

Hanna BATATU, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq. A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Ba'athists, and Free Officers*. Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1978 (25 cm., II + XXIV + 1284 pp.) = Princeton Studies on the Near East. Price : \$ 94.00. ISBN 0-691-05241-7.

This monumental work of Hanna Batatu, Professor of Political Science at the American University of Beirut, is the result of about a quarter of a century of serious study on Iraq. It constitutes the long-awaited sequel to his important, though unpublished, Ph.D. thesis *The Shaikh and the Peasant in Iraq, 1917-1958*, presented to Harvard University in 1960.

In fact, Professor Batatu's newly published volume consists of three books. Book One, "The Old Social Classes" (pp. 1-361), comprises a study of the landowners and the men of money and commerce of prerepublican Iraq, and concentrates on the wealthier and more influential layers of the classes concerned in the period of the monarchy (1921-1958). Since many characteristics of the social structure in the monarchical period had their roots in a more distant past, Batatu has extended his descriptive analysis, when necessary, back to Ottoman times. "Apart from throwing some light on the circumstances, the power, the function, the way of thought, the political behaviour, the social standing, and the origin of the position of wealth of the landed, commercial and moneyed elements, the aim of this part of the study is", in Batatu's own words, "to find out whether a class approach would open to view historical relations or social features that would otherwise remain beyond vision or, to put it more generally, whether such an approach, when applied to a post-World War I Arab society, is capable of yielding new insights or valuable results".

Due to the extremely complex and many-sided character of the class picture of Iraq, in which elements with respect to wealth, ethnicity, sect or religion, regional or tribal affiliation, political influence or social prestige, and others, are in many cases simultaneously at work, Batatu has been forced to conduct his discussion — in all three books — on a low to medium level of generality. In his Preface Batatu states: "Perhaps the exposition lapses here and there into minutiae or verges on a scholarly overkill". Generally he has taken care, however, not to lose sight of the wider context, and to bring to the surface only

the details that could simultaneously throw light upon conditions of society. Political scientists fond of high-level abstract theoretical discussions should realize here that high-level abstract theoretical statements about complex societies such as exist in Iraq and other Arab Fertile Crescent countries, could easily turn out to be oversimplifications which ignore, or are not completely in line with, many of the essential (and extremely useful) data given in the Batatu study.

Batatu shows which long-range effects the gradual transformation of Iraq into an adjunct of the international industrial capitalist system had upon preexisting norms and structures. He demonstrates the important influence which the stabilization, expansion, and, eventually, extreme concentration of private property had upon the formation, emergence and decline of classes.

After giving in his Introduction a highly useful treatise on the diversity of the Iraqis, the relative incohesiveness of their society, and their progress during the monarchy toward a more consolidated political structure; and after explaining the major religious-class and ethnic-class correlations; Batatu devotes separate chapters to each of the major dominant classes and status groups: The *Mallaks* or landowners; the Shaykhs and Aghas, and their relations to the peasants; the *Sadah* or claimants of descent from the Prophet Muhammad; the old "aristocracy" of officials; the *Chalabis* (merchants of high social standing), the Jewish merchants and merchant-*Sarrafs*; and finally the ex-Sharifian officers. Batatu shows how during the twenties and thirties these dominant classes and status groups were vying with one another for power, prestige, and property, whereas during the two last decades of the monarchy, the same groups tended to close ranks in order to defend the social order from which they all benefited, and which then became threatened by underprivileged groups.

Book Two, "The Communists from the Beginnings of Their Movement to the Fifties" (pp. 363-705), deals with the history of the Communist Party of Iraq, its ideological developments, organisation, and the social backgrounds of its members. Whereas Book One devotes much more attention to the state of affairs at the upper social and political levels, Book Two examines what was happening underneath the structure of power and in the lower reaches of society.

