

# Oriental Despotism

by Rolando Minuti

The concept of Oriental Despotism has shaped the European interpretation and representation of Asiatic governments and societies for many centuries. Its origins can be found in Aristotelian political philosophy. However, its meaning since then has evolved, not only due to the theoretical approach of different thinkers, but also to Europeans' experiences in confrontation with the Asiatic world. During the Age of Enlightenment, Oriental Despotism was a particularly important idea, especially for the writings of Montesquieu. Afterwards, it played a significant role in Hegel's thought as well as in Marx's writing when it turned towards the "Asiatic mode of production" theory. Finally, the concept reappeared both in Weber's thought and, in the 20th century, in Wittfogel's.

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## Introductory Remarks

The idea of Oriental despotism has an old and diversified history in European culture (→ Media Link #ab). It was a conceptual model in different interacting cultural contexts, it assumed various functions and meanings, and it waned with the decline of the Eurocentric preconception on which it was deeply grounded ever since its origins in Greek thought.<sup>1</sup> Many agents, not only philosophers or political theorists but also travellers, diplomats, missionaries and administrators, have shaped, spread and applied the idea of Oriental despotism. The classical scheme was not merely reproduced, but enriched with particular articulations and specific values which were connected to different exigencies and contexts. Hence the story of Oriental despotism is not only that of a unique philosophical and political idea, it is also a story of cultural attitudes, representations, concrete interests, interactions and direct experiences. This offers plenty of interesting variations on the same theme of the confrontation with and interpretation of an Oriental alterity (→ Media Link #ac).

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We could say that the theoretical force of this concept has vanished nowadays, if we mainly considered the development of post-colonial (→ Media Link #ad) approaches or the methodological perspectives opened up by world or global history. Inside the general framework of the contemporary analysis of 'Orientalism',<sup>2</sup> in particular, the stereotype of the arbitrary power of Asiatic princes and sovereigns and its political, social and cultural consequences have been pointed out, showing the strong implications of an ideology of domination which was inherent in colonial and imperial (→ Media Link #af) European power. Although Oriental despotism as a conceptual tool is not as common and accepted as it has been in the past, its influence on European culture has been considerable. In particular, it has shaped the modern European mind and its consciousness of civic identity (→ Media Link #ag) and responsibility, which played a critical and controversial role in the course of many centuries of international relationships.

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## The Classical Roots of a Eurocentric Concept

Like many other key concepts of philosophical and political European culture, Oriental despotism is deeply rooted in Greek thought. The words "despot" and "despotism" clearly come from a classical Greek context, where this concept became an effective tool of automatic recognition of Greek identity and superiority over other "barbarous" nations, mainly the great Persian (→ Media Link #ah) enemy. Although the idea of a radical opposition between the Greek and Persian nations, grounded on the Greek assumption that Persians were subordinate slaves, was expressed by several authors, such as Aeschylus (525–456 BC) (→ Media Link #ai) or Isocrates (436–338 BC) (→ Media Link #aj), it was Aristotle (384–322 BC) (→ Media Link #ak) who formulated the first solid theoretical foundation of this idea, codifying despotism as a *topos* of political philosophy.

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In Book III of his *Politics*, Aristotle identified a particular form of monarchy – which, with aristocracy and the state, is one of the three possible forms of government. These three forms may degenerate and thus become tyranny, oligarchy and democracy. He explained the despot's authority in terms which correspond to the power of a master over his servant. Despotic monarchy is precisely distinguished from tyranny, which is exercised over people against their will and consequently is illegitimate, whereas despotism is exercised over people who voluntarily or passively accept this kind of power. Despotic government as such is not unlawful or arbitrary; it is a special form of monarchy (→ Media Link #al) which can be confused with tyranny because its power is exercised in similar ways. However, it is substantially different, because despotic monarchy is both legitimate and hereditary.<sup>3</sup>

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In many respects, this was a crucial distinction which enabled the Greeks to theoretically justify their future attitudes towards Asiatic societies and political systems. First, Aristotle's theory clearly qualified despotism as incompatible with the natural character of the Greek people, who were free and could only temporarily be subject to tyranny because they would revolt against it as soon as possible. Instead, despotism was said to be the most suitable form of government for barbarous nations, mainly the Persians, who were thought to have a natural tendency towards subordination and would thus accept authorities which would be intolerable for the Greeks without opposition or apparent pain. Despotism, for Aristotle, was therefore not degeneration, but a proper and possibly durable system in radical opposition to the Greek world and mind. This judgment followed from the idea that different ethnic groups were naturally compatible with different systems of government, which is an important element of Aristotle's political thought.

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From another point of view, this ancient Greek stereotype of Persians being naturally inclined to accept despotic power introduces an historical and geographical determination of despotism which has no connection with the Aristotelian concept of tyranny – any monarchy may degenerate into tyranny, in every place and time. This establishes the "Oriental" character as a constitutive value for the notion of despotism.

