Review Essay

Comments on Pre-Capitalist Iran: A Theoretical History

Ali Akbar Mahdi

Abbas Vali’s Pre-Capitalist Iran: A Theoretical History represents a continuation of the debate among neo-Marxist scholars on the epistemological and theoretical status of the concept “pre-capitalist mode of production.” This debate began in the 1970s and has generated numerous studies of the non-capitalist production system. More specifically, Abbas Vali’s work is a post-Althusserian analysis of pre-capitalist Iran, drawing heavily from Barry Hindess and Paul Q. Hirst’s formalist discursive theory.¹ Discourse is viewed as the medium of both theoretical and practical knowledge. Rejecting traditional empiricist historiography, Vali characterizes the modern historiography of Iran as “genealogies of the present rather than studies of the past.”² He rejects “the unassailable status of the fact” as either the means or the object of evaluation of historical knowledge. Facts are discursive constructs that are only meaningful in reference to a specific epistemology. Conceptual elements of discourse are logically related and may be tested only “... in and through the forms of discourse ... in which they are constituted.”³ Hence, history becomes a theoretical enterprise, and the “truth” and “relevance” of historical facts are determined by the specific conceptual framework employed by the historian.

2. Vali, Pre-Capitalist Iran, p. xi.

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After defining his theoretical approach in the Preface, Vali examines various theories of Iranian pre-capitalism in Chapter I. Inappropriately lumping them into two "convenient" categories of "the Soviet" and "the Asiatic" models (not all proponents of those models are Marxist, let alone Soviet-oriented), Vali discusses these theories, traces their European and Soviet origins, rejects their empiricist emphasis on the correspondence of the "theory" and the "reality," and criticizes their teleological and essentialist characters. According to Vali, by treating the "reality" of Iranian history as "an effect of its similarity/dissimilarity with European history," these theorists "displace the 'specificity' of Iranian history in favor of its 'uniqueness'" and thus deny its independent discursive reality. The chapter offers an overview of the literature on Iranian pre-capitalism and provides a clear analysis of the problem of political essentialism in both sets of theories utilizing the feudal and Asiatic modes of production.

Chapter II examines the Asiatic mode of production concept. Reviewing both classical and contemporary Marxist views of this concept, Vali reiterates Hindess and Hirst's conclusion that the concept "is not only theoretically inconsistent but also discursively incoherent." It inappropriately assumes a centralized state affecting particular form of social relations of production devoid of a class component. To Vali, that is a logical impossibility. After discussing the paradoxical treatment of this concept by Perry Anderson and his implicit Eurocentrism, and explaining several theoretical disjunctions in the classical Marxist concepts of pre-capitalist modes, Vali offers an overview and a critique of Ahmad Ashraf's synthetic notion of Iran's pre-constitutional period (pre-1906) as "Asiatic patrimonial despotism" and Homa Katouzian's conception of the "Aridisolatic society." Vali finds Katouzian's model as geographically determinist, theoretically inconsistent, and "calculatedly" oblivious to the nature of property and exchange relations in the production process. Based on a Weberian notion of economic rationality, Ashraf's model also is incapable of explaining the actual character of pre-capitalist economic relations in pre-modern Iran. Both these theories fail to appropriately characterize the economic components of the relationship between the state and producers.

Chapter III begins with a critical examination of the feudal mode of production and the current theories of pre-capitalism in Iran. Building on the frameworks developed in his previous chapters, Vali seeks to "bridge the gap between the classical Marxian and Weberian theories of economic history" as discussed in his latest works. By integrating both approaches, Vali proposes a more comprehensive framework for understanding the development of capitalism in Iran.

5. Ibid, p. 32.
production concept as used by Karl Marx, E. A. Kosminsky, and Perry Anderson. Finding numerous theoretical inadequacies in the application of the concept by these theorists, Vali then examines the application of the concept of "feudalism" to Iran by Russian Iranologist, I. P. Petrushevsky and Iranian economist Farhad Nomani. Petrushevsky's concept of feudalism is found to be "discursively incoherent" and "theoretically inconsistent" for the inclusion of tax-rent in feudal rent, displacement of the conditions of existence of feudal landed property, inadequate understanding of serfdom in Iran, and dependence on a particular interpretation of the Mongol era. Nomani's theory also is criticized for lacking a discursive existence independent of a particular reading of Iranian history and for not defining the concept of feudal rent in accordance to Marxist theory. The problem common to both these theorists is their discursive attempt "to establish a correspondence between Iranian history and the general concept of the feudal mode of production as a universal historical phenomenon." For Vali, in the absence of seigneurial power and a clear legal definition of relations of domination and subordination between the landlord and peasant, it is theoretically impossible for the classical Marxists to establish the existence of a feudal social formation in Iran, not until the concept is treated as an economic category encompassing the forms and outcome of class struggle between labourers and non-labourers in the social formation at large.

