, dispensing with the ‘services’ of the landlord is unthinkable. Consent, thus was engendered by everyday experience and not through a meticulous analysis of the history of the existing ruling class.

To perpetuate the ‘legitimacy’ of feudalism as a political protector, especially when it was decaying in the fifteenth-century, the rulers were directly implicated in creating gangsterdom. This was not an incidental coincidence, as the following lengthy quote from Dobb shows:

“This gangsterdom, though it probably increased in the fifteenth century, seems also to have characterized Feudalism in earlier centuries (as it did even more notoriously on the Continent, e.g. the “robber barons” of the Rhineland and elsewhere). Jusserand gives examples of highway robbery and racketeering by armed gangs in the fourteenth century: gangs which, under the system known as “maintenance”, received support from the highest of the land, including persons at the Court and members of the Royal Family, not excluding the Prince of Wales and the prelates of the Church and Edward III’s “dearest consort, the queen”.

“The great of the land and some lesser people too had their own men, sworn to their service and ready to do anything they were commanded, which consisted in the most monstrous deeds, such as securing property or other goods to which neither their masters nor any claimants, paying their master in order to be ‘protected’, had any title. They terrorized the rightful owners, the judges and the juries, ransoming, beating and maiming any opponent.”

Dobb 1946: 49 fn

Thus it could be easily seen that an ideological representation of politics was the motivating force behind feudalism in Medieval Europe, just as an ideological representation of religion was the legitimating force of the pre-existing civilizations (in Europe as elsewhere), and an ideological representation of economics under
capitalism. The ideological representation in the feudal case lies in the fact that it is force that protects others and that legitimacy, from the point of view of an agricultural community, resides with the most powerful protector, that is, the best warriors.

The costs of protection therefore necessarily vary depending on the magnitude of perceived threats on the one hand, and the availability of alternative 'protectors' on the other. Yet one thing must be borne in mind regarding these costs, namely that they had to be legitimized. In other words, the view that feudalism was based on pure coercion in the sense that peasants were aware of its injustices from the outset must be seen as a pure fantasy invented by the minds of those who derive their notions from the rules of bourgeois society and cannot therefore imagine producers parting willingly with portions of their work for the benefit of others. But in a social setting where war is the 'normal' way of life, an agricultural community would see its search for a 'protecting' group and the payment of protection costs as natural. In the presence of many competing warlords, the margin of freedom available for such communities would be confined to choosing the least costly and more efficient protector among those predators.

The above mechanism, which defines pre-modern social formations, explains much of the eighteenth-nineteenth century dynamics of class formation in the Mashreq as well as many other parts of the world at various points in time. Theoretically the Ottoman and Persian states were responsible for protecting the cultivating communities and fighting outlaws. In reality, however, state authority hardly extended beyond the major cities. And even here, the central authorities had to rely on local notables in order to keep order, as we have seen. Moreover, several Mashreq cities came under the siege of different warring tribes in many occasions.

Naturally, warring tribes differed in size and therefore the extent of their threats and their ultimate objectives varied. The majority were elbowing each other in order to lay their hands on grazing land and form their own dira: a domain over which the tribe exercised sovereign rights and from which the sheikh extracted the khmarwa or "brotherhood" tax on all those unaffiliated with his confederation and who traversed the tribal dira (Fattah 1997: 30-1). When the tribe grew strong enough, the sheikh also sent representatives to collect the khmarwa from "protected" tribes and villages within the dira itself. Payment of the khmarwa implied recognition of tribal frontiers by all those parties that crossed the tribal dira, be they merchants, pilgrims, or pastoralists in search of water and forage.

Occasionally, however, stronger federations like al Muntafiq in the south of Iraq, the Babans in Sulaymaniyya, and more seriously the Saudis in Najd managed to form semi-independent statelets. In the first two cases, the supreme authority of the Ottomans was not challenged. However, in the Saudi case a powerful amalgam of warring tribes converted into a newly formed puritanical Islamic sect: Wahabism and

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5 I am emphasizing the term "ideological representation of economics, religion, or politics" to distinguish my understanding of the working of social formations from those scholars who maintain that economics, politics, or religion, and not the ideological representation of economics, politics, or religion are the dominant instances under various social formations. In the preceding pages, I have tried to show that it is ideology and ideology alone that casts on a given instance its dominant position within a specific historical context.

6 A future analyst may wonder how present-day citizens were 'coerced' to pay for such 'irrational' expenses as to sustain monarchic dynasties and political leaders. And indeed the whole tax system of today may be viewed tomorrow the way we view tribute extracted by old empires. But unless the overall working of the existing social system is taken into consideration, the 'necessary' functions of the present political structures in preserving the cohesion of a social formation cannot be thoroughly understood.
challenged the authenticity of the Ottomans' Islam, eventually managing to wrestle much of the Arabian Peninsula from the effective rule of Istanbul.

Divisions between or within tribes between warriors and peasants has been acknowledged even in early times. Not only did the Hindus and West Europeans hold peasants in low esteem, but Arabs too. In his famous _Mugaddama_, Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) affirmed that “People who live by agriculture are distinguished by the abjectness or lowness of their condition”. Ibn Khaldoun traces the roots of this condition to the impost or other compulsory contributions levied on the peasants, the detriment sustained by them in their possessions, and their fall under the yoke of overbearing power. From his standpoint, their payment of taxes or imposts which, unless threatened by destruction, “proud hearts” would not bear, is itself a sign of weakness and ultimately explicable by the erosion or loss of their “asabiyah or group feeling and, therefore, of their ability to defend themselves or advance their interests” (cited in Batatu 1999:95).

