

INTRODUCING AND UNDERSTANDING THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF URBAN GEOGRAPHY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: THEORY OF RENT CAPITALISM

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Abstract

Different sciences, especially human sciences, will lose their scientific and dynamic nature without the theory. The geography is one of the sciences that need the theory to grow as much as possible. Nowadays, one of the criticisms of geography in Middle East is that the geographic researches are inadequate from the scientific theories, especially those derived from the geographic components. Considering the importance of the above mentioned, we have tried to introduce rent capitalism theory using an analytical-descriptive approach. The theory developed by Hans Bobek on the fundamental stages of human development from a geographical point of view, as well as urbanization in the Middle East. In addition to introducing this theory, some of the researches that have been made in the history of Iranian urban geography based on this theory will be presented. Ultimately its criticisms, in particular the criticisms that led to the formation of another theory in the urban geography of Iran known as Government & Urbanization, will be presented.

Key Words: *Theory, Urban Geography, Rent Capitalism, Government & Urbanization, Iran*

1. INTRODUCTION

Like other sciences, geography requires theories that come from geographic components to consolidate their nature and prove their scientific presence among other sciences.

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Empirical studies without previous theories are more similar to outcomes of obvious and useless results, because there may be structures that are not directly observed and diagnosed during a real study; structures that may only be detected through theoretical research or last theory-based works (Roe, 2000:100).

In this period, we also see allegations of the kind that Iranian geography is left behind in theory. Here, this scarcity of theory prompted the researchers to introduce one of the dominant well-known theories in the field of urban geography of the East especially Iran. The theory was first proposed in 1948 by an Austrian geographer Hans Bobek. Bobek's theory sparked many arguments in scientific assemblies. (Ehlers, 1995: 17) This theory has been called "rent capitalist theory" in Iran.

Another aspect that enhances the importance of studying and investigation of rent capitalism theory is that by further criticizing this theory in the field of urban geography and urbanization in Iran, the theory of *Government & Urbanization* was developed and presented by an Iranian geographer, Dr. Mohammad-Taqi Rahnamaee. (Rahnamaee, 1995: 17)

Accordingly, first, we describe how to formulate Rent Capitalism theory regarding Iranian cities and then introduce the researches conducted in Iranian cities based on this theory, and finally, critics and their views on this issue are addressed.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology applied in this paper is descriptive-analytic and the data is gathered through documentary approach.

3. DEFINITION OF THEORY

First, it is better to define fundamental concepts of theory. Accordingly, Thorndike dictionary defines theory as:

1. The explanation based on observation and reasoning, in particular what has been tested and acknowledged as a general principle and illustrates a large number of related facts or events, such as the theory of evolution.
2. The hypotheses presented as explanations, reasonable assumptions, such as the theory of the origin of the solar system.
3. The principles and methods of a science or art instead of its practice, such as the theory of music
4. An idea or belief about something
5. thought or vision against reality or practice(Thorndike, 1974: 105)

"Theory is a set of, or more specifically, a continuous network of concepts, definitions and propositions that in order to explain and predict phenomena through discovery of relationships between variables, provides a systematic view about these phenomena".(Papoli Yazdi and Rajabi Sanajerdi, 2004: 8).

"Theory is a set of rules that are connected to each other based on logical principals and demonstrates a part of reality" (Zyari, 2004: 5).

3.1 Rent Capitalism

This theory was first proposed by Austrian geographer Hans Bobek In fact, in 1948, Bobek used the term rent capital in an article entitled” The main stages in socio-economic evolution from a geography point of view”. His concept of rent capitalism was an independent stage in the course of the geographically developed societies between a master-organized farming community and a productive capitalist society. (Ehlers, 2002: 222)

Indeed, as opposed to Marx’s theory of *Capitalism*, Bobek believed that to explain the flourishing stages of societies as Marx employed economic and political components (such as production and the relationships of working class with capitalist class), it was not correct and could not elaborate the development and the evolution of societies. (Rahnamaee, 2005: 173) Therefore, he believed that it is more useful to use geographical components, because not only they influence socio-economic components, but also they can better justify and explain stages of society development. To do this, Bobek used following components:

1. Existing forms of living
2. Relations and interrelation of various livelihood groups with society
3. Population burden of societies with all the qualitative & quantitative behavioral characteristics of the population
4. Spatial and residential groupings of societies as well as the effects that societies and cultures may have on the landscape

On this basis, Bobek explains socio-economic stages of society development based on performance and content, and not on the form and appearance, as expressed in Marxist views in six stages. (Ibid: 19)

In the table 1, you can see the classification and stages of development and evolution of societies in the Marxist point of view in contrast to Bobek’s (Rahnamaee, 1995: 19).