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The history of the relationship between Greece and the Asiatic world, especially while Alexander the Great (356–323 BC) (→ Media Link #am) was expanding his empire, is full of interactions and contaminations. A prominent example is Alexander's way of adopting Oriental concepts of conceiving and exercising power. It was criticized by his opponents because it was contrary to the idea of a necessary separation between different forms of society and government, which was stressed in Aristotelian political thought. However, it thus opened the way for a variety of attitudes towards the Oriental world in Alexander's empire, both empirical and theoretical, which was typical of the Hellenistic era. Nevertheless, the previously established stereotypes about the Persians continued to have a strong influence. After the foundation of the Byzantine Empire and of the so-called *New Rome* (Constantinople), the Greek cultural and political identity found in this *topos* an important ideological support against the threats of the Sassanid Persian Empire, which was founded by Ardashir I (died 241) (→ Media Link #an) in 224. Thus the idea of the anthropological and political otherness of the Persian people was not rejected but enriched and articulated in various ways by several authors in this new context. In particular, moral judgments of the Eastern enemy now played an important role alongside the emphasis on geographical and anthropological diversity which had until then been predominant.

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We can observe that by this time the Aristotelian classification of governments was no longer the only theoretical foundation of these debates. For example, the term *despotes* was used with a connotation that is not negative – in the late

ancient language it was mainly an equivalent for *emperor*. On the other hand, the term tyranny was now employed more frequently for classifying the Persian government. Only after Aristotelian thought had been rediscovered and appreciated in late medieval culture, mainly after the translation of Aristotle's works (→ Media Link #ao) by William of Moerbeke (1215–1286) (→ Media Link #ap), the influence of his classification and attributes of Oriental despotism grew and developed. Again, the Aristotelian terms were not simply reproduced; a significant variety of attitudes can be found in the writings of authors such as Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) (→ Media Link #aq), Tolomeo da Lucca (1236–1326/27) (→ Media Link #ar), Nicholas Oresme (1320–1382) (→ Media Link #as), William of Ockham (1285–1347) (→ Media Link #at) and Marsilius of Padua (1275–1343) (→ Media Link #au).<sup>4</sup> Generally, they were less interested in interpreting and judging Oriental societies and governments than in using Asiatic examples of tyrannical government in order to support the struggle between imperial and popish power. Still, the geographical identification of Asiatic areas, where the existence of a *principatus despoticus* was supposed to be naturally consistent with the character of the people, remained a mark of a qualitative difference between European and Asiatic society and politics and a confirmation of Oriental otherness in many works – especially in Marsilius's *Defensor pacis* or in the commentary of Aristotle's *Politics* by Nicholas Oresme.<sup>5</sup>

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## Theoretical Developments and Travelling Experiences in the Early Modern Age

The classical heritage and the various implications of the Aristotelian model were of great importance for the early modern European approach towards Eastern societies and governments. Nevertheless, important new ideas emerged which gave the category of Oriental despotism fresh connotations from a theoretical point of view. Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) (→ Media Link #av) distinguished between two essential forms of states, thus uniting Aristotle's classifications of Aristocratic and Democratic governments in a single category called republics, which he opposed to the category of principalities. The notion of a despotic power, notwithstanding the fact that Machiavelli did not use terms like *despot* or *despotism*, was explained as the absolute power of a monarch ruling over a nation of slaves instead of free citizens. This power was thought to be the most difficult kind to achieve, but the easiest to preserve because, in his view, the subordinates did not even know the meaning of freedom.<sup>6</sup>

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What is particularly important with regard to Oriental despotism is the fact that the traditional geographical delimitation of Oriental despotism changed in reaction to the emergence of the Ottoman Empire (→ Media Link #aw) at the end of the 13th century. However, Machiavelli's approach placed the fear (→ Media Link #ax) of Islamic expansion, which was common in European Christian thought and culture, in a different context. He was more interested in analysing the characteristics of the Ottomans' particular form of monarchical government than in portraying the Islamic enemy. This state form is ruled by the Sultan, who is simultaneously the Caliph, the religious head of state, since he is considered to be a descendant of the prophet Muhammad (570–632) (→ Media Link #az), with the assistance of his most powerful minister, the Grand Vizier. It is therefore radically opposed to European monarchies, which are led by a prince and his lords, as was the case in France at the time. Therefore Machiavelli saw the governance techniques of France and Turkey as two opposite ways of conceiving and practising power and authority, thus proposing a new outline for the traditional confrontation between East and West (→ Media Link #b0).

