

features which differentiated them from each other. This does not mean that commonalities among these areas did not exist, it only means that in order to appreciate the history of a particular region, that region must be addressed specifically. These specificities play no role in the approaches discussed above.

The Ottoman Empire was not always the centralised despotic state that it has often been described as. Middle Eastern scholars generally agree that the beginning of the decentralization of the Ottoman central authority began as early as the seventeenth century with the introduction of the "Iltizam" system. The "Iltizam", or tax farming system, was introduced by the state as a measure to solidify its central authority. The state, which claimed absolute right over the land, used this vital means of production (i.e., land) as a form of payment for its military and other civil service men. Multazims, or tax farmers, were sole possessors of this land for a specific period of time. However, in the process, this phenomenon developed its own contradictions. Multazims (tax farmers) began to treat their "Mugata'a" (their tract of land) as their own private property and they assumed full rights over its possession, transfer and inheritance. (Barakat, 1977; Barakat, 1985; Saleh, 1979). By the nineteenth century, as one author noted, "...groups of advantaged social status..." which had access to large tracts of land were transformed into "social classes," that is, influential landed propertied classes (Barakat, 1985: 139-140).

The magnitude and effect of this class varied from one region to another. In large peasant societies, such as Egypt and Iraq, it was markedly significant. It has been reported that in Egypt, just prior to the 1952 revolution, about 6 per cent of Egyptian landowners owned