Table1. Marxism Perspective versus Bobek Theory

Marxism Perspective	Bobek Theory
1. Early Communal Society(primitive commune)	1. Hunting Based Livelihood
2. Slavery Society	2. Mastery in Hunting, Fishing and Food Gathering
3. Feudal Society	3. Tribal Agricultural Community with Lateral Activities in Husbandry & Pastoralism
4. Capitalist Society	4. Agricultural Society with Organized Governmental Authority
5. Socialist Society and transition to Communism	5. Old Urban Elements with Rent Capitalism
	6. Productive Capitalism, Industrial Society and Modern Urban Elements

Source: Authors, 2016

After a while, this theory is widely criticized, which ultimately leads to the revision of Bobek's view.

The most controversial critique of Bobek's theory relates to the fifth stage, rent capitalism and old urban elements, which he adopted to describe the development of societies from a geographical point of view. That is why his theory came to be known as *Rent Capitalism*, which has been discussed by geographers for several decades.

Now, we move on to more explanation of Bobek's opinion regarding rent capitalist society and old urban elements.

Bobek considers the society of middle-east and northern Africa as perfect examples of the fifth stage of socio-economic development of societies regarding geographical point of view; in fact he first presents the theory regarding two cases(1957, 1976) from Iran. (Ehlers, 2002: 226)

The features of rent capitalism are consistent with the early form of capitalism put forward by Sombart & Max Weber and shares many similarities with relationships in *Feudalist Capitalism*; but it also has its specific distinctions. (Momeni, 1999: 154)

The principals of rent capitalism are based on this principle that cities have a great importance in the social and economic system of Middle East. Exploitation is the main principal dominating the relation between cities and their sphere of influence. "City receives from rural areas without sending back anything in return. Cities are analogous to leeches or parasites that are sucking villages of their sphere of influence. Proprietors and other urban exploiters do not invest in villages or if they do it is for more exploitation of the villagers. Stagnation and depression of the rural societies in the middle-east is due to these aspects of rent capitalism." (Momeni, 1999: 53)

In the nature of rent capitalism theory, which relies on specific models of urban development of the East, the reality lies that urban economy in the Orient Islamic is based on the resources and wealth achieved through unilateral, aggressive & predominant relationships from rural districts and farming areas. As a result, urban roles are not more than a superstructure that its existence is merely derived from its sphere of influence; and from these sphere of influence, the city receives a major part of the driving force for economic growth and its specific social and political features. In fact, the economic importance of the city and the urbanism without the sphere of influence is relatively negligible. (Ehlers, 1976: 21, taken from Papoli Yazdi & Rajabi Sanajerdi, 2004) The way of generating wealth and incomes and the factors that lead to transition and accumulation of them in cities are traders and owners who own most of the agricultural land in the villages, but residing in cities. Therefore, they make communication channels between cities and villages (traditional relation of ownership), through which they transfer the royalties, or in other words their portion of rural production (agriculture, artisan, craftsmanship) from the villages to cities, i.e. their own place of living. In the next stage, a small amount of the income and wealth gathered by the proprietors from selling the products and the interests goes back to the villages and the rest is mainly invested in the different commercial activities of cities. This unilateral relationship leads to absolute hegemony and dominance of city centers over village areas. This is how the process of economic growth and urban expansion model based on rent capitalism is brought about. (Ehlers 1992: 118, taken from Papoli Yazdi & Rajabi Sanajerdi, 2004)

Bobek has named "proprietors & traders" as old urban elements. The Residence of these elements in the city and their functioning, which constitutes the main themes of the theory, results from fundamental features of socio-economic structure of Islamic-Eastern territories. In Iranian and eastern feudalism in contrast to its European type, the landowners do not reside in Hinterland of their lands in villages, but rather they stay in city centers (Absent proprietor or urban proprietors). Bobek believes that this framework has been acting in Oriental-Islamic sphere with an emphasis on Middle East and Iran since the second millennium BC to the present

time (1948 and the presentation of the essay of socio-economic development of societies from a geographical point of view), that is, during the four thousand years. (Ehlers, 1992: 116; Rahnamaee, 1995: 21) In fact, it can be said that the history of the emergence of such relations and development of these cities is traced back to the prehistoric period and early periods of history where the first eastern cities, native old endogenous cities of ancient east, formed after emergence and development of organized sedentary agricultural societies, which were based on dominance of cities over villages. From Bobek's point of view, such domination has been a form rent capitalism, and Egyptian and Sumerian governments and the remnants of 14-15 cities in the valleys of the Nile, Tigris, and Euphrates Rivers are the first governments and cities that embody such kind of dominance. (Momeni, 1999: 33-34)

As a result, Rent Capitalism is a stage of socio-economic evolution with the following features:

1. Continuation of close interdependence between government and city; these kind of dependence is in close connection with the economic approach based on ownership in eastern urbanization, which relies on cities.

