

Karl August Wittfogel. *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power*. New Haven, USA: Yale University Press. 1957 (Reprinted 1981). 550 pages. USD 119 (Paperback).

Karl A. Wittfogel, famously known for his hydraulic thesis, was a German historian and sinologist. In his book, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power*, he has given a comprehensible account of social, political, and economic history of Asian societies. The book offers a study of the development of totalitarian rule in hydraulic societies. He refers to the Asian societies as hydraulic societies, as they control the population by maintaining control over supply of water and irrigation system. The book focuses on different factors that invited totalitarian rule in these societies. Influenced by the classical economists, Wittfogel argues that large irrigation systems tend to win large lands and an expansion and acquirement of large areas is the development of managerial form of administration.

Wittfogel argues that the natural setting is a major determinant of the economies of oriental societies. In Asian societies, highly developed irrigation systems provided basis for the hydraulic agriculture and it eventually preserved the patterns of despotic government. In the first chapter, he shows how natural resources have played a remarkable role in highly developed irrigation systems. In the second chapter, he describes the process of division of labour and how it is, along with cooperation, the key to modern industries. Wittfogel claims that highly developed irrigation systems of Asian societies were the basis of the political economy of these economies. While establishing this as the basic argument of the book, in the next four chapters, he describes the rise of strong state, strong despotic power, total terror, and total submission of society to highly concentrated power. In chapter seven he provides institutional analysis not only in the context of agro-managerial apparatus but also its proprietary development. He examines the pattern of private property, which emerged under the agro-managerial despotism. In chapter eight, he analyses societal orders, viewing the position of state as the one practicing maximum control. After presenting an historical context, in chapter nine, he describes the Asiatic mode of production from a socialist's, an economist's, and an historian's points of view. In chapter ten, he elaborates some key aspects of a society, such as the development of the society, its specific and non-specific elements, and perspectives of hydraulic society in transition.

Oriental Despotism, to some extent, is a successful effort by the author. Wittfogel has discussed how sources and supply of water for irrigation were the basis of Asiatic mode of production, which eventually led to despotic empires and bureaucracy. Referring to the Oriental society as a hydraulic society, he has tried to introduce his theory of hydraulic monopoly. The author accentuates that in Asian societies, the highly developed irrigation system as a mode of production had determined the character of political control. In the same context, he endeavours to explain agro-managerial and agro-bureaucratic characteristics of the Asian societies. He propounds that agriculture as a mode of production determined the character of political control. He derives his inspiration from Montesquieu and Karl Marx. On the same lines, he tries to show that climatic conditions and landscape also influence the customs, laws, and intellectual

facets of a society. In the very context, he provides individual examples in order to explain specific hydraulic order of life.

Wittfogel has compared the Eastern hydraulic societies with the Western capitalist societies based on totalitarian and democratic rules. The crux of his argument is that the hydraulic civilisations are static in nature, hence they are destined to be ruled by despotic authorities and can only be exposed to democratic rule through imperialist intervention. According to him, only exposure to democratic rule cannot provide the surety of establishment of electoral government. He asserts that the structure of Oriental societies is rigid to an extent that democracy requires further evolution to take hold in these societies. Describing the democracy in Oriental societies as beggar's democracy, he diverges from his basic point, which is that the Asian societies are unable to develop the true spirit of democracy. On the other hand, patronising Russia as a semi-hydraulic society, the book describes how anti-totalitarian forces brought anti-Asiatic society revolution in Russia in 1917, a prediction made for India by Karl Marx. Spotlighting the importance of the Western concepts of private property and democracy, Wittfogel has shown how it influences non-colonised countries, as it is clear from the Russian culture. According to him, revolutions in hydraulic societies are not really revolutions because they originate from controlled hydraulic economy and only imperialist interventions can expand the horizon of societies for liberal democracy. Giving his comparative analysis of power in western and eastern societies, he claims that the Western democratic system is in fear of being contaminated by the system of totalitarianism of the Asian societies.

According to Wittfogel, the vicious seeds of total power were sown in hydraulic civilisation. This is the reason despotic empires have proved to be a poor form of rule in the Oriental societies. There is intra-bureaucratic competition in hydraulic bureaucracies and despotic rulers are not benevolent in these states. As the people are totally subdued by this totalitarian power, different attempts by virtuous colonialists to modernise their possessive societies were not persuasive in the past. Hence, after decolonisation hydraulic societies again regressed to their traditional structure, though some societies maintained pseudo-democracy. These absolutist regimes were free to alter law. History is full of examples of how one-sided constitution regulation has played a role to subdue the people. Colonial rule gave rise to government that was a mixture of Oriental and Occidental despotism. Few hydraulic societies developed the democratic system when reforms were introduced by the colonial masters, for example, in India and Indonesia while the same did not occur in Mexico and Peru.

Even though Wittfogel is quite objective in describing the setup of hydraulic societies, he is silent on many issues. After describing the nature of hydraulic societies, the author has stuck with his theory that imperialist intervention is the only way to change the static nature of hydraulic societies. The book turns out to be a description of struggle between good Occidental and bad Oriental. According to him, if the colonial power fails to bring change in colonised societies, it is a loss for the Oriental societies that they failed to apply democratic model in its true spirit. He totally deviates from objectivity in an effort to describe the concept of total power. Describing the Russian communist regime as the manager of total power, he ventures to assert that this kind of regime must be blown away by

democracy. When the question of hydraulic societies arises, he is hostage to his thesis in which he ascertains that these societies need democracy more severely than any other society, by colonial or imperialist intervention.

One may pause at the absurdity of claim that concept of totalitarian power is solely attached to the Asian societies. Wittfogel was a communist and was detained stay in a concentration camp by the Nazi Germany. It is striking to notice that in his comparison of total power, only the Asian societies are guilty of absolute power even though plantation slavery in America was one of the worst forms of human labour under the supervision of so-called enlightened masters. Also, one of the worst forms of totalitarian power was observed in the Nazi Germany. Despite the existence of such examples in history, totalitarian power holds a permanent value only in the Oriental societies according to the author. He hedges the concept of total power in compliance with the Eastern societies, describing culture, social norms and economics in the same context. The most conspicuous thing in this perspective is the universalisation of his theory.

While Wittfogel's book might be dated but his thesis is still relevant in the present age of post-colonialism. For example, in Pakistan, since its inception, the leadership, while claiming to be the custodian of people's power and interests, has meddled with the constitution and democratic framework. There has been a continuous struggle between political leadership and other institutions for arbitrary power. For the major part of the political history of Pakistan, the power has rested with non-political actors, who derive their ethos from the values of absolute power. The major source of income is traditional Asiatic mode of production, and form of governance has been despotic throughout Pakistan's history. In short, the arguments of Wittfogel resonates across the length and breadth of country when we observe the passive tussle that is still going on among various institutions of the country. Despite its obvious shortcomings, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* is alluring for geographers, historians, and economists alike as the author has tried his best to give a global point view of the societies, cultures, and economies. Though he has failed to offer implications of the concept presented in the book, still a discussion of several themes, such as the origin and evolution of society, economy, and politics, in a philosophical way can help to analyse history through Marxist lens to evaluate his theory.

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