The aversion of warrior tribes from practicing agriculture continued well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in many parts of the Mashreq. Kurdish aghas insisted that their peasants belonged to a different race than theirs, as we have seen. The powerful Bani Lam tribe in southern Iraq did not practice agriculture and considered it degrading. Despite the many canals that were built in their lands, they relied on protection fees extracted from other peasant tribes. Their large dira was cultivated by the Kurdish Lure tribes. This was also the case of Shammar Jarba, whom the wali Madhat Pasha tried to settle on land in the 1860s. The response of their chief ‘Abdul Karim was that Shammar had a lot of cattle, horses and camels, and “we will not become shopkeepers” (Nawwar 1968:156).

Tribes of notable bedouins kept terrorizing Egypt’s countryside at several periods until the first half of the nineteenth century. Many of these tribes were from the bedouins of Barqa (Libya) who came to Egypt during the eighteenth century and resided in the governorates of Al Fayoum, Bani Swaif and al Minya. Others migrated from Hijaz due to the harsh economic conditions there and directed their attacks to the fertile Nile delta before laying control over the peasants in much of al Sharqiyya governorate. A noted Egyptian historian described nomadic threats in the following lines:

“For a considerable period of time, these tribes continued to shake the Egyptian social and political structure. They were a constant plague to the agricultural areas on the edge of the [Nile] Delta, particularly in the Sharqiya and Beheira provinces and along the fringes of the Nile valley in Upper Egypt, notably in Beni Suef, Minya and Fayoum. ... In the 18th century, for example, the sheikh of Huwara...took advantage of the disintegrating authority in Cairo...to establish a virtually autonomous entity in Upper Egypt.”

These bedouin tribes only settled in land in the nineteenth century when Muhammed Ali turned them into multazims (tax farmers) and granted them large areas of land. The settlement of others occurred several more decades later in the era

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7 A secessionist movement required not only a far away location from the seat of empire, which provided the technical potential for success, but also an ideological legitimacy. And in an empire whose legitimacy resided in representing Islam, the best recipe was the spread of a different version claiming to be the authentic Islam. The Arabian Peninsula was not the only case of such an attempt. Sinusism developed in Libya and Mahdisim in Sudan around the same time. Early on, however, Persia’s conversion to Shi’ism in the sixteenth century was the major legitimating principle of its rivalry with the Ottomans.

of Khedive Sa'id. Many of today's prominent Egyptian families are direct descendents of these tribes. Lamloum al Sa'di al Masni in Maghagha in the governorate of al Minya and al Basil in Al Fayoum Oasis and Abaza family in Al Sharqiyya (Davis 1983: 51, 100).

The tendency towards the domination of peasant communities by the more powerful warring lords was more pronounced in the Asian part of the Arab world. The warring Druze communities subjugated Christian Maronites in Mount Lebanon and later moved to conquer the Suwaida' region of Syria. In the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Druze from Lebanon made the Hawran Mountain (now called Jabal al-'Arab) their own, giving it their name. It was also by conquest that they acquired the plains to the south. Some of the towns and villages that they seized had long been deserted or seasonally occupied by bedouins but many others belonged by tradition to the peasants or townsmen of Hawran (Batatu 1999: 13). Eastern Syria became the stronghold of the Roula clan—a branch of the powerful 'Iniza that migrated from the Arabian Desert in the seventeenth-eighteenth centuries, while the northeast was under the Syrian branch of Shammar (Blunt 1880: 46-90).

In Iraq

"It is the fighting nomadic order that tended to provide the ruling stratum of Kurdish princes and aghas, and of Arab shaikhs al-mashayikh— the chiefs of tribes— that is, the heads of the confederations, and the shaikhs of the powerful constituent tribes, and it is partly to the distinction between the fighter-nomad and the often nonrelated cultivator that we may ascribe the beginning of the social cleavage within the tribal domain as we find it in the period of the monarchy."

Batatu 1978: 71

Arab tribes in the south of Iraq were divided into People of the Camel, People of the Sheep, and buffalo-breeding Marshdwellers. The fighter-nomads belonged to the people of the Camel who regarded all the other groups with the same undiscriminating contempt, and refused to give their daughters in marriage even to their leading families. The cultivators in the tribal society who lived in miserable huts and paid "tribute" to the camel-owning desert-lords— were members of weaker or subdued tribes (Ibid.: 68-9).

It is very interesting to note that long before the Ottomans' move to grant lands in private names, those powerful confederations like Bani Lam, al Khazai'il, Shammar, and Albu Muhammed, who differentiated their chiefdoms clearly from the peasants by bringing other 'lower' tribes to cultivate land for them, were already evolving into European-type feudal lords. Political authority and monopoly of

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Dr. Rizq (Ibid.) gives several examples of how these sheikhs were pacified through intimidation, land grants, bestowing honorary titles on them and appointing others to official posts. Thus Suleiman Pasha Abaza of the Abaida tribes in Sharqiya province occupied the post of "the chief of provincial directorate, a post that had been formerly reserved for members of the Turkish aristocracy that were close to the throne." Lamlum Bey El-Saadi, the bedouin sheikh received the rank of a bey and a pension of 15 pounds a month.

