

Peter von Sivers

Prolegomena to a Study of Traditional Social Formation in the Middle East and North Africa

Während der Zeitperiode vom fünfzehnten bis zum neunzehnten Jahrhundert waren der Vordere Orient und Nordafrika im Vergleich mit Europa oder dem Fernen Orient relativ dünn besiedelte Regionen, mit nur etwa einem Fünftel der Siedlungsdichte auf der landwirtschaftlichen Nutzfläche. In diesem Beitrag wird argumentiert, daß Siedlungsdichte und Sozialformation eine Einheit bilden, insofern Demographie, Technologie, Urbanisierung, politische Integration und kulturelle Einheit in jeder funktionsfähigen Gesellschaft mehr oder weniger eng aufeinander abgestimmt sind. Für die historische Entwicklung des Vorderen Orients und Nordafrikas waren geringe Bevölkerungsdichte, einige wenige aber hochproduktive auf Bewässerung gegründete Landwirtschaftszentren sowie eine kleine Zahl städtischer Metropolen charakteristisch, in denen Politik und Kultur von relativ kleinen Eliten beherrscht wurden. Es ist diese Entwicklung, die heute den speziellen Traditionsbestand der Region bestimmt und von der die Modernisierung ausgeht.

Are burgeoning masses necessarily hazardous to economic development? One is inclined to nod an emphatic yes to this question, with visions of ballooning birth rates, shrinking infant death rates, teeming cities and mass unemployment in the Third World in one's mind. Yet why then did the Middle East and North Africa, that is, the area comprising the heartlands of Islamic Civilization, not develop economically during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when population figures still were not dramatically higher than during medieval times? Surprisingly, as far as I know, this question has never been systematically addressed, either by social scientists dealing with the contemporary period or by historians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the Middle East and North Africa. To be sure, there is a plenitude of explanations for what is generally regarded as the »stagnation« or even »decline« of the area after its medieval efflorescence, but no more than two or three scholars have ever confessed to suspicions of a demographic connection in the story and so far no one has analyzed the possibility that the roots of underdevelopment in Western terms may lie in sparse and unevenly distributed populations (Dols, 1979; Miguel, 1968; Raymond, 1972). Social scientists and historians dealing with the Middle East and North Africa have been inexplicably oblivious to the historical demography of their area.

It can be estimated that during the period from 1400, when the worst ravages of the Black Death and its aftercycles ended, to 1880, when slow demographic rise gave way to more rapid expansion, the population density in most of the area increased from 7 to 14 persons per km² of cultivable land. Comparative estimates for Germany, France and England-Wales show increases from 18 to 75, 20 to 65 and 16 to 120. The Far East shows increases similar to Europe: India, China and Japan are estimated to have moved from 33 to 86, 20 to 108 and 33 to 86 persons/km². In the Middle East only one country, Egypt, came close to Europe and the Far East, with a density increase from 70 to 110 (McEvedy & Jones, 1978; cf. Issawi, 1981). Although in early modern times the Middle East and North Africa doubled their population densities, by 1880 the area was still relatively empty compared to much of the rest of the world.

In an important analysis of the connections between population and technological change Ester Boserup has distinguished between ten population density groups (Boserup, 1981). In terms of this analysis, the Middle East and North Africa can be said to have moved from group 4 to group 5, both of which are in the »sparse« category, during the period from 1400 to 1880. During the same period Europe and the Far East jumped from group 6 in the »medium« category to group 8 in the »dense« category. Although worthy of note, the population increases in our area did not reach the levels to which Europe and the Far East ascended.

In a slight modification of Boserup I am defining »sparse« populations as having been settled densely enough to have to practice agriculture but not as having been so crowded as to require dense urbanization. By »require« I am referring to the well-known historical phenomenon, according to which rising population densities stimulated the introduction of more complex forms of technology, that is, rising levels of specialization and productivity. As more mouths had to be fed, production was increased and diversified not only through an intensification of labor but also through the use of labor-saving instruments. Specialists trained in only a few skills obviously could produce more in a given time and with the help of improved tools than generalists without specific skills and with only basic implements. Historically it must be assumed that productive capabilities tended to rise in at least equal measures with population increases, otherwise it would be inexplicable why world population increased as it did from prehistory to the present in spite of famine, pestilence and plague. As far as the Middle East and North Africa from 1400 to 1880 were concerned, their relatively sparse population was characterized by a developed agricultural system based on irrigation. The population was not numerous enough to require a dense network of towns and cities.