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The reference to the Ottoman example for qualifying Oriental despotism is important for the political theories of the French author Jean Bodin (1530–1596) (→ Media Link #b1) as well. Bodin further developed the thoughts of his predecessors by describing a *monarchie seigneuriale*<sup>7</sup> in which the authority of a prince over his subjects is limitless and similar to that of a master over slaves in the Aristotelian sense. The word despot or despotism, however, was not included in Bodin's political vocabulary. The essential difference between a *monarchie seigneuriale* and what Bodin called *monarchie royale* consists in the fact that the absolute nature of a king's power – *legibus solutus* – has some essential limits, that is property rights, divine and natural laws as well as the fundamental laws (→ Media Link #b2) of the kingdom. As a consequence, the king of France (→ Media Link #b3), whose power is in fact absolute because there are no opponent authorities, does not have the same position, according to Bodin, as the kind of sovereign who, for example, rules the Ottoman Empire. In the latter case, neither property nor fundamental laws are respected; the king is the only proprietor of his subjects' possessions. In Bodin's thought, this is not the consequence of a particular nature of the Ottoman people, as Aristotle believed, but the effect of war and conquest, which is the only origin of slavery. For this reason, not only Oriental monarchies were supposed to be despotic, but also the colonial empire (→ Media

Link #b5) of Charles V of Spain (1500–1558) (→ Media Link #b6). Any monarch can incur the arbitrary power of a prince who does not respect the system of a *monarchie royale* and will thus be a tyrant, but his power must always be temporary because rebellion is an unavoidable consequence of his illegal authority. Despotism, that is, *monarchie seigneuriale*, on the other hand, is a political and social system which may have great stability and whose duration can be very long. In fact, according to Bodin it was the most ancient and primitive form of monarchy in world history.<sup>8</sup>

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By stressing conquest as the origin of despotic power and pointing out the absence of property rights as a characteristic of despotic government, Bodin introduced important new aspects into the theoretical debate about despotism. As a result, significant developments in the works of major philosophers like Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) (→ Media Link #b7) or John Locke (1632–1704) (→ Media Link #b8) and in the general political and ideological European debate were possible.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, not only the theoretical side of the issue is of interest here, because the evolution of the concept of Oriental despotism, as we said, is the result of a complex interaction of factors. The early modern interest in discoveries and voyages (→ Media Link #b9) and the collection of new experience (→ Media Link #ba) and knowledge in travel literature and encyclopaedic works also influenced the idea of an Oriental political otherness whose typical character was despotism. On this empirical basis a new comparative analysis of various Oriental societies and cultures was attempted. There were, for instance, the *Relazioni Universali* by Giovanni Botero (1540–1617) (→ Media Link #bb),<sup>10</sup> who made use of a large amount of primary sources and, above all, travel literature, describing the political relations of Venetian (→ Media Link #bc) ambassadors and many others. He geographically extended the idea of a despotic form of government beyond the Ottoman Empire, including a whole variety of Oriental governments, from Turkey to Persia, from Mughal India to China and Siam. This extension of the boundaries of Oriental despotism, in addition to previous philosophical and political ideas concerning the substantial difference of Asiatic governments, significantly enhanced the concept by offering a synthesis of empirical experience and theory.

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Travel writings played a major role in this process, and their importance, sometimes underestimated in comparison to philosophical and political theory, deserves particular attention. For example François Bernier (1620–1688) (→ Media Link #bd), a traveller in the Mughal Empire, proposed a comparison between Mughal India and Europe in which the socio-economic situation in the country was profoundly analysed. Bernier painted a negative picture of the Empire by emphasizing the economically disastrous consequences of despotic government, the ruinous effects of a lack of private ownership, and the shocking contrast between the extreme wealth of the princes and the poverty of their people, who were oppressed by the taxation system and by rapacious peripheral administrators.<sup>11</sup> His writings had a major influence on European attitudes towards India and, more generally, towards Asiatic politics and governments. All this was the result of an empirical approach and direct experience, and not of mere theoretical speculation, although Bernier was also a philosopher and an original thinker.

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Another example would be Jean Chardin (1643–1713) (→ Media Link #be), who was not a philosopher but "qui a voyagé comme Platon", as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) (→ Media Link #bf) said of him.<sup>12</sup> During his travels in Persia he empirically experienced a state shaped by Oriental despotism. His observations in the Safavid monarchy at the end of the 17th century led him to describe the Persian despotic government as a result of incidental and historical circumstances which provided the prince with strength and extreme authority for controlling the aristocratic opposition. Chardin did not consider despotism as a result of the natural character of the people nor of Islamic religion, which could in fact produce different political systems, as the examples of Turkey and Persia show. He therefore took care to describe the different varieties and forms of Oriental despotism in detail, and his writing is a remarkable example of how empirical experience could not only confirm but also question the use of a uniform interpretation scheme applied to every Asiatic government.

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## Oriental Despotism in Enlightenment culture

When Charles Louis de Secondat de Montesquieu (1689–1755) (→ Media Link #bg) published his *Lettres Persanes* in 1721, France had already been debating on Oriental despotism for many years in a highly intellectual way, mainly in connection with the political and ideological struggle against the authoritarian trend of the French monarchy. The new

term emerged during the age of the Fronde<sup>13</sup> and was elaborated in an intensive pamphlet war, in which the similarities between the power of Louis XIV (1638–1715) (→ Media Link #bh) and that of the *Grand Seigneur* or the *Grand Mogol* were often hinted at; for instance, in the celebrated *Soupirs de la France esclave* by Michel Le Vassor (1646–1718) (→ Media Link #bi).<sup>14</sup> Obviously the tensions in the critical period of transition after the Sun King's death and the worries about the authoritarian turn of the French monarchy played an important role in the *Lettres Persanes* and in Montesquieu's treatment of Oriental despotism as well. It would be misleading, however, to reduce Montesquieu's important contribution to this subject, which was later elaborated in his *Esprit des Lois* (1748), to a mere polemical or ideological exploitation of the concept for contingent political purposes.