2. Exploitation of artisans and agricultural procedures through allocating of major amount of the interest, which is meant here the interest from the sale of agricultural productions

3. Commercialization and investment of the earned interest; Based on available information, it can be stated that specific signs and features of traditional urban development based on rent capitalism can only be found in the Orient Islamic (Momeni, 1999: 313). So long as there is no information from other cultures about obtaining part of the value added of agricultural production or domestic industries by large urban lenders or landowners on the basis of rent capitalism, commercializing the interest earned from productive activities of the rural lower classes and small craftsmen can be regarded as the incipient germ of establishment and spread of Oriental-Islamic city (Ibid).

4. Lack of productive investment or even small investment by proprietor in villages; the constant reference to the share of production within the rent capitalist relation is consistently associated with a negligible desire for reinvestment in order to maintain and improve revenue resources. (Momeni, 1999: 313-314)

5. Lack of improvement in production tools and relative stability of general characteristics in rural communities (Momeni, 1999: 313-314)

3.2 Studies carried out based on Rent Capitalism in Iran

Rent capitalism theory and its case study applications in Iran, was introduced by western geographers (English, German & French) and continued by their Iranian students. The prominent German geographer Eckart Ehlers had an important role in focusing on the theory and its application in Iran (Momeni, 1999: 135); and even arguments regarding Bobek's rent capitalism and its application in Iran, which had started in 1970s, continued by translated works of Ehlers after 1975 Revolution. (Momeni, 1999: 312) In fact, after the *1975 Revolution*, most of Ehlers & Iranpour students, such as Momeni, Rahnamaee, Saeedi, Bahrambeigi and Zia Tawana introduced the theory and made it more known and applicable by translating the works of Ehlers or other German prominent geographers or compiled works in this field, and conducted research in various cities. Of course, apart from this group, some other foreign and domestic geographers have also described the relationships between urban and rural areas in Iran, which have extended the rent capitalism.

Here are presented examples:

- Bobek, Hans (1962); *Iran- Problems of an Underdeveloped Country of Ancient Culture*²
- Shafaghi, Sirous (1965); *City of Tabriz & its Hinterland*
- English, Paul ward (1966); *City & Village in Iran: Settlement & Economy in the Kirman Basin*
- Ehlers, Eckart (1971); *South Caspian Lowlands (Northern Iran) and Caspian Sea: Contributions to its evolutionary history and the Early and Late Pleistocene*³
- Bazen, Marcel (1973); *Qom City of Pilgrimage & the Center of the Region*
- Ehlers, Eckart (1975); *the Town of Bam and Its Surrounding Oases*⁴.
- Ehlers, Eckart (1976); *Dezful and Its Hinterland: Observations on the Relationships of Lesser Iranian Cities and Towns to Their Hinterland*
- Momeni, Mostafa (1976); *Malayer & its Hinterland; Development, Structure & Functions of Small Cities in Iran*
- Ehlers, Eckart (1977); *City and hinterland in Iran: The example of Tabas/Khorassan*
- Ehlers, Eckart (1978); *Rent Capitalism and Urban Development in the Orient Islamic : The example of Iran*⁵
- Bonine, Michael (1979); *City and Hinterland in Central Iran*
- Nazarian, Asghar (1980); *Qaredagh or Qarechedagh*

3.3 The critique of rent capitalism theory

As previously mentioned, after the introduction of this theory by Hans Bobek, many criticisms and stances have been made on it.

Initially, Eugen Wirth criticized the theory and its fifth stage in terms of the content of the theory. Moreover, scholars such as Long also criticized the theory in terms of terminology as a specific socio-economic stage (Ehlers, 2002: 22); and among Iranian geographer, Mohammad-Taqi Rahnamaee criticized the mechanisms referred in the theory; and also questioned the applicability of the theory at the present time and pioneered a new theory entitled "Government and Urbanization".