The assumption of a rough balance between social resources and

productive capacities in the historical process sounds reasonable enough, yet it stands the conventional wisdom of Malthusian demography on its head (Simon, 1981). It is widely held that populations more or less constantly teeter along the razor's edge of overpopulation and starvation. Obviously, lists of individual incidents of famines and mass starvations can always be assembled from the historical sources in order to prove the malign effects of »overpopulation«. But it is difficult not to be impressed, for instance, by the ability of China between 1400 and 1880 to absorb a population increase of over 350 million (McEvedy & Jones, 1978). Similarly, the so-called LDCs have not only absorbed explosive population increases between 1950 and 1975 but have, in addition, managed to raise per capita production by 3 percent (Morawetz, 1978). Likewise, in a study of French-speaking African peoples it was found that the higher the population density was, the higher also the standard of living climbed (Stryker, 1977). Thus, if a narrow historical view is replaced with a more comprehensive one, Malthusianism no longer convinces.

In the Middle East and North Africa the »sparse« population, particularly in the hinterland away from the coasts, lived predominantly in villages or tent settlements. Prior to the change in transportation technologies in the nineteenth century, a town had a hinterland of no more than 200 km² or a circular area with a radius of 7-8 km (Boserup, 1981). This radius was the maximum distance a peasant could travel comfortably on a one-day round trip on foot or donkey-back, in order to trade food for clothes, tools and utensils on the town market (Clark, 1967). Under demographic conditions of sparsity, with a maximum of 16 persons/km², some 3,000 peasants and dependents inhabited an area of 200 km² and produced a food surplus of perhaps 10-15 percent, sufficient for 300-450 craftsmen and dependents (Clark and Haskell, 1970). Since agglomerations of a few hundred craftsmen families could not really be called towns it is clear that the countries of the area in the period from 1400-1880 were still a good distance away from the need for a dense urban network.

However, North Africa nevertheless possessed an urban civilization which compared well to Europe and the Far East in terms of both size and degree of specialization, from crafts to international commerce, at least until the middle of the nineteenth century. How was it that comparatively empty countries with little demographic need for towns and cities were able to maintain such a highly developed urban life? The answer is that access to the Mediterranean gave cities a much larger radius from which to procure food. Secondly, in the interior, intensified agriculture based on irrigation at a small number of favorable river locations supported locally higher population densities within the 7-8 km range and therefore urban centers with viable craftsmen populations. With the help of comparatively inexpensive sea and river transport and locally intensified

agriculture means existed to overcome what would otherwise have been unfavorable demographic conditions and maintain a limited urban culture.

The towns and cities were organized around a local market which brought the farmers and craftsmen together for an exchange of their more or less specialized goods: the market integrated the rural and urban population of a given region. In the areas away from the urban centers where the population had no direct contact with the urban market and the technological improvements it offered, peasants remained largely self-sufficient, producing most of their food, tools and household requirements themselves, and had to turn over most of the money which they received from travelling traders to tax officials. In return for their taxes in money and in kind the peasants received the benefits of central rule and protection - dubious returns at best. While in the rural-urban centers peasants and craftsmen were integrated with each other through the market, no such integration existed between the coastal and riverain cities and surrounding peasantries outside the 7-8 km radii.

In a strict sense these Middle Eastern and North Africa peasants were not a great deal different between 1400 and 1880 from their colleagues in Europe and the Far East. Self-sufficiency peasants reluctantly paying taxes to alien urban-based rulers for little in return were an almost universal phenomenon in the broad belt of Eurasia and northern Africa where wheat and rice agriculture were practiced. One set of rulers after another struggled to create and maintain military and fiscal unity in territories which were far from possessing integrated systems of production and exchange. Although these rulers furthered urbanization as a means to bring about integration, for lack of demographic mass they never progressed very far. Imperial conquest, in which rulers in search of a shortcut towards urbanization typically engaged during the period 1400-1880 allowed for a quick acquisition of cities, but this only increased the problem of integration. The Ottoman Empire and the Mamluk, Qaramanli, Hafsid, Zayanid, Wattasid, Husayni, Janissary, Sandi and °Alawi regimes in northern Africa between 1400 and 1880 were no exceptions. What made them noteworthy was that they pursued urbanization under the particularly unfavorable demographic circumstances of sparse populations which were characteristic for the Middle East and North Africa from 1450 to 1880. If they failed, they did so more honorably than the *anciens régimes* of southern Europe, India or China with their much higher population densities.