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What distinguished Montesquieu's approach was his analysis of a particular authoritarian form of government which he may have rejected but whose predominance in the ancient and modern world, especially in Eastern countries, urged him to study its causes and conditions of existence. It led him, therefore, to define Oriental despotism as an autonomous form of government beyond its accepted categorization as a particular form of monarchy coming from the Aristotelian tradition. His analysis of despotism, of its nature – a concentration of authority that leaves no place to liberty –, and the principle of intimidation it is grounded on, as well as his systematic study of its various connections with climate, religion, manners, economy and laws, made Montesquieu's work the most important contribution to this debate in the 18th century and beyond.

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Asia – referring to all Eastern countries, from the Islamic world to the Far East – was for Montesquieu the natural milieu of despotism. He accordingly proposed a contrast between Europe and the Orient that was based on his scientific approach. *L'Esprit des Lois* was immediately recognized by his contemporaries as an important work and was extremely influential not only from a theoretical but also, maybe more, from a more general cultural point of view. Its success may be connected with the fact that Montesquieu based his conclusions not only on philosophical and political speculations, but also on a variety of empirical experience.

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Travel literature was an essential source for Montesquieu's approach, as his careful readings and summaries of the works by Bernier, Chardin, and many others show. They inspired his interest in the particularities of despotic governments and their varieties in the context of the nature and principle of despotism, which had not always been analysed as closely as they deserved. Islam is proposed, in this view, as a perfect ally of despotism because of the strong interaction between political and religious matters, even if the respect for religion can have a stabilizing effect, since it imposes rules that everybody must accept.<sup>15</sup> Montesquieu thus emphasized the importance of religion from a political point of view and showed that it could act as a moderating force in despotic realities as well.

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At the same time, although he highlighted the radical geographical and political differences between Europe and Asia – the large plains of the Asiatic natural milieu were an essential condition for despotism, in Montesquieu's view, whereas the fragmented territory of Europe gave natural support to political liberty –, he did not deny that historical events and political situations could produce despotism in Europe as well. For example, such a situation could have occurred after the territorial and political extension of a sovereign's authority and the weakening of its checks, even though, in Montesquieu's eyes, it would not have been typical.<sup>16</sup> All these reflections hint at a political criticism that is strongly linked to the sociological or scientific analysis of despotism in Montesquieu's work.

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Although Montesquieu considerably influenced European attitudes towards Oriental despotism in the 18th century and beyond, a variety of approaches can be observed that sometimes diverged from and sometimes directly opposed Montesquieu's thesis. The fundamental connection of despotism with religion was a central element of Nicolas-Antoine Boulanger's (1722–1759) (→ Media Link #bk) *Recherches sur l'origine du despotisme oriental* as well, in which theocracy was established as the essential basis of despotism.<sup>17</sup> However, he did not believe climate or natural environment to be a cause of Oriental despotism, as Montesquieu did. Other authors, Claude Adrien Helvétius (1715–1770) (→ Media Link #bl) for instance, made the same point.<sup>18</sup>

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Besides, Boulanger did not define religion as socially useful but as the anthropological source of a fundamental mystification that creates power. Its political consequence, reinforced by superstition and idolatry, would then be despotism. In Boulanger's analysis, the link between religion and despotism was strongly emphasized. A similar approach was present in the writings of various other authors of that time. This can be seen as the expression of a struggle against ecclesiastical power in which the negative model of Asiatic governments was systematically employed. At the end of the century, Jean-Antoine-Nicolas de Caritat, marquis de Condorcet (1743–1794) (→ Media Link #bm) gave this idea a concise and vigorous form in his *Esquisse*,<sup>19</sup> observing the marked contrast between Orient and Occident. He thus urged all enlightened European countries to energetically help foster the emancipation of a large part of humanity which was, according to him, still living in a system of oppression producing economic, cultural and civic backwardness and stagnation.

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The political relevance of the concept of Oriental despotism in the 18th century is also evident in writings that directly opposed Montesquieu's analysis but used the same methodological premise, which is empirical evidence. For example, Voltaire (1694–1778) (→ Media Link #bo) accused Montesquieu of incorrectly using his sources and thus shaping a concept of Oriental despotism that had no matches in history and the real world, as he proved by the example of Turkey.<sup>20</sup> Although this attitude was mainly due to the substantial difference between Voltaire's political ideas on government and limiting monarchic power and Montesquieu's thought, criticism also came from other scholars. Abraham-Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron (1731–1805) (→ Media Link #bp) tried to demonstrate, supported by his vast experience as an orientalist, that an unlimited authority without regard to property rights had never existed in Asiatic countries or the Islamic world.<sup>21</sup> In Anquetil-Duperron's thought, it was even more necessary to oppose the notion of Oriental despotism because of Europe's growing economic and political interest in Asia, particularly in India, whose complex and ancient civilization would have been wronged by the use of this concept.