3.4 Eugen Wirth

Eugen Wirth, professor of geography at the University of Erlangen in Germany opposed Bobek's theory. He believes that Oriental-Islamic cities should not be seen as a parasitic octopus against their sphere of influence; contrariwise, they are obviously the center of innovation and organizing the economy, with positive functions (Ehlers, 1992: 118). Wirth convinced Bobek to modify his theory and remove epithets such as parasitic & leech-like about eastern cities. Eventually they agreed on the following subject: "although some urban elements provide the groundwork for the accumulation of capital in cities by organizing commerce and trade of agricultural products of villagers & the landowners' royalties, on the other hand, they provide the villagers with non-agricultural goods, and mutually they are responsible for organizing & supplying services and goods that the villagers require." Thus, instead of a unilateral, there is a bilateral relationship between cities and villages, which is more

² Iran - Probleme eines unterentwickelten Landes alter Kultur

³ Südkaspisches Tiefland (Nordiran) und Kaspisches Meer: Beiträge zu ihrer Entwicklungsgeschichte und Jung-und Postpleistozän

⁴ Die Stadt Bam und ihr Oasen-Umland/Zentraliran: Ein Beitrag zu Theorie und Praxis der Beziehungen ländlicher Räume zu ihren kleinstädtischen Zentren im Orient (The Town of Bam and Its Surrounding Oases).

⁵ Ehlers, E. (1978). Rentkapitalismus und Stadtentwicklung im islamischen Orient: Beispiel: Iran (Rent Capitalism and Urban Development in the Orient)

complementary. Rural production is consumed in cities, and, conversely, a portion of urban goods is consumed by the villagers. (Rahnamaee, 2005)

Below are two examples of Wirth's papers in critique of rent capitalism theory:

1. Wirth, Eugen (1972) *On Problems of Bazars & its Relations with the Surrounding Cities of Iran*

In fact, this short writing is a critique of Bobek's Rent Capitalism theory & its application by Ehlers in the cities of Caspian Sea's southern coastal plain and their relationship with their Hinterland, and also is the beginning of a later article in which Wirth, with reference to the reasons, modifies the Rent Capitalism theory in detail:

2. Wirth, Eugen(1974) *Relations between Oriental-Islamic Cities with Their Hinterland; an Argument on Rent Capitalism*

3.5 Mohammad-Taqi Rahnamaee

Rahnamaee is one of the Ehlers students and critics of Rent Capitalism theory and. He is well acquainted with Rent Capitalism theory and its theorists working in German School. As an Iranian geographer criticizing this theory, he question the applicability of the theory at the present time; and in response, he theorizes another one titled of "Government and Urbanization", which reflects urbanization changes of Iran in the current time.

Rahnamaee first discussed on this issue in 1995 in the article "*Government & Urbanization*, a critique on the theory of Hans Bobek's old urban elements and Rent Capitalism", and criticized Bobek's theory; and introduced the mechanisms of urban development, which had a big difference with Hans Bobek's Rent Capitalism theory. He declares, "There are some examples of urban developments and newborn cities in Iran, which in the last decades have been formed solely with the support and stewardship of the government, and in justifying their performance, commercializing of interest (rent) & Rent Capitalism cannot be used.

After the "Constitutional Revolution", emergence of a new bureaucracy system, and oil revenues, National economy of Iran has undergone fundamental changes; and the government has had a crucial role in expansion and development of cities by constructing public spaces (educational, health, administrative, etc.), funding facilities, infrastructures & instruments and regular salary payment to government employees & injection of capital into economy. By establishment of new administrative organizations, the administrative and political system of cities has changed in terms of the direction of capital flows and resources of government financing." (Rahnamaee, 1995: 20-24)

Mohammad-Taqi Rahnamaee by supervising some dissertations carried out at University of Tehran, proved the applicability and authenticity of the "Government & urbanization" theory, against "Rent Capitalism". Studies carried out in these dissertations are in contradiction to factors applied in Rent Capitalism theory.

Some of the dissertations supervised by Rahnamaee are presented as follow:

Aliakbari, I. 2001. *Urban Development Mechanism of Ilam Province; Emphasizing the Explanation of Government role*. Geography & urban planning Ph.D. dissertation, University of Tehran.

