
*Introduction: Large-Scale Commercial Agriculture in the Ottoman Empire?**

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The papers collected in this volume were prepared as contributions to a conference on the subject of "Large-Scale Commercial Agriculture in the Ottoman Empire." The object of the conference was to investigate the question of the *çiftlik*, a superimposition on the peasant economy whose protean nature and diversity of historical incarnations make it difficult to define or identify. We may provisionally define *çiftlik* as private control over landed property which tends to reduce the autonomy of the peasantry. Despite the problem of identification, most scholars in the field would agree that the implicit debate on the *çiftlik* raises the principal questions of Ottoman history. First of all the existence of *çiftlik*s contradicts the self-understanding of the ruling class of the Empire. According to this conception, the legitimacy of political power is based on the perpetuation of an independent peasantry who enjoy unassailable usufructuary rights over state lands. They pay a customary tax to the designated representatives of the state and are thereby protected from expropriation. Revenue collection or appropriation of the agricultural surplus is a privilege granted by the central authority to those who render a service to the state or who farm the various taxes. In this regulated universe, extra impositions on the peasantry, such as arbitrary taxation or

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corvée, do not simply threaten the independence of the direct producers, they also violate the law of the realm. The question then is to what extent was the idealized version of the Ottoman agrarian structure subverted by private usurpation of landed property. If such transgressions occurred to a significant extent, then the Ottoman self-definition is under risk of collapse, especially if it can be shown that the *çiftlik* was common and indeed tolerated from the very beginning of the Empire's existence. Independent peasant farming would then be bracketed as one form of production among others. Under these circumstances a redefinition of the Ottoman social formation would be called for, perhaps assimilating it to a variant of feudalism.

A similar problem arises if it is maintained that the *çiftlik* gained growing importance over time. Such an argument would suggest that the initial model of a centralized empire with a tax collecting polity gave way to locally controlled units based on the subjugation and exploitation of the peasantry. According to this theory of *çiftlik* formation, the "strong central power-independent peasantry" equation would reflect an unstable balance, and the Ottoman classical system would be only a temporary exception to an otherwise all encompassing feudal universe.

In Part I of this volume İnalçık and Veinstein discuss the concept and the practice of the *çiftlik* as these relate to interpretations of the Ottoman system. Halil İnalçık sets the stage by reviewing the various uses of the term *çiftlik* in Ottoman state practice. He identifies those cases where private persons, in fact, appropriated state lands. Gilles Veinstein discusses the diverging schools of thought concerning the genesis of the *çiftlik*, concluding that its resemblance to the landlord-managed estate is exaggerated. Despite İnalçık's greater willingness to entertain the notion of *çiftlik* as an estate, the balance of these contributions suggests that Ottoman exceptionalism is not yet to be discarded. In other words, the Ottoman social formation seems to have embodied a logic in which privatized large property was marginal.

One way of transcending the insular model based on the interdependence of the central authority and the small peasantry is by introducing the impact of the capitalist market on the Ottoman social structure. The argument of external impact and commercial opportunity leading to a rupture with the classical model would seem to solve the problem by safeguarding Ottoman exceptionalism. According to this project the dissolution of classical Ottoman balances results from the various dynamics brought into the picture via the economic integration with Europe. The *çiftlik*, once again, lies at the center of the questions relating to the mode of incorporation of the Ottoman

Empire into the world capitalist system. It becomes the Ottoman version of the landed estate engaging in commercial agriculture, employing enserfed or dependent peasants. In this perspective, the çiftlik is supposed to belong in the same category as Prussian estates, Latin American and Italian latifundia, Asian plantations and the Egyptian *izba*. It is supposed to be a product of increasing trade with the core countries and the local seizing of commercial opportunity.¹

This is the model of peripheral transformation that most of the papers in Part II of this volume question. İslamoğlu-İnan looks at an earlier period of commercial expansion and its impact on the peasant economy. She finds that politics and ideology prevented officials from increasing the scale of exploitation, despite growing trade opportunity. Suraiya Faroqhi brings a unique perspective on the subject through the study of a wealthy individual, a small *ayan*, his attempts at accumulating land, riches and power through controlling the peasant economy, and the political factors that constrained him. Elena Frangakis-Syrett describes the accommodation of the İzmir hinterland to the expanding trade in cloth, the monetary mechanisms which fueled it, and the channels that served in intermediation. The impact of market integration and commodification of the peasantry is also discussed by Reşat Kasaba who concentrates on the role of seasonal and permanent migration which served to counteract the perennial labor shortage in Anatolian agriculture. Tosun Arıcanlı in his overview argues that the absence of inviolable property rights in the Ottoman context rendered a lasting privatization of land an unlikely event. Since property was not recognized, estates could not be formed. Faruk Tabak, Dina Khoury, and Linda Schilcher in their respective papers on the Arab provinces of the Empire describe the modes of commercialization of the peasantry and the channels of intermediation between urban and rural economies that insured a market-oriented transformation of the agrarian structure. In these richly textured studies it becomes apparent that commodity production by small-owning peasantry represents an alternative mode of integration into the market, and that this path excluding large-scale commercial exploitation characterized most of the Ottoman lands. Together the papers provide a diversity of perspectives and a wealth of social historical data on the agrarian structure of the Middle East.