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In the Physiocratic school which was founded in France by François Quesnay (1694–1774) (→ Media Link #bq), despotism had other theoretical and political connotations, on the basis that scientific knowledge of the economic and social laws should have imposed the despotism of *evidence*. A good and well-ordered government could, for this economic school, politically be managed by a strong central authority, which justified a virtuous despotism.<sup>22</sup> They frequently referred to the empire of China as an example, revealing an appreciation of China which can be connected to Jesuit sources. The Physiocrats proposed China as a model<sup>23</sup> because of its economic regulations and its social, political and administrative rules as well as its religion, Confucianism, which efficiently cooperated with political order. They thus created a different and more positive image of Oriental despotism.<sup>24</sup>

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All these various attitudes towards Oriental despotism should, however, be considered as the theoretical side of a more complex debate; the real development of the relation between Europe and Asia must not be overlooked. Since European powers (→ Media Link #bs) became more involved in Asia during the 18th century and British colonial interest in India was growing especially fast, Europeans could gain empirical experience much more easily and extensively. Administrators, diplomats and political staff employed in colonial government were much more involved in Asia and became the main source on this topic, whereas authors in earlier centuries had mainly had to rely on travel literature. The lack of proprietary rights in India and the idea of the prince as the owner of everything, one of the central elements of the modern idea of Oriental despotism, became a more urgent question in the colonial age. One of the most important consequences in British India was that the *zamindars*, that is, the tax-collecting tenants in the Mughal administration, were granted proprietary rights.<sup>25</sup> This had unexpected negative effects on the society and economy of British India and clearly shows the practical effects of the European idea of Oriental despotism when it was directly applied by colonial administrators, opening new and various debates.

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In other words, the concept of Oriental despotism is shaped by different languages, approaches and actors, and should not be seen uniquely from the theoretical side. The cultural problem of this Eurocentric category and its evolution should be analysed in all its varieties and implications.

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## From Oriental Despotism to the Asiatic mode of production

The Eurocentric representation of the relationships between the East and Europe, from a philosophical point of view, becomes most interesting at the beginning of the 19th century when Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) (→ [Media Link #bu](#)) used the concept of Oriental despotism in his *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*.<sup>26</sup> The quality of his interpretation is comparable to that of Aristotle's and Montesquieu's contributions to the debate. Elements of Montesquieu's analysis were in fact present in Hegel's interpretation – above all, he focused on despotism as a particular form of government. What distinguished Hegel's approach is that he placed despotism within a dialectical scheme which is chronological and logical at the same time, since it is the first phase of the historical and universal movement of the spirit. Despotism, which for Hegel was represented by Asiatic societies and governments, was conceived of as the first of four stages in the dialectics of the universal spirit, because it departs from the state of nature but does not yet permit the individual to be autonomous. A despotically ruled society cannot articulate itself, and the universal spirit is concentrated in a single free person, embodied by the despot himself. The logical analysis of the spirit's development implies an historical movement, and in Hegel's view "the History of the World travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of History."<sup>27</sup>

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This movement also has a geographical dimension, because the universal spirit can only be achieved by peoples with the corresponding natural constitution (*Volksgesist*). A link with Montesquieu's approach is clearly visible here, as well as the influence of more recent authors, in particular Carl Ritter (1779–1859) (→ [Media Link #bv](#)), who believed geographical factors to be natural conditions for the evolution of people's spirit.<sup>28</sup> Geographical factors interact with the logical development of the spirit, which Hegel divided into four great stages, that is, the Oriental, Greek, Roman and, finally, Germanic stage. The particular history of each people's spirit is also influenced by geographic factors such as the different lifestyles in the uplands or in the plains of the Eastern world. The Eastern world represents the first stage of the universal spirit's movement – "the childhood of History" – since it remains locked in a condition which, by restricting the role of the individual, does not permit any evolution.<sup>29</sup>

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This, for Hegel, is most evident in the Mongolian and Chinese Empires. They may be characterized as systems of "theocratic despotism", for which the connection with Enlightenment ideas on Eastern societies and governments is particularly clear and in which religious and political authorities are strongly linked. In India, the situation is similar and the caste system is a different expression – "theocratic aristocracy" – of the same unarticulated dimension of the spirit. The same could be observed in ancient Persia – "theocratic monarchy" – where the interaction with the West and sea trade, however, produced more heterogeneous elements.<sup>30</sup> In this general context, the sea – in the case of the Phoenicians, for instance, and their maritime commerce – particularly acted as an effective force against the undifferentiated dimension of the spirit. In Western Asiatic countries, it opened up the way to a different scenario, defined by Hegel as the second stage of universal history, that is, the Greek one. In this geographical area, therefore, despotism is no longer the main political category.