Aliakbari writes in his doctoral dissertation that the mechanism governing on urban and rural relations in Ilam province prior to *Land Reforms* did not have the attributes defined for Rent Capitalism. The establishment of 14 new cities between 1957-1997 in this province and increasing urbanization from 7.6% to 52% are mainly because of decisions, investments and government measures in cities and villages. Since the 1340s, more than half of the job opportunities in urban communities of this province have been provided by the government. (Aliakbari, 2001: 32)

Zyae, M. 2001. *Explaining the role of government in urban development and urbanization in Iran*. Urban geography Ph.D. dissertation, University of Tehran.

Zyae in his doctoral dissertation considers some elements as the role and influence of government on urbanization including the influences of the expanding government bodies in the modern era, government investment in urban spaces, implementation of government development plans; and governmental dominance over the economy. He also highlights the influence of government structure and functions on urban expansions (Zyae, 2001: 45).

Faraji, M. 2006. *Mechanisms of urban development in Sarabehleh*. Urban geography M.A. dissertation, University of Tehran.

“In general, all the results obtained from the central role of government in formation and development of Sarabehleh indicate applicability of Government & Urbanization theory and inefficiency of Rent Capitalism theory”, Faraji writes. (Faraji, 2006: 3)

Amirian, S. 2007. *Analysis of Government Role in Development and Centralization of Urbanization in Iran (with an emphasis on modern government)*. Geography and urban planning Ph.D. dissertation, University of Tehran.

Due to historical weakness of the private sector, lack of the capitalist mode of production, backwardness of the socio-economic foundations and historical domination of political system over all aspects of social life, after the Constitutional Revolution and gradual preparation of country for socio-economic modernization, especially by the rise of Pahlavi dynasty, most of changes have taken been occurred by the government. Establishment of new civil institutions, and development of economic and communication infrastructures are due to the government. Industrialization, changes in urban space, conscription and establishment of judicial & educational organizations and others strengthened the socio-economic foundations in cities. (Amirian, 2007: 210)

3.6 Theory Destination

At the beginning of proposing Rent Capitalism theory, in spite of all the criticisms, modifications and proposed amendments, the basis of the theory were almost accepted by all. It was applied to explain urban economy performance within the country, especially before Land Reform in 1960s (Ehlers, 1995: 42), and many studies have been carried out based on the Rent Capitalism theory, some of which were mentioned in this paper.

In the recent decades, especially after the Land Reform, various perspectives emerged from this theory. “Eckart Ehlers restricts the application of the theory to traditional Iranian cities, where the industry has not been begun or have not had an influence, and new elements of the West has not affected trade and its services.” (Papoli Yazdi and Rajabi Sanajerdi, 2004: 267)

In this regard, Nazarian believes that “after enactment and enforcement of *Land Reforms*, the theory and the system’s mechanism have either changed or abolished, but the basement that it has created in the relationships of city and village has had an influence on new mechanisms, and all the changes in city-village relationships are affected by the former relations. In fact, this system has been the cause of other relations and broad associations, whose performance, in general, has been in favor of urban centers and detriment of rural spheres of influence.” (Nazarian, 2001: 141)

Rahnamaee also criticized the applicability of the theory in terms of time and place in various articles and the dissertations he supervised. Aliakbari, as mentioned above, writes in an article, “The mechanism of urban development in Ilam indicate that the framework of *Rent Capitalism* is still applicable in the urban economy of some parts of the country; however, the type of rent and its transferring vector to city has changed. Nowadays cities are economically more receptive than providers are; however, their performance and behavior is not related to royalties produced in rural margins, as Bobek says in *Rent Capitalism*, but it is in relation to

financial resources of the government, that is, oil revenues or oil rents. Instead of old urban elements (urban-settled proprietors), government employees are the transferring vectors. (Aliakbari, 2001: 61)

4. CONCLUSION

The relationship between villages and cities in eastern societies, specifically Iran, is different from other economy system. So far, various theories and arguments have been devoted to settlement, urbanization and the relation of cities with their hinterland in Iran, but none of them has been more important and influential than *Rent Capitalism* theory.

Almost everyone who have studied the theory have admitted its influence on the formation of urban structures in Iran, even those who criticized the theory; however, a majority of scholars question the mechanism of its effectiveness at the present time and also believe that it cannot explain urban-rural relations, and urban development vectors.

However, it can be concluded that in order to planning for development of sustainable settlements, a thorough understanding of the settlements is required to be able to plan on the basis of the present circumstances for the future; since our understanding requires the historical recognition of that phenomenon. Therefore, explaining theories such as *Rent Capitalism*, which demonstrates the influential mechanisms in development of Iranian cities and relations between urban and rural settlements in a long period, and even in the present time directly or indirectly affects the establishment of these relations, is of high significance.

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