Subjugating tribes to the Egyptian central authorities reached its zenith, as Rizq quotes Al-Ahram daily of 2 December 1895 which related that the government "convened commissions in all the provinces in which a mayor or more was elected for each tribe. Each mayor would be served by other sheikhs in the capacity of division chiefs." The system was in fact implemented without a hitch in all the provinces with the exception of Beheira, where "the sheikhs of the Nazla tribe objected to being division chiefs after they had been tribal leaders."
violence was established by the chiefs as the following quote on Albu Muhammed reveals:

“The peasants (from other tribes) were kept in check by the armed retainers of the ruling sheikh. The chiefs of Albu Muhammad, the powerful camel-people on the southern Tigris, developed in the first half of the nineteenth century a standing armed force and, with the help of two smiths from Baghdad, fitted it with twenty-one canons, and forbade the peasants and other tribesmen under their control to carry arms”.

Batatu 1978: 69-70

In different parts of Africa similar patterns were at play in the nineteenth-twentieth century. The case of the Zulu fighters in South Africa is perhaps the most familiar episode. Yet in the second half of the nineteenth century Ethiopia underwent a phase quite similar to Europe’s passage to feudalism. At the time of Manlike, the King of Shoa (1865-1869), the Kingdom expanded to the east and south by annexing regions not inhabited by Abyssinians. The Abyssinians had established the naftagna - gabbbar vertical relationship in the conquered regions. Naftagna means literally ‘riffle holders’. The conquered peoples and their land belonged to the victorious soldiers or settlers: the Abyssinian royal families, nobility, the Orthodox Church and the state, while the peasants (gabbars) were forced to give free service to the settlers and pay tribute in kind both to the settlers and the state. In some cases, the inhabitants of the conquered territories were sold as slaves (Vander Linden 1977: 70 ff., Vail 1997: 52-68, Etienne 1997: 518-35).

The Mossi, who descended from horsemen in Ghana, conquered the Volta basin about the middle of the fifteenth century. They subjugated the native agricultural people, who are known today as the ‘people of the land’ or the ‘sons of the land’ (Izard 1975: 234-7). A group of nomad Touareg dominated the African farmers of the Niger in the nineteenth century. These societies were organized in a hierarchy of groups with, at the summit, a tribal aristocracy which wielded political power and dominated nomad tribes which supplied it with cattle, labor and armed forces. Lastly, subordinated to the stock-breeders, were African farmers who paid tribute. (Bonte 1975: 51-3).

The above shows beyond doubt how warriors, nomads or not, have historically used their fighting skills to turn into ruling classes almost everywhere. Their ideological legitimacy rested upon a system of terror that they themselves had created then proceeded to offer protection to the weak peasant/shepherd communities. Their transformation into ruling classes was associated with a process in which common interests took precedence over kinship. E.A. Thompson traced in details the formation of a retinue system which, according to him, was a decisive preliminary step in the gradual transformation from tribal towards a feudal order everywhere (Thompson 1965: 48-60). Kinship relations did not lose their importance to be sure. However, they ceased to be the dominant structure of feudalism.

In the Mashreq and Africa, warriors went almost exactly into that same path, as we have noted. Quraish, the merchant-warrior tribe of the Muslim Prophet Muhammed subjugated whole nations during the early Islamic conquests, as is well

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10 Maurice Godelcher describes the early formation of feudalism in Germany in similar terms where the “free peasants slowly lost their personal independence and became increasingly subject to the authority of new nobility which had developed from Germanic chiefs and their armed retainers and Romanised Gauls who had joined the administration” (Godelcher 1978d: 187 bold and italics added).
known. A viable state that existed for several hundred years ensued from these tribal invasions. The same applies to the Mogul tribes who, though unable to survive in a centrally irrigated Iraq, established one of the most prosperous civilizations in pre-British India.

Eighteenth and nineteenth-century developments in the Mashreq, however, are most instructive in their evidence. Thus it is all the more surprising that many authors simply indulged in some kind of speculative thinking regarding tribes and state formation. Perhaps the most significant attempt at understanding the general traits of nomadism is Perry Anderson’s coinage of the term ‘nomadic mode of production’ which, according to him:

“dominated the Asian borderlines beyond Europe in the Dark and Middle Ages .... This nomadism did not simply constitute a primordial form of economy, earlier and cruder than that of sedentary peasant agriculture. Typologically, it was probably a later evolution. In fact, the particular paradox of nomadic pastoralism was that it represented in certain respects a more highly specialized and skilled exploitation of the natural world than pre-feudal agriculture, yet one whose inherent limits were also narrower. It was a path of development that branched off from primitive agrarian cultivation, achieved impressive initial gains, but eventually proved a cul-de-sac, while peasant agriculture slowly revealed a far greater potential for cumulative social and technical advance.”

P. Anderson 1974a: 219

Anderson’s generalizations, however, are empirically unfounded and theoretically untenable. Once he views nomadism as a ‘stage’ in the history of human evolution and a distinct mode of production, then he has to place it somewhere in the sequence of stages. Yet, we have seen that depending on ecological conditions, nomadism gained importance and lapsed away in recurrent phases of the history of Asia and Africa. When the sedentary civilizations around nomads were prosperous and expanding, nomadism receded to insignificant pockets that had to find a modus vivendi with the local rulers. When empires were decaying, nomads presented the embryos of potential political leaders and dominant classes over agricultural populations. Hence, in all circumstances, nomadism could never evolve into a distinct mode of production capable of reproducing itself without significant interaction with other forms of material production.

Anderson’s notion of a nomadic tribe is actually the conventional nineteenth-century concept which has been shown to be empirically incorrect. According to this concept, a tribe is a ‘completely organized society’, i.e. a self-perpetuating system having within its boundaries all the resources necessary for the continued maintenance of a particular mode of collective existence (Beteille 1980: 826). Nomads, as we have seen, could never reproduce their life cycle without significant exchange with peasant communities. Exchange in this sense involves plunder and coercion, exaction of protection tolls, as well as exchange of products via barter or using money.

