

***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'thists
and Free Officers***

by Hanna Batatu, Saqi Books, 2004, 1,284 pp.

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No serious study of the modern history of Iraq can be undertaken without a period of immersion in Hanna Batatu's massive *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, first published by Princeton University Press in 1978. It is a pleasant duty to commend Saqi Books for having had the courage to republish a paperback of 1284 pages. As one reviewer wrote in 1981: 'Hanna Batatu has constructed a masterpiece of historical literature that single-handedly catapults Iraq from the least known of the major Arab countries to the Arab society of which we now have the most thorough political portrait.' [1] Let me take advantage of the luxury of a long review to say something about the author and his work. [2]

Hanna Batatu (1926-2000)

Hanna Batatu was born in Jerusalem in 1926; he emigrated from Palestine to the United States in 1948, and attended first Georgetown and then Harvard, where he received his doctorate in 1960. He held two teaching appointments, the first at the American University of Beirut between 1962 and 1981, and the second at Georgetown between 1982 and 1994. He retired in 1994, and died in 2000. As far as I can tell, [3] he did not publish anything at all, certainly nothing in English, before *The Old Social Classes*, which appeared in 1978, when he was 52. While at Georgetown, he published about a dozen articles on Iraq, about half on the Shi'i opposition. His other major work was *Syria's Peasantry: the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables and Their Politics*. About a third of the length of *The Old Social Classes*, but still a substantial four hundred pages, it was published by Princeton University Press in 1999. In some ways the methodology adopted in *Syria's Peasantry* replicates that of the last section of *The Old Social Classes*, especially, as its title suggests, in its stress on the rural or small town lesser notable origins of the post-revolutionary ruling class. Batatu had already sketched out a comparative

approach to this theme in his inaugural lecture at Georgetown (as the first holder of the Shaykh Sabah Al-Salem Chair in Contemporary Arab Studies) in January 1983. [4] According to the preface to *Syria's Peasantry* Batatu's last research visit to Syria was in 1992: I think I am correct in saying that the Syrian authorities either prevented or discouraged subsequent visits.

I first became aware of Batatu's work in the late 1960s, well before *The Old Social Classes* was published. My doctoral supervisor at Oxford, Albert Hourani, had brought back a microfilm of Batatu's doctoral thesis, called 'The Shaykh and the Peasant in Iraq, 1917-58,' from Harvard (much of which appears in Book One of *The Old Social Classes*) and I was able to make use of it in my own work on the British mandate. [5] Reading it made me particularly aware of the profound pauperisation of the countryside in the interwar period caused largely by the British policy of economising on local administration in the rural areas, essentially giving large landowners a free hand to 'manage' their estates with minimal interference from 'government.'

I met Batatu first in Beirut on my way to work in the Iraq mandate archives in India in 1970. I was a graduate student on my way to work on a body of material which no scholar had looked at before; Batatu was shy and retiring, but berated me (gently) for what he rightly considered my over-empirical approach. My own complacency was to be shattered permanently when, quite by chance, I met (and subsequently married) Marion Omar Farouk in the Public Record Office on my return from India. I think Batatu would probably have approved the overall effect this meeting had on my formation as a historian.

My second and only other meeting with Batatu took place several years later. Early in 1989, Roger Louis at the University of Texas at Austin convened a conference to which Marion and I were invited, whose theme was a re-examination of the Iraqi Revolution of 1958 both in the light of the opening of the British archives for 1958 and of Batatu's analysis of the events surrounding the revolution. The title of the collection that resulted, edited by Robert Fernea and Roger Louis, *The Iraqi Revolution of 1958: the Old Social Classes Revisited*, published in 1991,[6] reflects these twin concerns. Batatu himself wrote a brief postscript to the papers, in which he was kind enough to commend our contribution ('The Social Classes and the Origins of the Revolution' pp. 118-41), and in general seemed pleased with the themes and discussions which the conference had raised.

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I have two main criticisms of Batatu, which are different aspects of the same thing. In the first place, I find it hard to understand – and harder with the passage of time – what positive elements he could ever have found in Ba’thism, or perhaps more accurately why he was not more clearly aware of the farrago of nonsense, mostly poisonous nonsense, that it now seems (and to me at least, has always seemed) to be. [7] In this respect, the last hundred odd pages of *The Old Social Classes ...* are something of a disappointment. Batatu infers on pp. 985-86 that the CIA was involved in the coup of 1963 (which brought the Ba’th briefly to power): even if the evidence here is somewhat circumstantial, there can be no question about the Ba’th’s fervent anti-communism. Since so much of the book reveals his profound sympathy with the ‘real left,’ his rather ambivalent attitude towards Ba’thism seems especially odd. Secondly, by the time the conference volume edited by Fernea and Louis mentioned above was published (in 1991); Saddam Hussein had not only initiated and fought an almost entirely pointless bloody war with Iran, but had also invaded Kuwait. Whether or not Batatu himself had had the time to take the invasion into account in his postscript I do not know, but the only two references it contains to current events read rather oddly today:

In the 1980s the workings of balance-of-power diplomacy and Saddam Hussein’s weakness led to his curious enmeshment with the superpowers and his role as an instrument for the containment of the Iranian revolution. (p. 216)

It is true that the top of the present power structure rests to an important degree on solidarities based on region and kinship. It is also true that the distance between the Kurdish minority and the regime has widened. Saddam Hussein has, however, associated the Shi’is more meaningfully with his regime and extended economic benefits to their areas. (pp. 221-22)

The first comment suggests a lack of agency on Saddam Hussein’s part that is, to say the least, puzzling; his behaviour in the 1980s was surely such as to put paid once and for all to the image he had tried to create for himself as a crusader for Arabism against imperialism. The second is even more disturbing, given that the bombing of Halabja, and the genocidal campaign against the Kurds known as al-Anfal, had taken place in March 1988 and 1988-1989 respectively. Furthermore, although this is only hearsay, I have been told that Batatu was deeply critical of Samir al-Khalil/Kanan Makiya’s *Republic of Fear* when it first appeared in 1989, largely, I think, because he considered it ‘boat-rocking’ or otherwise damaging to ‘the Arab cause.’

None of these things, however, much as I wish I did not feel obliged to mention them, detracts from the quality and originality of *The Old Social Classes*, to which I will now turn. [8]

Social Classes

The Old Social Classes is an inspired and inspiring book, a work of passionate commitment and profound scholarship. It provokes many questions on the writing of contemporary history, and the relation of the historian to his human and documentary material. Above all, the book conveys a vivid sense of what it must have been like to live at this or that time in recent Iraqi history, as a member of a struggling clandestine group, or even more graphically as a participant in one of the mass demonstrations or risings against the *ancien régime* in the 1940s and 1950s. The main impression is that of a vision of a better and more just society emerging in spite of intense persecution and repression, and the preparedness of ordinary individuals to make heroic and often supreme sacrifices in order to bring the vision closer to reality.

The book is divided into three sections. The first, as I have mentioned, is an enlarged and revised version of Batatu's doctoral thesis, and provides a comprehensive survey of Iraq's 'old social classes' from the late eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century. It provides a detailed and vivid description of the processes of commercial and political penetration of the area in the course of the nineteenth century and of the new social and economic structures which emerged. The picture is one of great social upheaval and dislocation. In the course of his narrative of the years of the occupation, mandate and monarchy, Batatu not only shows the way in which British control was maintained but also describes how British land policies radically influenced the social structure of the countryside, where the majority of the population lived. In very simple terms, a combination of economic circumstances and Ottoman policies had caused the once powerful tribal leaders of Central and Southern Iraq to lose much of their control over their tribes by the latter part of the nineteenth century. This state of affairs was almost completely reversed by British land policies, and the tribal leaders were transformed into powerful landowners who rapidly became a vital social base for the regime.

The wider impact of these policies, and the social and political tensions that arose from them over the years, particularly during the decade before the Revolution of 1958, is perhaps best summarised in Batatu's description of Baghdad:

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When we come ... to the period 1917-1958 – and more particularly 1941-1958 – we encounter an unusual phenomenon: a Baghdad throbbing with a vigor long unknown, a middle class in continuous growth and already intensely articulate, a modern education still meager in content but extending in bounds, paved roads, railroads and air services gradually spanning more and more of the country, a commerce still hesitant but in a lively mood – all coexisted with a newly born artificially isolated structure of vast semi-feudal estates, where the enfeebled Shaikh of a few decades earlier now ruled practically unchallenged as landlord, producing for a market, and as absolute master of a peasantry by this time depressed to a condition resembling serfdom. In other words, the circumstances – the development of towns, of the central government, of commerce and of communications – that, in the nature of things should have hastened the downfall of the Shaikh, were on the contrary attended by the growth of a new commercial shaikhly semi-feudalism (p. 78).

This paragraph is particularly informative because it encapsulates the inconsistency between conditions in the countryside and the main trends of development in the rest of the economy. It shows that the power of the great landowners had to be broken, not just to improve the wretched lot of the peasantry, or because they constituted a major social base for the monarchy, but also because this would be a major precondition for the integration of the country's agriculture into the rest of the economy. Thus it is not at all surprising that all the opposition parties adopted land reform as a major feature of their political programmes, and that land reform became an important issue immediately after the 1958 Revolution had taken place.