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The extraordinary theoretical strength of Hegel's thought reinforced the idea of an inexorable connection between despotism and immobility and an essential difference between the Eastern and the European world which had already been discussed in the Age of Enlightenment. Its influence, from a theoretical but also from a political and ideological point of view, was considerable. If Asia was located at the origin of the universal spirit's movement, its lack of dynamics placed it outside the development of civilization.

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The parallels between Hegel's interpretative scheme and Karl Marx's (1818–1883) (→ [Media Link #bw](#)) thought have often been pointed out. At the same time, the connection of Marx's interpretation of Asiatic societies with 17th and 18th century observations on the specific nature of their economy, particularly the idea of the precarious status of proprietary rights in Asia, is clearly visible in his writings, mainly in his journal contributions on India and China.<sup>31</sup> According to Marx, the entire Asiatic economic system was based on the absence of individual proprietary rights, due to the sovereign's being the sole proprietor, and to the organization of economic life in autonomous village communities. Marx believed that the geographical conditions of Asiatic countries reinforced this political system, for example, because only a strong and

centralized authority could provide the required agricultural watering systems. The Asiatic "mode of production"<sup>32</sup> which prevailed in India and other Eastern countries like China and parts of Russia was, for Marx, the real foundation of Oriental despotism, and these two concepts are strictly linked in Marx's thought. In the general framework of Marx's ideas on the development of society and its future perspectives, this system marked a stoppage. For this reason, Marx thought the European domination of the colonies – particularly the British involvement in India – to be a necessary measure or, in his words, a "double mission [...]": one destructive, the other regenerating the annihilation of old Asiatic society, and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia".<sup>33</sup>

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This shift from the "Oriental despotism" concept to the "Asiatic mode of production" opened a fresh discussion and proposed new methodologies of investigation. It also had political implications which were related to the international social and political contexts of the late 19th and 20th centuries.<sup>34</sup>

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The connection between irrigation systems and the nature of Asiatic political structures also played a major role in Max Weber's (1864–1920) (→ Media Link #bx) interpretation of the differing development of Mediterranean and Asiatic societies. Weber claimed that different geographical conditions caused this fundamental divergence, pointing out the contrast between coastal Mediterranean regions and the essential importance of rivers and the managing of irrigation in Egypt or in Middle Eastern areas in the ancient world.<sup>35</sup> He wrote: "The crucial factor which made Near Eastern development so different was the need for irrigation systems, as a result of which the cities were closely connected with building canals and constant regulation of waters and rivers, all of which demanded the existence of a unified bureaucracy."<sup>36</sup>

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The political and ethical consequence was "the subjugation of the individual" in the East, and, on the Mediterranean side, the rise of a "purely secular civilization which characterized Greek society and caused capitalist development in Greece to differ from that in the Near East".<sup>37</sup> The economic foundation of Asiatic monarchies and the existence of a 'patrimonial' bureaucracy personally depending on the monarch, such as existed in China, thus seemed to prevent political development and the modernization of the social and institutional structure. Weber gave the old concept of Oriental despotism a fresh impetus by interpreting various materials and judgments from the history of European culture. He thus supported the core idea of a European singularity and predominance in the history of world civilization which he clearly exposed in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.<sup>38</sup>

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In the 20th century, Karl August Wittfogel (1896–1988) (→ Media Link #by) recovered the term "Oriental despotism" in his provocative work *Oriental Despotism* in 1957.<sup>39</sup> His approach was strongly related to the thought of Marx and particularly that of Weber. He developed the idea of the economic necessity of supporting irrigation systems as the foundation of a model of society and government whose main characteristic was the absolute power of a central bureaucracy. On these grounds, Wittfogel diagnosed a clear contrast between polycentric societies like those that developed in Europe and monocentric ones as in Asia. There, he observed a transition from the old despotic governments to a new form of despotism represented by communist Russia (→ Media Link #bz), which could be considered as a new version of industrial-bureaucratic despotism. Wittfogel's controversial and stimulating work was clearly influenced by the ideological and political tensions of its time, but it also shows a remarkable methodological and theoretical insight. Accordingly, it proves the long life of an ancient concept and cultural attitude which has for many centuries shaped the European perception of the clash of Eastern and Western civilizations.