Despite Anderson’s efforts to show nomadism as a distinct mode of production, he was unable to show the existence of an antagonistic formation based on clear differentiation of classes. The difference between owners of means of

11 The Egyptian historian Sayyid Mahmoud al Qimni provides ample evidence on how Mohammed’s call was actually driven by the imminent threats to the established social position of his tribe. He also shows how before the Prophet’s birth, two lineages within that tribe almost went to war and finally reached a division of labor whereby Mohammed’s lineage would specialize in spiritual jobs while the other contending lineage was given control over the war machinery (al Qimni 1989, 1993).
production and the propertyless was nonexistent, and therefore the internal dynamics that could make this supposed mode evolve were nonexistent. He admits however, that the phases of expansion of a nomadic social formation: “typically begin with raids on adjacent trade - routes or centres . The next phase was characteristically the fusion of rival clans and tribes on the steppes into confederation for external aggression. This phase also produced in the case of the Moguls a genuinely close parallel to the retinue phenomenon of pre-feudal social formations” (P. Anderson 1974a: 223)

But what does this actually mean? It means that clear-cut class divisions within nomadic tribes only begin when they inevitably, and not accidentally, merge with their non-nomadic surrounding. This is because the internal dynamics of nomadism only allow a limited degree of differentiation within the lineages, differentiations that are similar to the senior-junior ones which we noted above. The warrior clans would turn into leading or dominant classes within the formation with which they merge. In this respect, Anderson remarks that

“Collection of taxes, control of trade-routes, rounding up of recruits, deportation of craftsmen: the administrative operation of nomadic states were essentially limited to these. They were thus purely parasitic constructs, with no roots in the system of production on which they battered.”

P. Anderson 1974a: 224

However, it is only from the vantage point of a contemporary observer that such ‘ethical’ statements can be advanced. One needs only to question the nature and functions of feudal rent to discover that collection of taxes and recruiting warriors was the essence of virtually all precapitalist political units. Whether these were parasitic constructs or not is a matter that can only be judged historically, i.e. whether imposing taxes on trade encouraged producers to make more efficient use of their resources or not, or whether squeezing peasants led to increased productivity, albeit an intermittent one, or not. Otherwise, one can argue that protecting trade routes, even if the threat to them comes from those same protectors, is an indispensable function for each state and cannot be dismissed by simply labeling it ‘parasitic’.

Applying similar speculative (and unfounded) generalizations about tribes, nomadism and state formation in the Middle East, Simon Bromley tried to use these as explanatory factors for the non-rise of capitalism. According to him, in the regions beyond the reach of the Ottoman rulers, that is beyond today’s Turkey:

“[T]ribal pastoralism permitted neither any significant development of the forces of production nor any lasting social stratification or political authority within the community. The tribal nobility was not reproduced by regulated intermarriage and it had no power to tax, control or command. And even if tribal warfare precipitated the temporary emergence of a confederation, the paucity of the available surplus meant that state formation was unthinkable. Where this tribal cohesion survived it proved to be destructive as such, for in so far as nomads accumulated surpluses at all this was by means of parasitic plunder of sedentary agriculture or from siphoning of tribute from trade routes.”

Bromley 1993: 383 - 384

Such general statements assume a temporally and spatially unchanging relationship between tribes and states. The evidence, however, show that at various points, and depending on the power relations tribal leaders acted as autonomous political entities rebelling against the existing states, clients to the states performing functions and policies that the center assigned to them in exchange for rewards, or even members of the ruling classes who joined cabinets. Conversely, state leaders
dealt with tribes differently: from dealing with them as outlaws to incorporating them within the existing institutions.

The changing power relations, not only between the various social actors makes any statement about the ability of tribes (or other social actors) to form states of little value. One might ask: how then did the Ottoman warrior-nomads (and the Mogul nomads in seventeenth-century northern India) establish formidable states, tax sedentary cultivators and merchants and become their political leaders, oppressors and protectors? Why, in other words, one should assume that once we are talking about nomads no embryonic state structure could emerge from a coupling of producers and warrior protectors-oppressors, which was the case in Saudi Arabia, southern Iraq and many parts of Iran and the Arab Mashreq.

"Historically, whether a given tribe was to be reckoned as a tribal chiefdom or qualified as a tribal state depended very much on the fluctuating fortunes of the larger polity of which it was a part or to which it was related, and not simply on its own evolutionary potential."

Betille 1980: 827

One does not need to go beyond the same standard references that Bromley had relied upon to discover that there were indeed several attempts to create independent states by tribal leaders throughout the eighteenth - nineteenth centuries, as we have seen above. Plundering? But what else was the so-called primitive accumulation of capital and the Ottoman tax farming from the point of view of their victims. For social theory is not concerned with the ethical implications of the sources of wealth, as much as with the social conditions that permit or forbid the reinvestment of what is plundered in a process of enlarged reproduction.

For his part, Aziz al Azma recognizes the possibility of state formation by a tribal-nomadic stratum. However, his study of Saudi Arabia implies that this formation had to impart some exceptional traits on the nascent state emanating from an exceptional situation, as the following quote shows:

"This new political right [exclusively exercised by the center] erected over the debris of tribal rights is itself derived from an eminently tribal concept, that of protection, himaya, exercised by the central authority, in exactly the same way as the nomadic tribes had hitherto offered protection and thus politically neutralized settled and trading groups in return for taxation.... In the religious terms of the Wahhabite divines and of the principles of government they imparted to the House of Saud, this reduction of nomads, agriculturalists and townspeople equally into subjects of the Saudi polity, this compact of protection and allegiance, was expressed in terms of the canonical tax, the zakat.... With the zakat, the criterion of inclusion within the exclusive group is indicated; the group comprises the parties to a compact of unequal power, sharing a common exterior which exists for the purpose of expansion."