Chapter Nine, on the merchants, is particularly valuable for its description of the process of capital formation and the rise of the national bourgeoisie. The whole first part presents a lucid picture of a society undergoing rapid and uneven transformation from a far-flung Ottoman province to an adjunct of the British imperial economy in the space of less than seventy-five years. It provides a backdrop for the second part of the book, since the nature and the rapid rate of change, and the economic and social polarities which resulted, contributed to the politicisation and radicalisation of important and articulate sections of Iraqi society.

Communists

The central section of the book deals with the history and development of the Iraqi Communist party from the early 1930s to the mid-1950s. Here Batatu shows conclusively how the Communist party led and inspired the national movement in the 1940s and 1950s, and also derived much of its own impetus from it. From the style and presentation, this topic seems to have been his main concern. He gives the reader a memorial, as well as a documentary record, and the descriptions of the Communists in prison, of the Great March (*al-masira al-kubra*) and the leap (*al-wathba*) are unforgettable. Here, for example, he describes the gradual build-up of tension during the months before the announcement of the Portsmouth Agreement, which was to replace the 1930 Anglo-Iraqi Treaty, in mid-January 1948. Salih Jabr, a Shi'i, was the first of his sect to be made prime minister under the Iraqi monarchy:

Raising a Shi'i to the Premiership proved eventually to be of little avail. It meant nothing to the workers without bread, the lawyers without law-suits, the forgotten clerks, the students clandestinely propagandised, and the parties held in leash. It took now only a few incidents to precipitate the thinly disguised, long-seething ferment (pp. 546-47).

Later Batatu describes the wathba, the great movement of protest directed against the Portsmouth Agreement, which eventually brought down the Government: the Communists 'emerged unmistakably as the fundamental force,' and the police 'fired murderously into their midst' (p. 551). He continues:

At about the same time, on the other side of the river, parts of the Karkh crowds, reckless of life, thrust away an armed police force that had been disputing their passage and swarmed onto the fifty-foot-wide bridge, intent upon effecting a union with their comrades in ar-Rasafah. But their forward ranks had scarcely gained the left bank when suddenly pitiless fire was let loose upon them by an armored car detachment that had rushed from the markets of as-Sarai and at-Tuhufiyat. Several were instantly killed or wounded. The others turned round and tried to regain the opposite bank, but were spattered with machine-gun fire from the top of a khan in as-Suwaidi Square. The bleeding of the crowd was terrible. Bodies lay all over. Some were entangled in the iron of the bridge. Others had dropped into the river below and were carried along by the current (pp. 555-57).

It is clear from such passages, and there are many others, that the author is not simply concerned to give a record of what happened during these turbulent years. Many of those who experienced these events have admired the authenticity with which he managed to capture the mood and spirit of the time.

Although Batatu does not say so explicitly, Iraq was undoubtedly a divided nation in the 1940s and 1950s. The British mandate [9] had come to an end in 1932, but the reality of Britain's power within the country belied the illusion of independence. Britain retained her military bases, had the right to appoint 'advisors' to key ministries and some of the senior judges, and retained a military mission. In addition, the British Ambassador had permanent precedence, and privileged access to the King and prime minister. The ex-Sharifian officers (that is, those who had taken part in the Arab Revolt and had subsequently been associated with Faysal in Syria before returning to Iraq) had been incorporated into the regime since the early 1920s and the monarchy had lost its 'nationalist physiognomy' (p. 30). It became more and more isolated from the population at large, and

had been tying its fortunes more and more intimately to those of the English and the tribal shaikhs, and thus had developed a living interest in the continuance not only of the English connection but also of the tribal order ... the fierce urban uprisings drove the Monarchy even deeper into this isolation (p. 31).

Political life was extremely circumscribed, since elections to the Chamber of Deputies were rigged, and the average life of cabinets between 1920 and 1958 was a mere eight months. Parties existed, but they were based almost without exception on the interests of individuals rather than on principles. Given these political and economic structures, the chances for democratic development were slight. By the late 1940s, the majority of Iraqis had become totally disenchanted with the regime, except for a narrow stratum of individuals whose interests were directly linked to it. Above all, the continuation of the regime in power, its corruption and repression, and the social inequalities which it tolerated and represented, were inexorably linked, in the minds of many Iraqis, with British influence and British interests. Thus Britain was the principal enemy, and the idea of national independence united all shades of political opinion. Sometimes, when reading the immensely detailed chapters on the development of the Communist party, the reader may become so bogged down in the mass of information that this particular reality sometimes disappears from view, although it is of course implicit in the narrative.

