

ROUND TABLE

Writing Capitalism into Iran through the International

Kamran Matin

Sussex University, UK

(Received 4 February 2023; accepted 6 February 2023)

“Writing capitalism into Iran” arguably requires addressing a prior theoretical question regarding the origins and development of capitalism. This is because many of the existing analyses of Iran’s experience of capitalist modernity tend to uncritically deploy classical Marxist theories of capitalist development. This literature’s analytical problems, especially its recurrent recourse to exceptionalism, cannot be solved at the empirical or analytical level but rather at its intellectual roots in classical Marxism (see Samiee in this roundtable forum). This observation has been central to my research program. What follows is an extremely condensed genealogy of this research program and some of its analytical implications for Iranian studies.

My point of entry was political Marxism, a branch of Marxist theory that foregrounds class struggle and social property relations, rather than the expansion of commerce and trade, in theorizing the rise of capitalism.¹ Drawing on Marx’s later writings, *Capital* in particular, political Marxists argue that since exchange and trade have been features of all human societies, identifying capitalist development with the expansion of commerce dehistoricizes and therefore naturalizes capitalism. Instead, they argue that capitalism is the consequence of so-called primitive accumulation, that is, the separation of direct producers from the means of production following prolonged class struggle during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in England. The resulting agrarian capitalism later evolved into industrial capitalism. This argument had critical implications for literature on Iranian modernity, in which capitalism was considered to have emerged in Iran in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by virtue of the existence of the commercial bourgeoisie. This assumption is particularly visible in broadly Marxian accounts of the Constitutional Revolution as an unfinished or failed bourgeois revolution.²

Another important insight of political Marxism is that the separation of the economic and the political (i.e., the market and the state) that results from primitive accumulation is institutional and not structural. In other words, it is a differentiation within a totality.³ Therefore capitalism ought to be treated as an historically specific form of social totality, as a mode of

¹ Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin, 1985); Immanuel Wallerstein, “The Rise and Future Demise of the World Capitalist System: Concepts for Comparative Analysis,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 16, no. 4 (1974): 387–415; Robert Brenner, “The Origins of Capitalist Development: A Critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism,” *New Left Review* 104 (1977): 25–92.

² Ervand Abrahamian, “The Causes of the Constitutional Revolution in Iran,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 10, no. 3 (1979): 381–414; Ahmad Ashraf, “The Roots of Emerging Dual Class Structure in Nineteenth-Century Iran,” *Iranian Studies* 14, no. 1–2 (1981): 5–27.

³ Ellen Meiksins Wood, “The Separation of the Economic and the Political in Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 127 (1981): 66–95.

life rather than merely a system of production.⁴ The implication is that in discussing any national form of capitalism the economic and the political should not be treated as separate theoretical and analytical domains. This insight has crucial implications for recent debates on whether contemporary Iran can be described as “neoliberal” or not.⁵

In historicizing capitalism, political Marxism solved one problem but created another, for it theorized capitalist development in general by extrapolating from the English case. This internalist mode of theorization elided the intersocietal axis of causality, which, given that capitalism did not emerge everywhere simultaneously (its development was uneven), was too crucial to be theoretically neglected. This neglect of the intersocietal dimension of capitalist development was reproduced by the comparative method and diagnosed by postcolonialism as the source of Eurocentrism, and by implication of exceptionalism.⁶ These problems directly bear on our discussion, given that like all post-English cases Iranian capitalism (in the above sense of a sociopolitical totality) remains glaringly different from the historical English case despite its experience of primitive accumulation and market dependency, two pillars of political Marxism’s definition of capitalism mentioned in other contributions to this roundtable (see Harris, Maljoo, Mathee).