Instead of summarizing the various arguments elaborated in the individual contributions, it may be useful to trace the steps of the implicitly comparative perspective concerning the formation of large-scale commercial agriculture in the periphery and to discuss its applicability to the Ottoman case. This gloss will serve to introduce the principal themes debated in this volume.

The conventional wisdom that integration into trade networks brought about the formation of large-scale commercial agriculture derived its model from the experience of eastern Europe, the first region to be peripheralized.² Starting with an agrarian structure characterized by the feudal patterns of lordly landholding and servile labor, eastern Europe experienced an intensification of impositions on serfs and growing labor obligations precisely during the period when personal freedom and a commercialization based on yeomenry were being consolidated in western Europe. In the areas east of the Elbe, the nobility were able to arrest the dissolution of feudal relations and re-assert their traditional privileges. As they oriented their production to the international market, they also sought to manage their estates in order to maximize the extracted surplus. The transition had been from rent-collecting feudal ownership without management (*Grundherrschaft*) to large properties managed as commercial estates (*Gutsherrschaft*). The process of re-enservement was accompanied by an increased rate of exploitation as landlords gradually imposed heavier labor services on the peasantry.

The generalized version of the eastern European model suggests that commercial opportunity would exercise a similar impact on all peripheral landlords who rely on customary rent and dues for their surplus. Confronted with lucrative markets and profit opportunity, they would attempt both to impose heavier obligations on the peasantry and to manage their properties as economically efficient enterprises or estates, rather than in the *grundherrschaft* mode. Obviously, the transition to managed estates would be ideal for purposes of rationalizing market integration and maximizing the extraction of surplus while reducing the peasantry to subsistence. If such radical restructuring were not possible, however, the landlord would still try to benefit indirectly from the increasing availability of markets by imposing higher rents on the peasantry or by raising additional revenue through monopolizing commercial channels. The direct producers, tax/rent paying peasants, may in turn switch out of their traditional patterns of production as a consequence of greater commercialization.

The question of large-scale commercial agriculture in the Ottoman Empire was initially posed within the East European model as an attempt to uncover instances of radical restructuring resulting in landlord-managed estates. Recent historical research seems to show, however, that such a transformation from small property dominated agriculture, where peasant households were only obligated to pay the

tax/rent, to large-scale estates with increasing obligations imposed on the peasantry, was not a strong element of the Ottoman incorporation into capitalist markets. The papers collected in this volume argue that a transformation toward large landlord-managed estates was not prevalent; yet, they point to various ways in which local notables, merchants or tax collectors endeavored to benefit from changing conditions by attempting to capture a greater share of the peasants' surplus. In other words, increasing trade did not result in a change in the relations of production; but it did allow various well-placed officials to benefit from new opportunities in the circulation of products and money.

The obvious objection to searching for a model for Ottoman history in European experience is that the political and legal context of a strong state coupled with tax-paying peasantry in the case of the former, and parcellized sovereignty and serfdom in the latter, should not be expected to evolve in a parallel fashion. In considering eastern and western Europe, we are dealing with essentially comparable agrarian structures with a common genesis differentiated through historical contingency and dissimilar temporality. The pre-requisites for the application of the comparative method are indeed there. In the Ottoman case, however, the agrarian structure characterized by an independent peasantry without significant servile obligations, the absence of a propertied, hereditary noble class, and the apparent ease with which the monarch could eliminate and confiscate the wealth of private individuals make it difficult to justify a comparison with either version of the continental European experience. Nonetheless, the arguments usually found in the literature comparing eastern and western developments in Europe might serve to underline various dimensions of the Ottoman specificity.

The argument (as found in Max Weber, for example) proceeds on the basis of an elaboration of factors that were present in one case and absent in the other.³ We may summarize these factors in three categories: those relating to the character of the settlements in terms of peasant traditions and population density; those pertaining to the degree of commercialization and monetization of the producers; and finally, the most important from the point of view of discussing the Ottoman case, those concerned with the relationships among the central authority, landlords, and the peasantry.