Another minor point of criticism is that Batatu tends to attribute the relatively wide acceptance of socialist and communist concepts to the social conditions prevailing and emerging in Iraq. Thus, in his discussion of the period between 1945 and 1950 he includes a number of tables showing the relationship of popular disturbances to falls in real wages. Here he seems to overestimate the direct relationship between poverty and hardship and revolutionary consciousness, although he gives detailed descriptions of the influence of the Communist party in such large enterprises as the Iraq Railways and Basra Port. In general, it seems that deprivation and hardship alone, without political education and organisation, will not bring about movements of revolutionary change. [10] Furthermore, as Batatu himself shows (p. 611), it was particularly difficult for the Communist party to take root among the peasantry; the most exploited and deprived section of Iraqi society.

While it is true that the Communist party was a product of the harsh social and economic reality pertaining in Iraq, it is also the case that under the leadership of Fahd (1941-48) and Salam 'Adil (1955-63) it was able to merge the national with the social question in a unique manner. Thus, when asked when he was born, Fahd answered: 'My age begins from the day I entered the national movement; the rest is not of my age.' The party was involved in and generally led all the most important national risings and demonstrations, using its organisation and network in the trade unions and the city slums. The Communists bore the brunt of punishment and imprisonment after each of these events, especially after the wathba of 1948, when the party was virtually wiped out. On 14-15 February 1949, Fahd and two of his comrades were executed and their bodies 'were strung up in different squares of Baghdad ... [and] left hanging for several hours so that the common people going to their work would receive the warning' (p. 568).

However, the courageous suffering of many party members and the torture and death that threatened them did not simply serve as a 'warning' to the 'common people'; in fact, many of those who might otherwise not have dared to join the party began to support it and to admire what it stood for. Its stand in the national movement and among the trade unions left an indelible impression, and explains the unique prestige which it was to enjoy in the following decade. Furthermore, although it seemed to be 'crumbling to dust' (p. 567) in the last months of 1948 and 1949, 'as police blow followed police blow, and party unit after party unit disintegrated' (p. 569), it was clearly back on its feet by the time of the rising of November 1952, known as the intifadah. Of course the constant bloodletting of

these years inevitably affected both party organisation and the coherence of the party's political line.

Batatu documents these years meticulously, and describes the ideological struggles within the party leadership between 1948 and 1955, when Husayn Ahmad Radi, known as Salam 'Adil, assumed command, a position which he held until his murder by the Ba'th in 1963. These years of controversy are described as the 'ultra-left' period, but Batatu's account shows that the party leadership was extremely young and inexperienced, and that the various internal crises make it almost impossible to discern a genuine party line. Nevertheless, communism had become a 'powerful passion' in Iraq by the mid-1950s. Batatu estimates a membership of around 3,600, and a far larger number of 'supporters,' in spite of a campaign of persecution, imprisonment and execution. Under Salam 'Adil, the slogans adopted at the second Party Conference in 1956 reflected the general mood of the day, particularly the identification with Arabism as a result of the rise of Nasser. The Conference declared that the 'territory inhabited by the Arab people in Iraq constitutes an indivisible part of the Arab homeland' and that

the Arabs are one nation ... inasmuch as they form a stable historical group, live on a common territory – notwithstanding the present artificial frontiers – speak the same language, possess the prerequisites of a unitary economy, and have a common psychological make-up which finds its expression in a common Arab culture and common traditions and their fervent desire for unity (p. 750).

By the time of the Revolution of 1958, the party had once again been able to merge and combine the social and national objectives of wide strata of the population, and had become the most influential political organisation in the country. Although the party never held power, it had sufficient impact to ensure that its various rivals found it necessary to graft elements of Marxist economic and social thought onto their own ideologies.

After the 1958 Revolution

The third part of the book deals with the difficult years leading up to and after the Revolution of 1958, and ends in 1977. [11] The reader becomes a virtual participant in the powerful mass demonstrations which took place in the course of the first ten months after the Revolution, when the various political forces and parties began

to polarise. Batatu describes the controversial clashes in Mosul and Kirkuk, and the Ba'th's attempt to assassinate 'Abd al-Karim Qasim, who had become president after the revolution of 1958. We see how Qasim, who lacked instinctive political understanding, gradually undermined the left, his main source of support, and thus inevitably became the victim of this policy when the nationalists and the Ba'th seized power in February 1963. The coup was followed by a vicious persecution of the Left, and we visit the terrible torture chambers in Qasr al-Nihaya and hear the screams of those being tortured by the new rulers. The new regime held onto power for a few months, but in November, 'Arif managed to oust his Ba'thist allies and seize power himself. The Communist party, extremely weakened and licking its wounds once again, was nevertheless somehow able to gather its forces together again and to reassert its authority both underground at home and among its many members in exile abroad. A fiercely critical policy discussion ensued, which ended with 'Aziz al-Hajj splitting away from the party in the late 1960s.