Aziz al Azmeh 1993: 109-110

Looking at the above description, one can see that the Saudi tribal state actually went into the same practices that gave rise to the early centralized European states. Canonical or not, the principle of taxation, the subjugation of the population to a system of inequality, the system of exclusion and inclusion, were all part and parcel of the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries state consolidation by precapitalist warlords and monarchial dynasties. For although the legitimizing principle used by the Saudi family relied on tribal practices, the outcome, whether intended or not, was the rise of a centralized state structure. What transformed the subjects into citizens in the European case were not the initial plans of the ruling dynasties, but the ensuing social
struggles that paved the way to the transition to modernity. These social structures and struggles are what we should look for to explain why and how did sharecropping in Syria and Iraq lead to the disintegration of tribal ties, while in Saudi Arabia the state and social system could preserve its tribal basis.

To conclude: the process which led to the rise and consolidation of feudalism in Europe was known in different parts of the world, though its outcome was, obviously, not the same.12 Warriors turn into lords through conquering peasants and becoming a dominant class. But that does not explain what class will they become, or what mode of social production will they prevail in. They may turn into tributary ‘tax’ farmers, or just looters of levies in exchange for protection, or else become feudal lords. Thus while one can establish the universal case that precapitalist dominant classes owe their existence to some kind of legitimated force, the specific form(s) that these classes will take depend on many other factors, not least of which is the potential for surplus production within a given community.

Having addressed the question of spatial variations of state forms, we have to address the twin question of the transformations of state forms over time. This question becomes all the more important when we look at the qualitative differences between contemporary forms of authority and those of premodernity.

5.4 States and Classes in the Passages to Modernity:

With the rise of the modern state, politics becomes a distinct and specialized field of activity for the first time in human history.13 This can be said to be the main distinguishing feature of the modern state compared to the premodern ones. This separation of politics entailed a series of separations, so to speak: the separation of economics and the rise of the market as a regulating mechanism, the separation of religion and ideological instances from both economics and politics, and so on. Within politics itself, however, a series of specializations produced evermore-distinct bodies, to the extent that the word ‘state’ became too loose to express the full reality of political practices. The separation of the judiciary, legislative and executive branches, the professionalization of the armed and police forces, and the autonomous role of the administrative bureaucracies are the obvious examples.

As the contemporary state—unlike the political structures of the past—came to fill “the entire social space” (Braudel 1979: 39), it is seen more and more as an independent agent and actor, a shaper of that social space (Badii and Birnbaum 1979). More and more, social changes look like the products of state policies and programs.

A valid question is whether our approach to state-society relations is a false one, or whether it applies to precapitalism but not to the modern state. Addressing this question seems all the more important given that over the past quarter of a century an ever increasing number of social and political scientists have been in the habit of rightly rejecting the crude instrumentalist notion of the state as a mere reflection or servant of the interests of a dominant section of the population in favor of more dynamic perceptions that emphasize the relative autonomy of that institution. However, as is often the case in social and political theories, there is now a tendency

12 Moreover, this process should not be viewed as a ‘stage’ in the linear, evolutionary sense of the word. For the eighteenth-nineteenth-century process that we are analyzing here was the last in a series of similar invasion by nomads that began more than a thousand years before and ended up with the establishment of different socio-economic and political structures.

13 The word ‘state’ as we understand it today was first used by Machiavelli (from the Latin: status, the past participle of stare: to stand).
towards tilting to the other extreme; towards viewing the state as an independent institution that faces another equally independent institution: society. The state needs thus to be restituated in its societal context.

The best known (and perhaps most extreme) examples are the works of Theda Skocpol and Charles Tilly. Skocpol finds it imperative to define her approach by way of contrasting it to the Marxist tradition. She concludes her introduction to the collective work *Bringing the State Back in* by emphatically pointing out to the new “theoretical understanding of states in relation to social structures” that will likely emerge “will almost certainly not resemble the grand systems theories of the structure-functionalists or neo-Marxists” (Skocpol 1985: 28). The reasons for this, according to her, is that states are “social actors” and as “society-shaping structures”, while historical materialism is “society-centered” that ignores the state.

The problem with Skocpol’s work, however, is that it is self-contradictory, because in her analysis of the French revolution she makes extensive use of Marx’ writings and she explicitly admits that classical Marxists ‘do not analytically collapse state and society’, and characterizes the classical Marxist view as being that ‘states are not simply created and manipulated by dominant classes’ (Skocpol 1979: 26 - 28). In a critique of her assertion that the autonomy of the absolutist states refutes the historical materialist conception, Paul Cammack argued that:

"[I]t is not inconsistent with a classical Marxist perspective to identify in such cases independent state projects aimed at modernization which go against existing dominant class interests. It is exactly what Marx described and expects. If the projects which Skocpol describes seem to offer evidence against a Marxist perspective, it is because she fails to discriminate theoretically between precapitalist and capitalist societies, and ignores the structural context from which foreign pressures and threats from abroad emerge. Her version of the state is independent of class forces by definition, as she presents it as concerned purely with external defence and the maintenance of order at home, refusing to address the question of its possible class content."

Cammack 1990: 154

Charles Tilly presents a more comprehensive alternative statist view, which rejects associating forms of states with the dominant modes of production. His work touches directly upon the topic of our research: power and production during the passage to modernity. Hence I propose to discuss his work with some detail.