▲ 34

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## Appendix

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## Notes

1. ^ For general surveys on the history and varieties of the Oriental despotism concept, see mainly Koebner, *Despot and despotism* 1951; Venturi, *Despotismo orientale* 1960; Stelling-Michaud, *Le mythe du despotisme oriental* 1960–1961; Richter, *Despotism* 1973; Bobbio, *Dispotismo* 2004; Felice (ed.), *Dispotismo* 2001–2002; Rubiés, *Oriental despotism* 2005; Richter, *The concept of despotism* 2007.
2. ^ Cf. Saïd, *Orientalism* 1978.
3. ^ Cf. Aristotle, *Politics* 1984, III, 14.
4. ^ See William of Moerbeke, *Aristotelis politicorum libri octo* 1872; Aquinas, *Sententia Libri politicorum* 1971; Tolomeo da Lucca, *De regimine principum continuatio* 1948; Oresme, *Le livre de Politiques d'Aristote* 1970; William of Ockham, *Dialogus* 1927; Marsilius of Padua, *Defensor pacis* 1932–1933.
5. ^ Cf. Felice, *Dispotismo* 2001–2002, vol. I.
6. ^ Cf. Machiavelli, *Il Principe* 2006, IV.

7. ^ Cf. Bodin, *Les six livres de la République* 1576. The same form of monarchy is named *dominatus* in the Latin version of his work, published in 1586.
8. ^ Cf. *ibidem*, I, 6.
9. ^ See Hobbes, *Leviathan* 1991; De Cive 1983; and Locke, *Two Treatises* 1970.
10. ^ Cf. Rubiés, *Oriental despotism* 2005, for a recent interest in this work and its importance for the Oriental despotism concept.
11. ^ See Bernier, *Voyages* 1699.
12. ^ Cf. Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité* 1971, p. 181.
13. ^ Cf. Koebner, *Despot and Despotism* 1951.
14. ^ See Le Vassor, *Les Soupirs de la France esclave* 1689–1690.
15. ^ See Montesquieu, *De l'Esprit des Lois* 1973, V, 14 and VII, 29.
16. ^ See *ibidem*, VIII, 8.
17. ^ Boulanger, *Recherches sur l'origine du despotisme oriental* 1761.
18. ^ See Helvetius, *De l'Esprit* 1758; *De l'Homme* 1772.
19. ^ See Condorcet, *Esquisse*, in: *idem*, *Tableau historique* 2004.
20. ^ See Voltaire, *Commentaire* 1877–1885, especially Chapters IV and XII; *idem*: *Essai sur les Mœurs* 1963, p. 832.
21. ^ See Anquetil-Duperron, *Législation orientale* 1778.
22. ^ See mainly Le Mercier de la Rivière, *Ordre naturel* 1767.
23. ^ See Quesnay, *Despotisme de la Chine* 2005.
24. ^ This image met with severe opposition, mainly from Mably in *Doutes proposés* 1768, who asserted that every form of despotism had a negative and destructive part, mainly from an ethical point of view.
25. ^ For a recent approach to this complex issue, see Travers, *Ideology and Empire* 2007.
26. ^ Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, 1837.
27. ^ Hegel, *Lectures on the philosophy of history* 1861, p. 109.
28. ^ See Ritter, *Die Erdkunde* 1817.
29. ^ Hegel, *Lectures on the philosophy of history* 1861, pp. 111f.
30. ^ Hegel, *Lectures on the philosophy of history* 1861, pp. 118f.
31. ^ See Marx, *The British Rule in India* 1853.
32. ^ Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* 1859.
33. ^ Marx, *The Future Results of British rule in India* 1853, pp. 217f.
34. ^ See Sofri, *Il modo di produzione asiatico* 1974 and Krader, *The Asiatic mode of production* 1975.
35. ^ See *Weber*, *The Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilizations* 1976.
36. ^ *ibidem*, pp. 157f.
37. ^ *ibidem*, pp. 157f.
38. ^ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* 1905.
39. ^ See Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism* 1957.

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
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
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
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### Link #b7

- Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) VIAF   (<http://viaf.org/viaf/59083895>) DNB  (<http://d-nb.info/gnd/118551698>)



- (<http://www.ieg-ego.eu/en/mediainfo/thomas-hobbes-1588-1679-1?mediainfo=1&amp;width=900&amp;height=500>)  
Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679)

### Link #b8

- John Locke (1632–1704) VIAF   (<http://viaf.org/viaf/34459614>) DNB  (<http://d-nb.info/gnd/118573748>)



- (<http://www.ieg-ego.eu/en/mediainfo/john-locke-163220131704-en?mediainfo=1&amp;width=900&amp;height=500>)  
John Locke (1632–1704)

### Link #b9

- Early Modern Ports (<http://www.ieg-ego.eu/en/threads/crossroads/courts-and-cities/catia-antunes-early-modern-ports-1500-1750>)

### Link #ba

- European Encounters (<http://www.ieg-ego.eu/en/threads/backgrounds/european-encounters/guido-abbattista-european-encounters-in-the-age-of-expansion>)

### Link #bb

- Giovanni Botero (1540–1617) VIAF   (<http://viaf.org/viaf/10645099>) DNB  (<http://d-nb.info/gnd/41904563>)

### Link #bc



- (<http://www.ieg-ego.euhttp://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/braun1582bd1/0097>)  
Venetia 1572, UB Heidelberg 



