

An Epistemological Genealogy of Oriental Despotism in Iran: A Critical Re-reading of Thinkers' Views

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<p>Article type: Research Article</p> <p>Article history: Received: 09 May 2026 Received in revised form: 07 June 2026 Accepted: 12 June 2026 Published online: 15 June 2026</p> <p>Keywords: <i>Epistemological genealogy, Oriental despotism, Critical discourse analysis, Structure-agency duality, Mechanisms of power reproduction, Synergistic intervention, Path dependence.</i></p>	<p>Objective: The concept of "Oriental despotism" in Iran's theoretical discourse has often been explained from the perspective of positivist and reductionist approaches as a deterministic, intrinsic phenomenon, or merely the product of climatic and cultural determinism. This research, moving beyond these dualisms, seeks to critically analyze how this concept has been formulated, re-examine the hidden ontological presuppositions of thinkers, and identify the networked mechanisms of its reproduction. Based on a review of the literature, previous studies are mainly categorized into four paradigmatic clusters: ecological determinism, structural institutionalism, political-cultural psychology, and philosophy of history, each with its own analytical blind spots. Furthermore, few studies have explored the genealogical trajectory of the production of the concept of Oriental despotism and the hidden epistemological presuppositions of thinkers. Accordingly, the main research question is: How has Oriental despotism been reproduced through the dialectical interaction of multiple paradigms and structural mechanisms, and what networked model can formulate a path of escape from historical determinism as a structured possibility.?</p> <p>Method: This research is qualitative in nature and historical-comparative in approach with an interpretive-critical orientation. The research population includes the works of 25 prominent Iranian and international thinkers from the classical to the contemporary period, who were selected through "purposive-theoretical sampling" until theoretical saturation was achieved. Data were collected through structured note-taking and analyzed using "three-stage thematic coding" (open, axial, and selective) within the framework of critical discourse analysis and historical sociology. To ensure validity and reliability, strategies such as source triangulation, peer review, and transparent documentation of the coding process were employed.</p> <p>Findings: The findings revealed that, first, the paradigmatic classification of thinkers' views falls into four clusters: ecological determinism (emphasizing centralized water management, the Asiatic mode of production, and arid climate), structural institutionalism (emphasizing the lack of intermediary institutions, patrimonialism, and the tribal structure of power), political-cultural psychology (emphasizing chronic distrust, negative individualism, and the sacralization of power), and philosophy of history (emphasizing</p>



despotism as a necessary stage in the dialectical or cyclical course of history), thereby revealing the analytical blind spots of each. Second, discursive genealogy showed that the concept of Oriental despotism is not a static truth but a "situated report of the present," having served an instrumental function in different periods (from civilizational othering in the Enlightenment era to the pathology of modernization in the era of nascent nation-states and critical re-reading in the post-mid-20th-century revolutions period). Third, drawing the "matrix of reproduction mechanisms" identified four main locks: the ecological-infrastructure lock (monopoly over water resources and rent), elite coalition and rent distribution (distribution of economic-military privileges to tribes in exchange for loyalty), cognitive-cultural internalization (negative individualism, chronic distrust, sacralization of power), and institutional path-dependent vacuum (the persistence of patrimonial structures).

Conclusion: The final synthesis of the research shows that Oriental despotism in Iran is neither an inexorable fate nor an intrinsic trait of Iranian culture, but rather a "self-reinforcing, path-dependent system" arising from positive feedback among material, institutional, and cultural layers. Transition from this situation requires moving beyond single-interventionism and adopting a "synergistic and multi-faceted intervention" model. This model necessitates simultaneous transformation on three fronts: the material dimension (decentralization of resources, reduction of rent dependency, economic diversification), the institutional dimension (inclusive institution-building, strengthening independent oversight institutions, legal regulation of power), and the cultural dimension (rebuilding social capital, citizenship education, strengthening local participation). By moving from causal description to testable mechanistic analysis and from essentialism to structured agency, this research provides a framework for the empirical assessment of institutional dynamics and the design of developmental interventions in Iran.

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