

## ROUND TABLE

# Writing Capitalism into Iran: A Roundtable Discussion

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The Islamic Republic of Iran is confronting a crisis. Thousands of Iranians, within and without Iran, have taken to the streets to call for an end to a regime that sanctions violence against its citizens and a future of dwindling opportunity for its youth. These ongoing protests, catalyzed by the killing of Mahsa Amini, seem at once to have nothing and everything to do with the question motivating this roundtable: How can capitalism help us understand Iran, past or present? Some might argue that capitalism can scarcely act as a cipher for understanding recent unrest in Iran; it has hardly entered the slogans and symbolism of the protests, which decry police violence, state corruption, forced gender segregation, arbitrary punishment, and the greed of ruling military and religious elites more than they do a worldwide web of capitalist relations sustained by no single political party, religion, or country.

Does the absence of capitalism as an object of explicit critique in recent protests suggest that its analytical significance has been overstated? Why, in other words, should we convene a roundtable to write capitalism into Iranian history when demonstrating Iranians are writing their demands—for freedom, for life, for women’s rights—into the world without it? For one, any account of the recent protests must grapple with the ways in which the protracted erosion of rights and endemic economic crises have fed discontent. The ongoing protests are only the latest in a long series of recurring upheavals against the systemic social discrimination, political repression, and economic and cultural inequalities that have characterized Iran since the Pahlavi monarchy. The postrevolutionary state’s embrace of neoliberalism and structural adjustment policies after the end of the Iran–Iraq War in 1988 accelerated the privatization of urban, rural, and environmental commons. The loosening of labor laws and public regulations in the name of competitiveness and the withdrawal of social safety nets, a mainstay of the 1979 revolution’s moral economy, led to private speculations that further marginalized and pauperized much of the population. The unimpeded commodification of land and nature has generated environmental disasters and a seemingly insoluble housing crisis. Since the early 1990s, protesting Iranians have sought to reclaim the rights of social, political, economic, and environmental citizenship against not only the Islamic regime, but also the capitalist networks that underpin it.

But more importantly—and this has been a central motivation for the roundtable—capitalism’s opacity is part of its historical specificity. The apparent absence of a critique of capitalism in the ongoing protests is not accidental but symptomatic of the modes of contention and expression particular to life organized under capitalism. Scholars within the field of Iranian studies, we believe, have been handmaidens to this opacity, narrowing our understanding of capitalism to formalistic criteria that prevent us from appreciating how capitalism structures not just spectacular episodes of protest but more mundane occurrences

as well. In other words, although we do not believe that capitalism as a political-economic system can act as the sole or even the main analytic for understanding contemporary Iran and its modern history, we do maintain that without writing capitalism into this history we fail to grasp its most centrifugal dynamics.

It is against this backdrop and with these concerns in mind that we invited scholars of different disciplinary backgrounds and intellectual persuasions to address how capitalism has figured into their work and how they think it has shaped the broader field of Iranian studies, with the hope that such a retrospective might allow us to see future ways forward.

The contributions to the roundtable taken together make clear that the work of defining capitalism, no matter how precisely, cannot take the place of historical explanation. Definitions cannot account for the historical complexities of capitalism's chronic crisis tendencies, or the specific barriers it throws up to its own reproduction. Moreover, efforts to pin down a definition of capitalism risk treating some countries as outliers to its history, instead of constitutive of it, an exceptionalizing tendency to which Iran has been subject and to which all five of our contributors respond. As one contributor, Mohammad Maljoo, argues, searching for the "logic of capital" in history may cause us to overlook distinct dynamics that deviate from a preconceived understanding of capital but that nonetheless provide fresh ground for its theorization. And yet this is why definitions matter too. Without a way of delimiting capitalism, as Rudi Matthee and Kevan Harris suggest, we dilute its very utility, instead seeing capitalism everywhere at once.

Rather than empty capitalism of its specificity, Kevan Harris and Kamran Matin suggest we rethink the units with which we analyze it, while Rudi Matthee validates certain criteria for identifying it, namely the generalization of wage labor, private property, and state centralization. Although this definition might lead us to conclude, as Matthee does, that Iran until recently was in fact not capitalist, taken together with Kamran Matin's and Maziar Samiee's arguments for centering capital's capacity to subsume noncapitalist labor practices and social forms, our contributors suggest a way of appreciating how capitalism's globalizing tendencies have articulated to local practices and institutions.