#### Link #bd

- François Bernier (1620–1688) VIAF   (<http://viaf.org/viaf/22188549>) DNB  (<http://d-nb.info/gnd/119378426>)




#### Link #be

- Jean Chardin (1643–1713) VIAF   (<http://viaf.org/viaf/49223162>) DNB  (<http://d-nb.info/gnd/119384086>)

#### Link #bf

- Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) VIAF   (<http://viaf.org/viaf/100184045>) DNB  (<http://d-nb.info/gnd/118603426>)





#### Link #bg

- Charles Louis de Secondat de Montesquieu (1689–1755) VIAF   (<http://viaf.org/viaf/27069096>) DNB  (<http://d-nb.info/gnd/118583670>)



- (<http://www.ieg-ego.eu/en/mediainfo/charles-de-secondat-baron-de-la-brede-et-de-montesquieu-168920131755-1?mediainfo=1&width=900&height=500>)  
Charles de Secondat, Baron de la Brède et de Montesquieu (1689–1755)

#### Link #bh

- Louis XIV of France (1638–1715) VIAF   (<http://viaf.org/viaf/89765843>) DNB  (<http://d-nb.info/gnd/118816829>) ADB/NDB  (<http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd118816829.html>)





- (<http://www.ieg-ego.eu/en/mediainfo/louis-xiv-of-france-163820131715?mediainfo=1&width=900&height=500>)  
Louis XIV of France (1638–1715)

#### Link #bi

- Michel Le Vassor (1646–1718) VIAF   (<http://viaf.org/viaf/79124355>) DNB  (<http://d-nb.info/gnd/13584410X>)




#### Link #bk

- Nicolas-Antoine Boulanger (1722–1759) VIAF   (<http://viaf.org/viaf/27061505>) DNB  (<http://d-nb.info/gnd/11922920X>)





#### Link #bl

- Claude Adrien Helvétius (1715–1770)  (<http://www.ieg-ego.euhttp://viaf.org/viaf/100185545>)

#### Link #bm

- Jean-Antoine-Nicolas de Caritat, marquis de Condorcet (1743–1794) VIAF   (<http://viaf.org/viaf/34454867>) DNB  (<http://d-nb.info/gnd/118521772>)

#### Link #bo

- Voltaire (1694–1778) VIAF   (<http://viaf.org/viaf/36925746>) DNB  (<http://d-nb.info/gnd/118627813>) ADB/NDB  (<http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd118627813.html>)



- [http://www.ieg-ego.eu/en/mediainfo/copy\\_of\\_voltaire-169420131778?mediainfo=1&width=900&height=500](http://www.ieg-ego.eu/en/mediainfo/copy_of_voltaire-169420131778?mediainfo=1&width=900&height=500)  
Voltaire (1694–1778)

#### Link #bp

- Abraham-Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron (1731–1805) VIAF <http://viaf.org/viaf/29529168> DNB <http://d-nb.info/gnd/10011590X>

#### Link #bq

- François Quesnay (1694–1774) VIAF <http://viaf.org/viaf/7428836> DNB <http://d-nb.info/gnd/118743163>

#### Link #bs

- European Overseas Rule (<http://www.ieg-ego.eu/en/threads/europe-and-the-world/european-overseas-rule/reinhard-wendt-european-overseas-rule>)

#### Link #bu

- Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) VIAF <http://viaf.org/viaf/89774942> DNB <http://d-nb.info/gnd/118547739> ADB/NDB <http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd118547739.html>



- <http://www.ieg-ego.eu/en/mediainfo/georg-wilhelm-friedrich-hegel-177020131831?mediainfo=1&width=900&height=500>  
Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831)

#### Link #bv

- Carl Ritter (1779–1859) VIAF <http://viaf.org/viaf/56673426> DNB <http://d-nb.info/gnd/11860130X> ADB/NDB <http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd11860130X.html>

#### Link #bw

- Karl Marx (1818–1883) VIAF <http://viaf.org/viaf/49228757> DNB <http://d-nb.info/gnd/118578537> ADB/NDB <http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd118578537.html>



- <http://www.ieg-ego.eu/de/mediainfo/karl-marx-181820131883?mediainfo=1&width=900&height=500>  
Karl Marx (1818–1883)




#### Link #bx

- Max Weber (1864–1920) VIAF <http://viaf.org/viaf/100180950> DNB <http://d-nb.info/gnd/118629743> ADB/NDB <http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd118629743.html>



- <http://www.ieg-ego.eu/en/mediainfo/max-weber-1864-1920?mediainfo=1&width=900&height=500>  
Max Weber (1864–1920)

#### Link #by

- Karl August Wittfogel (1896–1988) VIAF  <http://viaf.org/viaf/19745649> ) DNB  <http://d-nb.info/gnd/118634305> ADB/NDB  <http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd118634305.html>

#### Link #bz

- Russification / Sovietization (<http://www.ieg-ego.eu/en/threads/models-and-stereotypes/russification-sovietization/theodore-r-weeks-russification-sovietization>)



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