Tilly formulates his problematic in the following words:

“What accounts for the great variation over time and space in the kinds of states that have prevailed in Europe since AD 990, and why did European states eventually converge on different variants of the national state?”

Tilly 1990: 5

This question arises from Tilly’s observation that:

“Three different types of state have all proliferated in various parts of Europe during major segments of the period since 990: tribute-making empires, systems of fragmented sovereignty such as city-states and urban federations, and national states. The first built a large military and extractive apparatus, but left most local administration to regional power holders who retained great autonomy. In systems of fragmented sovereignty, temporary coalitions and consultative institutions played significant parts in war and extraction, but little durable state apparatus emerged on a national scale. National states unite substantial military, extractive, administrative, and sometimes even distributive
and productive organizations in a relatively coordinated central structure. The long survival and coexistence of all three types tells against any notion of European state formation as a single, unilinear process, or of the national state-which did, indeed, eventually prevail-as an inherently superior form of government."

Ibid. 21

The author begins his book by a courageous statement of his method: “Any reader of this book will recognize the signs of my compulsion to order and simplify” (ix) However, an urge to order and simplify complex processes, such as state and nation formation, can hardly produce an adequate, not to speak of a superior theory that adds to the voluminous body of writings on the subject.

I will try to show in the following that Tilly's oversimplified account of state and nation formation in Europe has sacrificed accuracy and scientific rigor for the sake of producing an interesting and comprehensible text in which history was the main casualty.

In the first pages of the book, Charles Tilly attacks what he calls the ‘mode of production approach’ by selecting Perry Anderson's explanation of the different paths that Western Europe traversed towards modernity. Quoting the well-known work:

“The typical Western constellation in the early modern epoch was an aristocratic Absolutism raised above the social foundations of a non-servile peasantry and ascendant towns, the typical Eastern constellation was an aristocratic Absolutism erected over the foundations of a servile peasantry and subjugated towns. Swedish Absolutism, by contrast, was built on a base that was unique, because ... it combined free peasants and nugatory towns, in other words, a set of two "contradictory" variables running across the master divisions of the continent." Anderson 1974 b: 179-180

Tilly comments:

“[W]hile the mode -of- production literature as a whole contributes many insights into struggles for control of the states, indeed, it offers only the faintest of clues to reasons for variations in form and activity among states having similar modes of production... Most available explanations fail because they ignore the fact that many different kinds of states were viable at different stages of European history, because they locate explanations of state -to- state variation in individual characteristics rather than in relations among them, and because they assume implicitly a deliberate effort to construct the sorts of substantial, centralized states that came to dominate European life during the nineteenth and twentieth century.” Tilly 1990. 10-11

The lack of an adequate theory of state and politics, as well as a theory of international relations, in historical materialism has long been recognized by followers of that method. However, Tilly’s critique simply falls beside the point and brings us back to more vulgar formulations of inter-state relationships.

“Let us think of capital generously, including any tangible mobile resources, and enforceable claims on such resources. Capitalists, then, are people who specialize in the accumulation, purchase and sale of capital. They occupy the realm of exploitation, where the relations of production and exchange themselves yield surpluses, and capitalists capture them. Capitalists have
often existed in the absence of capitalism, the system in which wage-workers produce goods by means of materials owned by the capitalists.”

Ibid. 17

By equating capital simply with non-landed wealth, Tilly goes to the every day usage of the layman and brings us back to traditions that have been long discarded since the classical economists if capital were simply non-landed wealth, then the usurer in ancient Athens and today’s multinationals belong essentially to the same category. What has changed over time is the “ratio” of capital to coercion. Since economic power is only viewed in terms of capital, according to Tilly’s vulgar conception of it, then all other forms of rent extraction, slave labor, surplus extracted in kind or in monetary forms, etc. are nothing but expressions of coercion - the other leg in his dichotomy.

Thus, the author who justifiably rejects all kinds of teleological explanations of a national state asserting its dominance through time over other forms, ends up with a teleology of a capital (and capitalists) that existed since the outset, building up its position over coercion until some “optimal” mixture of capital and coercion was reached: the ‘capitalized coercion’ path, as he would like to call it.

Accordingly, the difference between capitalism and the socio-economic systems preceding it is only a quantitative one. Obviously, Tilly totally ignores the fact that even if we concede to calling pre-capitalist money lenders and merchants capitalists, their functions and positions as appendages serving pre-capitalist social relations of reproduction are totally and radically different from those in which capitalist social relations of reproduction dominate. What are the implications of such definitions for a theory of the state?

First, it is simply incorrect to state that “states having similar modes of production witnessed variations in form and activity”, unless the author has some other definition of ‘modes of production’ and/or unless he is referring to non-substantial variations. It is probably the first mistake that he falls in because of his deliberate loose definition of capitalism. Yet the second and major objection is that it is not difficult to see that the state - to - state variations are not absent in materialist-historical analyses. The radical difference between the latter and Tilly’s approach, however, is that the forms that states take, according to the historical - materialist approach, are not exclusively the product of the dominant mode of production, or interstate relations.

While these two sets of factors have a decisive influence, one should also look at the particular class configurations and geostrategic location of a particular country in order to understand why under the predominance of the same mode of production, say feudalism, Poland was different from France, or both were different from the Habsburg Empire. The balance of power between peasants and lords, the presence or absence of relatively autonomous towns and trading activities, the ethnic composition of the merchants and their relationships with the domestic classes, and the location of a particular country, especially its relative immunity or vulnerability to “foreign” incursions, all these help in explaining why states dominated by the same mode of production vary in form.