In so doing, the authors work through a broader tension: When theorizing capitalism from a global periphery like Iran, should we emphasize divergences, pluralizing the models and theories of capital's proliferation to which we have recourse, or convergences, so that we might arrive at unified theory of capital? Or, in the words of Harris, "how do we assess any features of capitalism in Iran by comparing them with ideal-types, most of which are abstracted from historical cases outside of Iran?" Maljoo offers a way of both using and expanding these ideal-types by disaggregating capitalism into spheres of production and social reproduction. Capitalist production, he argues, can be weak, as it has been in postrevolutionary Iran, even as social relations of exploitation are successfully reproduced there. Kamran Matin's argument in favor of a theory of uneven and combined development, meanwhile, brings the global and the local into the same analytical frame to point toward a different scalar imagination, one that replaces a model of historical diffusion with relational change. But questions linger. Few would argue against the point that societies mutually transform each other as they interact; the difficulty is in determining which interactions matter.

Divisions can be discerned along these lines between our contributors. Maziar Samiee and Rudi Matthee, for instance, argue respectively for and against identifying nineteenth-century Iran as capitalist. Although both appreciate the seismic shifts Iran's integration into a world economy by way of cash-crop cultivation wrought, Matthee arrives at this conclusion by identifying capitalism with industrial capitalism, and Samiee by understanding capitalism in terms of not just its mode of production but "institutions, arrangements, and techniques that organize production, exchange, and ownership." Capitalist development, within this view, is as much about the mechanical means of production as it is about social technologies of human and resource management. And it was arguably in this spirit that

Marx described the sphere of production as comprising “the relations of production in their totality,” not just the historically dominant forms of exploitation or labor.<sup>1</sup>

Two final points are worth emphasizing. Debates about the origins of capitalism are debates about units of analysis, and the contributions presented here can be read in this light. Whether we take the most revealing unit of analysis to be a single country, as Matthee does, or a larger unit within which there exists a division of labor, as Matin does, requires divergent assumptions and yields divergent conclusions. Understanding capitalism as a historical form of social totality guaranteeing not just capital accumulation but the reproduction of a “mode of life,” we detect capitalism even where the modes of production most conventionally associated with it are absent or, at best, tenuous. Proponents of uneven and combined development go further to suggest that the choice of units is not between the national or the international, since this construal assumes a meaningful distinction between the two, but that variations in capitalism can only be understood by joining the two. Yet a more fundamental question to ask might be: When we name capitalism, what are we trying to accomplish? That is, what are the implications of labeling Iran capitalist, pre-capitalist, or distorted and insufficiently capitalist, and how might these implications figure into arguments for the former? And here is our second point: The Eurocentric history of the debate under investigation here has so fundamentally shaped its contours and parameters that most authors have left it largely unnamed. Yet the fact that most contributors have given a qualified yes to the question not just of capitalism’s analytical utility but of its historicity to Iran suggests that the shadow of Eurocentrism continues to loom large over this conversation, acting as a motivating force in our (perhaps defensive) conceptualizations of capital.

In one configuration or another, and in fits and starts, capitalism has become the hegemonic mode of organizing social, economic, and ideational life. As a prime shaper of the modern world, capitalism has been a permanent chameleon, ever adapting to changing material and social circumstances while relentlessly transforming regimes of work, legislated forms of property, modes of governance, class configurations, and relations to nature, all in search of compound growth and the further accumulation of capital. Capitalism has ushered in the increasing commodification of nature and human work, and it has transformed and monetized notions of value, utility, leisure, consumption, and social relations. The papers presented in this forum make no claim to fully describing this process in Iran, or to answering all the relevant questions it raises. Rather, they elaborate how each author has used capitalism as a framework of analysis and explication in their own scholarship. It is our hope that these interventions will act as prompts in their own right, instigating further debate, discussion, and renewed sets of questions on this vitally important topic.

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, “Wage Labour and Capital” (1847), in *The Thought of Karl Marx: An Introduction*, ed. David McLellan (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1971), 131.