Why populations in the area were so sparse in early modern times is a question for which current scholarship has not yet provided satisfactory answers. The causes most often evoked for the Middle East are misrule, corruption and overtaxation. At first glance these causes sound plausible

enough: generations of orientalists have elaborated them and they seem to have strong foundations in the primary sources. However, on closer investigation it becomes clear that they are not specific enough. Misrule, corruption and overtaxation - from a nineteenth- or twentieth-century Eurocentric viewpoint - were general phenomena in all empires and dynastic realms between the periods of the ancient city-states and the modern national states. (And one might add that contemporary states are not entirely immaculate in this regard.) Some authors have even been tempted to regard these causes as ingredients of politics as such which thus assumed the features of a »macroparasitism« (McNeill, 1976). One would want to have precise quantitative proof for why, for instance, the *ancien régime* in France was less oppressive and therefore more conducive to demographic increase than the Ottoman Empire. Or, was China in the seventeenth century such a model of strong leadership, honesty and moderate taxation that it could double its population as a reward? Unfortunately there are no sources which tell us that peasants had larger or smaller families depending on the competence or incompetence of their rulers, honesty or dishonesty of their officials, and lower or higher tax rates. Quite possibly their family planning had very little to do with the imperial regime under which they lived and all the more with the local communities which defined their self-sufficiency (Musallam, 1981). In short, the argument of misrule, corruption and overtaxation is too un-specific for, and perhaps even inapplicable to, the question of growing or stagnating population densities.

More serious is the argument of cycles of epidemics which, as is now generally believed, were more or less connected with each other in the various parts of the Eurasian-North African belt since the beginning of the Christian era and which periodically interfered with the overall rising population curve (Durand, 1977). These epidemics were the unintended by-products of the imperial age when international merchants unwittingly brought the rodents and fleas of Africa and Central Asia to the urban centers of the Middle and Far East as well as to Europe. The Middle East and India, located at the heart of this traffic, apparently had to endure the plagues - the first beginning in 165 AD and the second in 1347 - as well as their aftercycles longer than the more isolated areas of Europe, China and Japan at the ends of the trade belt (McNeill, 1976). As far as modern times are concerned, the Middle East and North Africa were still experiencing regular outbreaks of bubonic plague in the eighteenth century while Europe had become almost plague-free (Dols, 1979). It seems that in the imperial age the price paid for urbanization, conquest and international trade was mutual adjustment of the populations to epidemics. Apparently the disease pools of the world had to be exchanged before the population curve could climb decisively (Deevey, 1960). This

exchange may perhaps be seen as but one of the severe yet unavoidable consequences of imperial expansion.

The analysis of the probable causes and actual consequences of low social resources in the Middle East and North Africa offered here is meant to serve as a basis for a definition of »traditional« economy and politics as they evolved from 1400 to 1880. In a broad sense this traditional socio-economic and political system of the area can be described as having had a social foundation of sparsely settled local tent or village communities. On this foundation a largely self-sufficient economy was built in which the local communities provided for most of their food, shelter and clothing needs themselves. There were scattered pockets in the interior of the area where more densely settled villages were integrated with urban settlements, but as a rule these rural-urban communities were small, particularly in North Africa, and self-sufficiency was only partially replaced by marked exchange. Large integrated rural-urban areas with towns or cities and developed market systems, located along the coast or navigable rivers, were few and far between. The social base carried an economic superstructure of either self-sufficiency or limited market exchange »embedded« in self-sufficiency (Polanyi, 1968).

Islamic imperial politics, as represented by the various ruling classes, were predicated on unevenly distributed populations engaged in self-sufficiency production. The rulers were centered in maritime or riverain metropolises which were considerably larger than warranted by local social resources and market economics. They collected taxes in kind and money from distant self-sufficiency peasants in order to feed the inhabitants of the metropolises, finance the importation of luxuries and pay for foreign ruling class recruitment. The strength of imperial politics depended to a large degree on the commitment of the ruling class to stay aloof from both local self-sufficiency production and market exchange, hence the need for transplanted people of foreign extraction with no local roots for military and administrative functions. Imperial politics were an elaborate instrument for imposing at least a semblance of military and fiscal unification on socially and economically fragmented territories.

With this description of the traditional system of socio-economic and political organization in the Middle East and North Africa during the period 1400-1880 I have tried to lay the foundation for a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon of tradition in the Middle East and North Africa. If this system can be convincingly demonstrated as having been characterized by such interrelated factors as low demographic density, prevalence of self-sufficiency, technology based on animal and water power, limited urban-rural integration and the primacy of imperial (military and fiscal) policies of rulers in the rural hinterland of their realms it will be possible to tackle the complicated question, raised at the beginning

of this contribution, of the reasons for the specific evolutionary process which the traditional Middle East and North Africa followed. In this process social resources and level of technology, technology and level of rural-urban integration, integration and level of political centralization, centralization and level of cultural homogeneity had to be matched carefully with each other. It is by no means clear whether these levels were altogether lower than during the period prior to 1400, as the standard orientalist wisdom has it. The »stagnation« or even »decline« of which the orientalists speak is usually predicated on isolated facts rather than on the full range extending from culture all the way to social resources, as developed above. A study of these factors in all their interrelationships is required before a true picture of the so-called traditional process of social formation from 1400 to 1880 can be developed. The purpose of this contribution is to draw attention to one pair of interrelated factors, social resources and technology, within the larger historical context.

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