On the other hand, the decisive role of domestic social structures can clearly be seen in the many cases when certain ruling classes were aware of the need to introduce new institutions and arrangements in order to compete with superior rivals, but were either unable to do so, or achieved little or even negative results from the introduction of such institutions that proved to be highly efficient in different circumstances. Stark examples could be seen in the Ottomans’ attempts to introduce
modern land laws, or their attempts to create a professional army, or the Austro-Hungarian Empire’s attempt at homogenizing its populations where no less than 15 languages were spoken by its soldiers and officers (Kennedy 1989: 164-5).

While Tilly pays lip service to such factors, admitting that they do play a significant role in shaping states, he nevertheless overlooks them because the story is already complicated, according to him, and he doesn’t want to introduce more complicating ‘details’. But if such ‘details’ are precisely what explains the variations in state forms, i.e. they are the variables that provide the clues to the book’s problematic, then their omission would demolish the whole theoretical construct of Charles Tilly.

In fact, Tilly contradicts himself on several occasions when trying to decide the factors that account for the formation of state structures. He states first that his ‘three paths of state formation’: the coercion-intensive, capital-intensive and capitalized coercion paths:

“do not represent alternative “strategies” so much as contrasting conditions of life ....The reshaping of relations between ruler and ruled produced new, contrasting forms of government, each more or less adapted to its social setting”

Tilly 1990: 30

One page later, we are confronted with a bold statement that contradicts the first one:

“Driven by the pressures of international competition, all three paths eventually converged on concentrations of capital and coercion out of all proportion to those that prevailed in AD 990. From the seventeenth century onwards the capitalized coercion proved more effective in war, and therefore provided a compelling model for states that had originated in other combinations of coercion and capital.”

Ibid. 31

Here, then, is a case where Tilly reiterates exactly the assumptions that he had set himself to refute: social configurations are of no relevance and state formation and form become strategies whose outcome is preconceived by the rulers. Reading the above paragraph, one is tempted to ask: for whom did the capitalized coercion path prove to be more effective? And if it were a compelling model, then somebody, the rulers that is, tried to implement it consciously and therefore the whole story of the different paths being independent of the rulers’ choices falls apart.

For Charles Tilly, and many other writers in the ‘statist’ traditions, there is always an explicit or implicit assumption that the dominant interests in a given economy cannot be any other thing but capitalist. This is especially evident in Tilly’s definition of capital, and in considering that the main source of exploitation in the medieval times, namely landlords’ exploitation, was only a form of coercion, where coercion is divorced from exploitation. Hence, when states took measures against merchants, for example, or adopted policies that were not particularly conducive to the interests of the existing capitalists, these are seen as expressing the “interests of the state” on the expense of the interests of classes. A question that is never raised by such authors is: why shouldn’t such measures or policies be seen to serve the interests of the real dominant classes under such social formations; that is the landlords and nobility who would benefit from acquiring industrial, or imported luxury goods as cheap as possible?

In fact, the economy and politics, properly speaking, are in Tilly’s account not only two distinct realms, but totally independent of each another each having its own
dynamics and internal logic, that of exploitation in the first case and domination or coercion in the second. Some sort of ‘bargaining’ takes place and a midway compromise is reached where ‘political interests’ intersect with ‘economic interests’ to produce some unintended outcomes. Thus the forms that states eventually took were the product of the conflicts between the two realms, rather than the development of political structures that reflected and expressed a certain balance of power ensuing within a social and economic context in a given society or country.

A proponent of Tilly’s theory may object to the last criticism on the grounds that he did indeed take the nature of the dominant classes and their relationships with the state authority into account and that he did emphasize the fact that the outcome of this relationship in terms of state forms was not dependent on a priori policies designed to produce a certain form, but rather on the balance reached among conflicting interests. Such an objection is only formally valid; for if exploitation (read = economics) is only identified with capitalism, and feudalism is seen as a coercive mechanism, then it will not be difficult to see that the whole theory is based on manipulating terms: coercion - intensive regions, defined by the author as “areas of few cities and agricultural predominance, where direct coercion played a major part in production” (Tilly 1990: 58) are nothing but feudal Europe.

It follows that the whole problematic of the book can be reduced to the familiar -almost mundane- question of why did feudalism, and the political forms associated with it prove to be inefficient in comparison with the rising modern state system? The fact that by 1490 “city-states, leagues of cities, dynastic empires, and ecclesiastical entities such as the Teutonic Order all coexisted ... on the continent” and that therefore “it was not clear that national states as we know them would become Europe’s dominant organizations” (ibid. 46) is tantamount to stating that feudalism, disintegrating feudal structures, buds of capitalism and petty commodity production coexisted during that period; or that in 1490, it was not clear that capitalism as we know it today would become Europe’s dominant system.

Tilly rightly points out to the fact that empires seemed the most efficient organizations during the ninth - thirteenth centuries and that national states took that role decisively only in the nineteenth century. But then, why should one dissociate political forms from the socio-economic systems to which they correspond? Isn’t this tantamount to saying that empires proved to be the most efficient state organization for feudal systems, while centralized states are the forms which fit well with capitalism?

Tilly’s overriding concern to show that inter-state relations play a decisive role in making certain state forms prevail has led him to leave many questions unanswered, for it is not enough to note that those states which failed to adopt to the new national form perished, but one needs to see that many states that did adopt to that form prematurely, i.e. before developing social relations, structures and mechanisms conducive to capitalism entered into deep crises because this centralized structure did not reflect the existing relations and realities within the ‘national space’. Indeed the example he uses to show how compelling the “national state system” has become to others following the Napoleonic wars is very significant. Most of Spanish America declared independence after Spain was defeated by Napoleon. Yet the ‘efficiency’ of the national state in the Latin American context of the early nineteenth century needs to be demonstrated.