Book Three, "The Communists, the Ba'thists, and the Free Officers from the Fifties to the Present" (pp. 707-1110), continues with the developments which the Communist Party of Iraq made through until the mid-seventies, and describes the political, socioeconomic and other backgrounds of the major political groups which competed for power in the post-monarchical period till about 1977. Though extensive consideration is given to the Ba'th Party and the Free Officers — in fact Book Three contains masses of data, as well as various insights not to be found anywhere else in published literature on Iraq — the history of the Communists is *relatively* represented on a larger scale. One reason for this is, as Batatu explains, "that this history forms the original nucleus out of which the books in question have grown".

Batatu convincingly explains why the solidarity of successive ruling groups, at least since November 1963, expressed itself recurrently in combinations of regional,

localistic, sectarian, or tribal or semitribal forms, but underlines simultaneously that these groups and the individuals composing them "were predominantly of middle condition and tended, in some respects, to look into life from similar standpoints and tackle many problems in a similar manner. That being so, and since they could not make particular but only general laws, they naturally benefited, by their public measures, the middle classes, even though they were acting on their own account". Batatu's analysis is always multi-dimensional. He never tumbles into the pitfall of oversimplification by attaching too great importance to one or two factors only. Although personal and accidental factors have indeed played an important role in political developments in Iraq, Batatu is able to unambiguously show that the oppositional or revolutionary politics of Iraq also had their distinct structural aspects and cannot be properly understood in purely personalized terms. Thus, he explains the socioeconomic and other factors which led to strong representation in Iraqi power institutions of, for instance, Sunni Arabs from the north, particularly from towns such as 'Anah and Takrit; or which factors helped form the mass backing of the Communist Party, in certain periods, among the Shurugis of Baghdad, i.e. the poor (Shi'i) tribal peasant migrants from the 'Amarah country south-east from the capital; etcetera.

One may not always completely agree with Batatu's analysis. With regard to the role of Takritis in the Ba'th regime which took over power in 1968 he remarks, for instance, that "their role continues to be so critical that it would not be going too far to say that the Takritis rule through the Ba'th party, rather than the Ba'th party through the Takritis". (p. 1088). It is clear that Takritis have since 1968 been strongly overrepresented in the most important Iraqi power institutions. But although it could be said that in a country like Iraq reliance on regional and tribal ties appears to be preconditional at present for staying in power, political developments in Iraq since 1968 would, to this reviewer's opinion, nevertheless justify the conclusion that the present regime is in the first place Ba'thist, and that being a Ba'thist is decisive for being in power. The high placed Takriti Ba'thists may from their viewpoint consider themselves as a temporarily indispensable safety device, necessary to keep the present Ba'thist leadership in power during a transitional period long enough to have Ba'thism penetrate deeply into Iraqi society and to broaden the Ba'thist elite's composition gradually, so as to finally win wider recognition in Iraq of its legitimacy as a ruling party. But this is only one of a few minor disagreements of interpretation, which do not detract from the enormous value of the book. Incidentally, Batatu realistically doubts whether the Ba'th Party alone would be able to run the country in the long run, and concludes: "These are tasks that are too great for any party acting singly, or simultaneously engaged in combating civil strife, and can be accomplished only if the country's principal forces — the Ba'th, the Communists, and the Kurdish Democrats — pull together and work hand-in-hand for the good of their people". (p. 1134).

The book contains 181 (!) tables with, among other things, historical, economic, social and biographical data (many of which are extremely difficult to obtain, and are

published here for the first time). The latter make the book also a highly useful "Who's Who in Iraq".

Batatu's work draws in part upon the extensive and richly varied secret records of Iraq's Directorate General of Internal Security, as well as upon the British public records, Arabic printed sources, the unpublished memoirs of Colonel Rajab 'Abd al-Majid, secretary of the Free Officers' Movement, and on a mass of interviews with Iraqis who participated, or were close to those who took part themselves, in the developments described.

The three books of Batatu's study may be read more or less separately; they might have enjoyed wider readership if published as separate volumes.

*The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* is a fascinating, rich, and highly original, monumental work of scholarship. It is an excellent, and definitive standard work, indispensable for anyone — historians, political scientists, sociologists and others alike — with a serious interest in political, social and economic developments in the Arab countries of the Fertile Crescent, Iraq in particular.

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