Postcolonial critiques of political Marxism focused my attention on the problem of internalism, the tendency to explain and theorize social and historical phenomena with reference to factors internal to a given society, a tendency that arguably marks the entire tradition of classical social theory, including historical materialism.⁷ Inspired by Marxian international historical sociology, I sought to overcome the shortcomings of internalism by integrating “the international” into social theory. The international refers to “that dimension of social reality that specifically arises from the existence within it of more than one society.”⁸ This pluralized social ontology extends Marxism’s conception of society to the level of humanity as a differentiated planetary formation. In short, the critique and supplantation of internalism require an ontological conception of the social and the intersocietal as mutually constitutive. In *Recasting Iranian Modernity*, I articulated this conception through augmenting historical materialism’s premise of double relationship into a triple relationship, to include intrasocietal, society–nature, and intersocietal relationships.⁹ This theoretical move also aids critical research on Iran’s contemporary ecological crisis and on the Anthropocene more generally.

The conceptual moves above are implicit in Leon Trotsky’s theory of uneven and combined development (UCD), which I have critically deployed in my research. UCD begins from societal multiplicity (unevenness) and captures its “consequences of difference, coexistence, interaction, combination, and dialectical change.”¹⁰ It registers and expresses the ontological condition of development as intrinsically interactive and multilinear.¹¹ The concrete forms and outcomes of uneven and combined development at each specific conjuncture or in each society are not pre-figured or pre-given in theory. They require concrete

⁴ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998).

⁵ Kayhan Valadbaygi, “Neoliberalism and State Formation in Iran,” *Globalizations*, January 17, 2022, doi: 10.1080/14747731.2021.2024391.

⁶ The comparative study is the relational study of objects in which their basic sameness and separateness are (falsely) assumed. J. M. Blaut, *The Colonizer’s Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History* (New York: Guilford Press, 1993).

⁷ Friedrich Tenbruck, “Internal History of Society or Universal History?” *Theory, Culture and Society* 11, no. 1 (1994): 75–93; Justin Rosenberg, “Why Is There No International Historical Sociology?” *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 3 (2006): 307–40.

⁸ Rosenberg, “Why Is There No International Historical Sociology?” 308.

⁹ Kamran Matin, *Recasting Iranian Modernity: International Relations and Social Change* (London: Routledge, 2013), 153–54.

¹⁰ Justin Rosenberg, “International Relations in the Prison of Political Science,” *International Relations* 30, no. 2 (2016): 135.

¹¹ Matin, *Recasting Iranian Modernity*, 16–17.

empirical analysis and critical theoretical imagination. The following points on the primary, general dynamics of UCD can nonetheless be made.

First, the historical development of a given society always takes place in interaction with other differentially constituted societies; it has an international dimension. This analytically external (but historically integral) aspect of internal social change is often empirically acknowledged in most analyses of Iran, but its historical and constitutive significance is conceptually unarticulated or construed as secondary or contingent. For example, the geopolitically defensive nature of Pahlavi modernization is routinely acknowledged, but the way in which this external dimension to Iran's modern development has impacted nearly all aspects of Iranian modernity has remained undertheorized.¹² The cultural and linguistic centralization of modern Iran from a multicultural society is a case in point to which I will return shortly.¹³

Second, all instances of capitalist development are initiated within an international context already overdetermined by earlier instances of capitalist development, which act as both a "whip of external necessity" and a "hostile tutor."¹⁴ This means that capitalist modernization after the English case tends to be state-driven and so externally defensive and internally coercive. Iran's modernization under the Pahlavis is emblematic of this circumstance. As a result, the new capitalist class tends to be politically and economically dependent on the state. This circumstance is reflected in inter alia the emergence of a comprador bourgeoisie in the Pahlavi period and of various governmental foundations in postrevolutionary Iran.

Third, central to combined development is the phenomenon of substitution, or the replacement of native and foreign phenomena for the agency, institutions, instruments, material, or methods of earlier processes of capitalist modernization in the West. Substitution necessarily generates amalgamated forms that are dynamically tension prone because they are inorganic to the late developing society; they have not developed from dynamics fully internal to that society. And herein lies the core contradiction underlying modern revolutions.¹⁵ A consequential form of substitution concerns the agents of primitive accumulation, which in England was carried out by the emerging capitalist bourgeoisie, but in later cases by nonbourgeois actors, for instance, Junkers aristocracy (Prussia), Tsarist absolutism (Russia), and Pahlavi autocracy (Iran). And this has had profound implications for modern class formation and class struggle in both Europe and the Global South. For example, in Iran the state's self-substitution for capitalist classes in the course of industrialization has amplified the sociopolitical effects of Iran's oil-based rentier economy.