What are the implications of Tilly’s seemingly ad hoc definitions? We have two distinct categories neatly separated from each other, but always coexisting: coercion and capital. On coercion “Europe created two major overlapping groups of
specialists in coercion: soldiers and great landlords" (p. 19), while capitalists, as we have noted "are people who specialize in the accumulation, purchase and sale of capital. They occupy the realm of exploitation, where the relations of production and exchange themselves yield surpluses" (p. 17). According to the above, feudalism ceases to be a system based upon relations of production and exchange that are no less authentic than those under capitalism. Feudalism belongs to the realm of coercion and not exploitation.

What Tilly overlooks here is the fact that coercion is meaningless were it not the means to extract more rent. However, coercion is not the regulating mechanism of the feudal system. Just like capitalism, where a worker is ‘free’ to starve if he does not work for a capitalist, a serf, even if not threatened by coercive means, has no means of living other than working for a landlord. And free peasants have to accomplish services for the lord because they have to put themselves under the ‘protection’ of a lord for fear of other predators. Revolts waged by serfs, or coercion deployed by the landlord are means to enforce better conditions for the respective parties within the existing structure of relations of production. Coercion, moreover, just like the various penalties and laws under capitalism, is a necessary means to ensure the more or less smooth functioning of the whole system.

Tilly’s definitions are therefore not just ad hoc ones. A little scrutiny would show that he has produced an excellent description, but his major arguments are nothing but absurd tautology. If coercion is identical with the authority of big landlords, then we are talking about feudalism, so we will have the coercion intensive path (which is not a path after all) to denote feudalism, capital intensive path = capitalism, and a feudal - capitalist path? Certainly, an expert in European history knows that landlords ceased to exist (or at least lost any coercive potential) long before the rise of capitalism. Then we are left with the other leg of the coercive apparatus: soldiers.

But Tilly very rightly reminds us that this institution - the army - has not remained the same over the one thousand year span that his book covers. From patrimonialism to brokerage, then to nationalization, and finally to specialization, one cannot assume that the interests which this institution has defended or expressed, or the social origins of its members, remained the same over time, nor were the coercive functions that it performed. Therefore, rather than being an explanatory factor itself, coercion needs to be explained, in the sense that it is not a goal in itself, but is needed to preserve something, in the interests of someone. This is not the case according to Tilly, for he reserves coercion for pre-capitalism. As for capitalism, coercion is an extraneous element, since the capitalist intensive path, in his view, is the one we had in the Dutch and Italian city - states. So there is a “pure”, non-coercive, but “exploitative” path followed here. Suppose we return to the familiar concepts (landlord domination = feudalism, capitalist domination = capitalism).

His three paths now would bring us back to:

1. Feudal states, with their feudal relations of production, feudal dominant classes, and their necessary oppressive apparatuses;

2. Autonomously organized trading posts, which despite occasional conflicts with the surrounding feudal world, served its needs and did not represent a capitalist system (as Tilly imagines). These posts preserved their autonomy simply because they maneuvered their way among the various rivals and because they performed essential services for the nobility; and
3. Capitalist states, with their capitalist relations of production, capitalist dominant classes, and their necessary oppressive apparatuses. The last variant eventually prevailed over other forms, because capitalism was the system to prevail.

To sum up, let us state first the necessity and validity of rejecting the instrumentalist view of the state as a reflection of the interests of some reified dominant class, its ‘chief of staff’ as Lenin put it. First because fractions of a dominant class sharing basic ultimate interests need not, and do not in fact, share the same world views on, and interests in perhaps all other aspects. Second, because this dominant class does not live in a void, and its interests are constrained by the existence of a multitude of other actors in society.

This should bring us to a second statement, that in order to preserve its viability, the state, or a political system has to regulate social conflicts in such a way that expresses the existing power relations between, within and among classes and fractions of classes. Third, as the state, that is the political level of social activity, acquires its relative autonomy from the ideological and economic spheres, which has only become possible with the rise of capitalism, state officials, state bureaucrats, and political leaders tend to develop some *esprit de corps* or bureaucratic ethos. But this is entirely different from saying that these officials, bureaucrats or leaders have interests, or views that are totally distinct from all other agents in society. Let us present the constraints and autonomous margin of the state in the following crude way: number 6 is different from each of the following numbers: 9, 7 and 2. But it is the simple average of these three figures. It is closer to 7 and 9 than to number 2. Although the resultant or average figure is none of the ones that made it, it nevertheless reflects the average of these.

The various versions of the statist views do not necessarily overlook the social structures within a given society. For just as the instrumentalist view derives the state from a dominant class interests, there is the no less instrumentalist statist view, whereby ‘strong’, despotic or ‘developmental’ states or leaders mold societies and shape them according to their interests.

Predictably, this is the view that we will meet when discussing the literature on the ‘third world’ in general, and the Middle East in particular. But in between these divergent opposite views, there is a wide nuance of theories which depart from what is claimed to be a ‘classical’ development through which Europe and the advanced capitalist world has passed, while claiming that the modalities of today’s third world development no longer permit this. The reasons for this supposed divergence may be the reinvoked Asiatic mode of production, or simply some culturally inherent traits that hinder any ‘normal’ development, or the impact of colonialism and imperialism. In the following chapters, I will address the ramifications of the doubly mistaken reading of history that we discussed earlier. This time we will see how this reading has managed to produce a highly distorted- but influential- narrative on the relationship between state and society in the Middle East.