Batatu's account of these years is primarily concerned with political events, and the social and economic dimension is less closely investigated. He describes the various policies, tactics and alliances adopted by the leading parties, political forces and personalities after 1958, tracing the social, religious, ethnic, tribal and personal backgrounds of an enormous number of individuals in great detail, providing a number of illuminating tables. As I have hinted earlier, this mass of detail can occasionally have the effect of obscuring the main issues. For example, after having read through the long section dealing with the period after 1958, the uninitiated reader may still be puzzled as to what the fierce struggle of those years was really about.

The battle between the Communist and anti-Communist forces in Iraq from 1958 to 1963 has been reduced by other commentators, especially Majid Khadduri in *Republican Iraq*, [12] to the question of whether Iraq would or would not join the United Arab Republic. The more fundamental issue, which sometimes gets lost in the narrative, was how much of a genuine socialist transformation Iraq should be permitted to undergo. If Iraq joined the UAR, political parties would be abolished, and all chance of carrying out thorough-going social and economic reforms would be lost.

Batatu declares himself in favor of a form of class analysis (a kind of combination of Marx and Weber), and a more rigorous application of that framework might have thrown more light on the question of why the political events so meticulously

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described took the course they did. This omission is especially apparent in the Conclusion. He offers the following explanation of the fact that individuals and groups with a relatively narrow social base have been able to seize power in Iraq:

The incohesiveness of the middle social elements, added to the circumstances that the mass of Iraqis are still outside the political cycle ... have repeatedly made it possible since 1958 for individuals or groups with a narrow power base to run the show (p. 1131).

This is too vague, and the category of 'middle social elements' is not specific enough. As a whole, and as I have already remarked, the last part of the book, particularly the long penultimate chapter which deals with the present regime just before the book was published, seems to me to be the weakest in the book.

Such criticisms, however, pale into insignificance beside the overall achievement of the book. As I have tried to indicate, it is unique for the depth and extent of detail on which the author has drawn. Very occasionally this can become overwhelming, but the style is clear and uncluttered, and the narrative lively. Much of the material on which the book is based (particularly the second section) comes from secret police files, [13] but Batatu has been able to check his sources in interviews with almost all the leading personalities. Furthermore, there is rarely any doubt about where his basic sympathies lie. Consider, for example, this account of Zaki Khayri's introduction to Communist ideas:

'I was fourteen years old and at the elementary school at that time [in 1925],' said Zaki Khairi, who, with pinioned wrists and ankles sat near me (i.e. Batatu, PS) in the guards' room of the prison of Ba'quba one June day of 1958 [where he had been since 1949]. 'I still remember the instructor – a humble man from the quarter of Albu Shibl – interrupted the reading exercise. The class had just run over passages of an essay in which the author, an old pedagogue called 'Abd ul-Qadir Wajdi, painted Bolshevism in very dark colors. "The Bolshevik government," the instructor explained, 'is a government of the poor. That is why it is regarded with hatred ...' I (Khairi) was at a malleable and receptive age, and the remark imprinted itself on my thought.'

In spite of its great length and considerable cost, the book is well known to a wide and appreciative readership, especially, for so many years, among Iraqis who were

no longer able to live in their country. The people of Iraq, to whom the book is dedicated, have a worthy chronicler of their recent past.

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Notes

- [1] Stork 1981, p. 23.
- [2] For further details on how the book was written, on Batatu's 'authorial voice' and more generally on his life and work, see Owen 2000-1, pp. 94-107.
- [3] See Bleaney and Roper 2004.

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[4] Batatu 1983.

[5] Sluglett 1976 (see especially Appendix II, Tenurial and Taxational Arrangements in 'Amara Liwa).

[6] Fernea and Louis (eds.) 1991.

[7] For a refreshingly frank account along these lines, see Mufti 1996.

[8] Much of what follows is adapted from Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett 1981.

[9] Oddly, Batatu refers to 'the British' as 'the English' throughout the book, as in the next quotation.

[10] See Aya 1975.

[11] For more recent studies of Iraqi history, see Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett 2001; Tripp 2000; Marr 2004.

[12] Khadduri 1969.

[13] Batatu's extensive use of police records is somewhat reminiscent of Cobb 1970.