Dissatisfied with the political essentialism of the classical Marxist concept of the feudal mode of production, Vali in Chapter IV examines Marx, Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, Hindess and Hirst, J. E. Martin, and Keith Tribe's conceptualization of feudal rent and the role of the land-owing class and


the direct producer in the process of production. Vali problematizes the status of the notion of non-separation of the direct producers and introduces an economic concept of feudal rent necessary for conceptualization of feudal mode of production—a notion based on the economic subsumption of the direct producer in the process of production. This rent is derived from the ownership of the land and not the right of exclusion often attributed to the juridico-political relations of private property in pre-capitalist societies.

In Chapter V Vali discusses the pre-capitalist Iranian land grant system known as iqta. Discussing both the bureaucratic and feudal theories of iqta, Vali argues that historical writings on the nature and development of the iqta in pre-constitutional Iran are based on the myth of a centralized despotic state. Examining Anderson’s notion of Islamic state, Mann’s conceptualization of the military-political as the necessary economic condition of production, and Lambton’s notions of iqta and the sovereign nature of power in Islamic societies, Vali argues against the historicist-essentialist interpretation of the iqta. According to Vali, the iqta should be viewed in terms of production and appropriation of land revenue based on the structure of possession in separation and not in terms of the sovereignty of the state.

Chapter VI problematizes “the juridico-political and economic conditions of existence of land assignments” by re-examining the historical roots of the notion of the “absolute ownership” in medieval Islamic political discourse. Analyzing Nizam ul-Mulk’s Siyasaat Nameh, Vali shows that this notion is derived from secular Persian sources and has no Islamic discursive autonomy. The historical condition giving rise to adoption of such a notion was secular, not religious, and based on the exigencies of autocratic rule.

Chapter VII examines the organization of agrarian production and various modes of appropriation of agricultural surplus in pre-capitalist Iran. In


particular, it discusses various theoretical, legal, and organizational aspects of sharecropping, fixed rent, and labor rent. Finally, in the concluding chapter, Vali pulls his arguments together and proposes a theoretical, abstract, and general discursive concept of Iranian feudalism—a concept based on feudal ground rent as “the condition of existence of feudal exploitation, resulting from and reproducing the possession of and separation from the land.”  

For Vali, Iranian pre-capitalism remains “feudal,” although for different reasons than those provided by other scholars who have employed this term.

Despite its dry subject and heavily theoretical language, this book is the most sophisticated theoretical Marxist analysis yet produced on the nature of pre-capitalism in Iran. Vali presents a challenging critical analysis of the two concepts of the Asiatic and feudal modes of production. He is thoughtful, knowledgeable, and “selective” in presentation of the data supporting his conceptualization. His argument about ground rent, reproductive conditions of labor, juridico-political conditions of land ownership, and land assignment often are compelling and undoubtedly will stimulate many useful discussions. Although the work suffers from its dissertation format, i.e., extensive overview of various theorists and repetition of the author’s thesis in every chapter, the work is well written and highly provocative.

Vali’s theoretical approach to the problem is so broad, crude, and “non-empirical” that it encompasses all historical epochs of pre-nineteenth century Iran. His “alternative theory” does not deal with numerous specificities of various dynasties, localities, periods, and socio-politico-economic formations. As recent studies have shown, the totality and immense diversity of the Iranian social formation in different eras cannot be captured by one single mode of production concept. The review of historical accounts about Iranian precapitalist productive structure reveals the existence of a variety of social relations of production. No single concept could actually cover all forms of social relationships of land-holding, land-assignment, landownership, and land tenure system throughout the long and varied history of Iranian pre-capitalism. A more inclusive approach to the problem has been the application of the concept of “social formation” as an entity consisting of one or more modes of production—an approach already used for Iranian pre-capitalism by Mahdi

and Foran. 15 This paradigm locates various forces of surplus appropriation and class relationships in the context of an articulated historical totality subject to the dynamics of temporal and spatial specificities.

To Vali’s disappointment, his characterization of pre-capitalist Iran does not move the debate on pre-capitalism beyond the existing deadlock. He simply moves the “feudal” argument to a higher level of analysis without ever breaking out of it. Pre-capitalist Iran still is identified uniformly as “feudal,” although for different and more sophisticated reasons. For Vali, the temporal and spatial aspects of a social formation does not matter at all. The terminology and conceptual framework he uses to explain the problem are grounded deeply in a formalistic Marxism unable to account for the elements of time and space or for the gap separating the subject and object in formation of historical knowledge. Vali’s highly abstract and theoretical approach continues to keep the debate at the intellectual and academic level. When “facts” take a back seat and theory and theoretical consistency become the only criteria for “relevance” and “truth,” then the heuristic constructs become reified and serve as, in Weber’s words, a “procrustean bed into which history is to be forced.”16 If the relevance and truth of theories are to be judged by their theoretical status, and not by some kind of reality, however it is construed, then where does this post-modernist approach take us?

In summary, this is a postmodernist Marxian analysis of the pre-capitalist modes of production controversy. Non-Marxists will be surprised that such arguments as found in this book are still made in the mid-1990s. The decline of the Soviet Union and the failure of many socialist economies around the world, accompanied by a return to economic privatization as a solution to stagnant Third World economies, raise serious questions for the analysis of social formations in these countries. Unfortunately, Vali fails to explain the “relevance” of this debate and the rekindling of an old fire at a time when sweeping global changes have transformed the character of the debate on Third World social formations.
