

MODERNITIES COMPARED: STATE TRANSFORMATIONS
AND CONSTITUTIONS OF PROPERTY IN THE
QING AND OTTOMAN EMPIRES

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Modernity has long been the preserve of Europe. Social science perspectives on modernization that have shaped the categories of historical analysis since the nineteenth century have excluded the Ottoman and the Chinese empires from mappings of modernity.¹ Instead, the two empires are designated as part of an undifferentiated and ahistorical domain of the East, characterized by what it lacks: individual ownership of property, rational organization of market activity, and rational bureaucratic forms of government. This construct of the East provides a contrast to an equally abstract domain of the West (including western Europe and its extensions in the United States) privileged with the presence of modern forms. This high drama of absences and presences of idealized properties has been instrumental in legitimating European domination of the East. The notion of oriental despotism has been a central feature of that legitimation.² In Asia it facilitated the setting up of colonial administrations that could be identified as rational and bureaucratic, as opposed to the arbitrary rule of the despot and the constraints that such rule imposed on social and economic progress. At the same time, once Asia was frozen in an imagined straitjacket of Oriental Despotism, any indigenous transformation of statecraft in modern times was dismissed, either as not conforming to the bureaucratic rational model (as was the case for China) or as a poor and ineffective aping of the European model (as was the case for the Ottoman Empire). On the whole, Oriental Despotism became a short-hand explanation for why Asia did not develop.

¹ Brian Turner, *Marx and the End of Orientalism* (London, 1978).

² Huri Islamoglu-Inan, "Introduction" in *Ottoman Empire and the World Economy*, ed. H. Islamoglu-Inan (Cambridge, 1987); Peter Perdue, "Constructing Chinese Property" in *Constitutions of Property in Comparative Perspective*, ed. H. Islamoglu (London, forthcoming 2001).

This paper addresses the experiences of modernity of the Ottoman and Qing Empires in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. It will focus on statecraft, or practices of governing or ordering social reality. More specifically, it will focus on administrative rulings or law and procedures which ordered and defined property relations on land. The idea behind this undertaking is to formulate an understanding of modernity that is historical and contingent, and that does not confine modern transformations in the governing of social reality to the European experience, or treat the experience of non-European regions as derivative. What is proposed instead is a shared experience of modernity, with multiple paths of modern transformations. The comparison of modern transformations in statecraft in two non-European regions provides an important starting point for bringing into focus the universality of the experience of modernity, beyond the narrow confines of western Europe.

Methodologically, this venture calls for setting aside analysis that has its starting point in ideal types—a check-list of modern properties generally associated with the nineteenth-century European experience in state-building and its colonial extensions. These properties have been appropriated and mobilized to support diverse political and ideological positions. For example, the ideal type of the centralized bureaucratic government has not only been part of a vocabulary of European domination, it has also been assimilated in defensive renderings of non-European histories that seek to show that this form of government existed in Asia long before it did in Europe.

Contemporary critics of modern statecraft, most recently James C. Scott,³ also take the bureaucratic organization of society to be a defining feature of modernity. For Scott, it was the administrative and legal practices of modern statecraft which simplified, standardized, uniformized and therefore rationalized social relations, including property and taxation relations, and rendered them administratively legible and accessible to state control. Thus, standardization and uniformization differentiated modern administration from pre-modern statecraft. The latter was characterized by an inability to cut through the web of particularistic customary practices making up the myriad of property arrangements and to establish its claims of taxation and surveillance over society. In fact, in Scott's analysis, the binary contrast between modern and pre-modern statecraft parallels the East/West dichotomy of modernization theory.

³ James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, 1998).