Moreover, substitution is bound up with a historical resequencing of the social and political moments of the English experience of capitalist development such that they either unfold in parallel (e.g., Bismarckian Germany) or are reversed (e.g., France, Russia, Japan, China, Turkey, Iran). In Iran primitive accumulation as the basis of capitalist development was preceded by the formation of a centralized nation-state that, following consolidation, undertook primitive accumulation as a passive revolution.¹⁶ This had a crucial consequence: the abstract individual (generated by primitive accumulation) that subtended England's imperial nation formation was substituted by the impersonal collective of an ethnoculturally or linguistically defined nation. The reason for this substitution is that primitive accumulation would have destroyed the precapitalist social basis on which the modernizing state and

¹² Touraj Atabaki and Erik J. Zürcher, *Men of Order: Authoritarian Modernization under Atatürk and Reza Shah* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004).

¹³ Afshin Marashi, *Nationalizing Iran: Culture, Power, and the State, 1870-1940* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008).

¹⁴ Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution* (London: Pluto, 1985), 26-27.

¹⁵ Matin, *Recasting Iranian Modernity*.

¹⁶ For a discussion of "passive revolution," see Antonio Gramsci, *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935*, ed. David Forgacs (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1999), 250.

its noncapitalist privileged classes rested. In multicultural contexts like Iran this process involved the ethnocultural hierarchization of different peoples inhabiting the territory of the emerging unitary nation–state. And this in turn led to nonsovereign peoples’ cultural othering, political minoritization, and (geo)political securitization, spurring the rise of subaltern nationalisms. Consequently, the national(ities) question continues to have strategic implications for any democratic and anticapitalist project in Iran and much of the non-Western world. An important case in point is the Kurdish question in Iran, and the Middle East more generally.

It can therefore be seen that UCD can historicize the formation of the nation as a distinctly modern phenomenon even in sociologically nonmodern contexts.¹⁷ This challenges those strands of Iranian nationalism in which Iran as a nation(–state) is dehistoricized; a circumstance that obscures the immense violence involved in its political construction and function as a “surrogate colonial state.”¹⁸ However, it should be emphasized that the novel relationships, forms, and dynamics that UCD generates can be neither derived solely from the social structures and institutions internal to the society in question, nor resolved back to preexisting capitalist forms elsewhere with which they are contemporaneous. They emerge and evolve in each society’s interaction with other societies. Internalist classical social theory, including Marxism, does not theoretically digest but instead negatively describes, normatively pathologizes, and analytically exceptionalizes these fusions.

A prima facie case can therefore be made that UCD offers critical intellectual resources for a new, more reflexive and critical project of “writing capitalism into Iran,” for it overcomes Eurocentrism (as a particular form of internalism) and therefore its analytical discourse of obstacles to or anomalies of non-Western forms of capitalist development. At the same time, it also enables the operation of a general analytics that foregrounds capitalism but avoids both abstract universalism (which postcolonialism correctly critiques) and postcolonialism’s own tendency toward cultural essentialism and normative relativism.¹⁹

¹⁷ Kamran Matin, “Deciphering the Modern Janus: Societal Multiplicity and Nation-Formation,” *Globalizations* 17, no. 3 (2020): 436–51.

¹⁸ Afshin Marashi, “Paradigms of Iranian Nationalism: History, Theory and Historiography,” in *Rethinking Iranian Nationalism and Modernity*, ed. Kamran Scot Aghaie and Afshin Marashi, 3–24 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2014).

¹⁹ Kamran Matin, “Redeeming the Universal: Postcolonialism and the Inner Life of Eurocentrism,” *European Journal of International Relations* 19, no. 2 (2013): 353–77.