The arguments in the first group derive from the relatively late history of settlements in eastern Europe. Peasants had originally been

attracted to the new settlements by relatively less oppressive conditions, but, because these were new settlements, they had never enjoyed the support of customary law and the solidarity of the village community. The balance of rights and obligations which was valid in the old lands and helped defend acquired rights, such as privileges on the village commons, had been lost with the move to newly reclaimed lands. In addition, the lord had been freed from the checks on his authority and he emerged as the sole purveyor of justice. In terms of the material topography of seigneurial property as well, the newly settled lands were compact in the sense that they did not permit the claiming of overlapping rights by rival landlords or suzerains, thus according no space to maneuver to the peasant. The lord's domain was usually an undivided, consolidated property, enclosed from inception. All these conditions conspired to render the serf defenseless against the lord who would impose on him yet more onerous obligations.

Colonization was possible because these lands were not densely populated; there were not many towns, hence not much local trade. In the West, the peasants had been able to realize their own surpluses in nearby markets, which was a precondition for the commutation of labor services to money rent; in the East it was the lords who controlled access to the markets and sold the surplus produced by the serfs. The dominant mode of commercialization was through exports. It is precisely at this juncture that the world-systems argument concerning the importance of the division of labor which characterized the peripheralized lands of second serfdom becomes important. Agrarian surpluses were marketed as exports, and the revenue served to support the noble life style and luxury of the lords. The economy of the grain-producing East was disarticulated, since the particular utilization of the surplus prevented the development of an expansive internal market and local accumulation of productive capital. Without such accumulation and the concomitant formation of an urban bourgeoisie as an estate independent of the aristocracy, eastern Europe became peripheralized. This peripheralization effectively guaranteed the longevity of the lords' economic and political power.

Finally, and most decisively, the lords in the East were able to protect their privileges and increase the servile obligations of the peasantry because during the period of the second serfdom the central authority (monarchy) was not strong enough to curb the nobilities' power and privileges. In an attempt to usurp political power from the aristocracy, absolute monarchies of the West (especially in France) had found it in their interest to pursue a policy which amounted to a protection of the peasantry. Monarchies imposed royal

justice and intendants and defended the peasantry, whose tax payments had become the principal source of revenue for the royal fisc, from the lords' encroachments. Unable to subjugate the peasantry, the lords had evolved as a rent-collecting class, deriving their authority from their association with the monarchy. This difference led to the two confronting ideal types of political development: an implicit alliance of the monarchy and the peasantry which kept lordly reaction at bay and eventually allowed the evolution of a free peasantry, as in France and south and western Germany; and, in the East, a monarchy which did not succeed in becoming anything more than a representation of the collective identity of the seignorial estate.⁴

Let us temporarily suspend the argument that eastern European estates emerged out of a background of feudalism that had no parallel in the Ottoman case. If the strong model predicting the creation and survival of estate agriculture were applicable in Ottoman history, we would expect that the eastern particularities sketched in the arguments above would have some parallels in Ottoman class structure and political and institutional balances. First, there is the colonization of new lands that contributed to giving the lands East of Elbe their unique character. In the Ottoman Empire, most land reclamation in the margin seems to have been undertaken by the peasantry themselves. The famous provision concerning the payment of taxes on previously empty state property for ten years which made the peasant into the recognized "owner" of the land seems to have been of general use. When such an opening-up was undertaken under state auspices, as in large-scale settlements of immigrant populations, the object was to create a peasant sector, and there was no question of establishing an ownership structure discordant with the preferred mode of production.

If nineteenth-century examples provide a model, such state-directed settlement of newly opened lands often resulted in a purer form of peasant agriculture, true to the model of village communities exhibiting little inequality in terms of landholding. There were, however, instances of colonization that resulted in a structure somewhat resembling eastern European estates. This is the case of the opening up (*şenlendirme*) of uncultivated or waste (*mevat*) lands, which İnalcık and Veinstein discuss. Here, colonization was the prelude to the setting up of a farm, called *çiftlik* in official registers, ordinarily larger than typical peasant holdings, but nowhere near the size of an east European estate or a new world plantation.⁵ The principal factor restricting the size of exploitation in the *çiftlik* was the difficulty of finding labor. Faced with a central authority that would not cooperate, the colonizer landlord could not change the legal status of the peasant

or his right of access to land. He rarely owned slaves, and since he could not control a servile labor force, he was dependent on peasantry from adjacent villages who otherwise cultivated their own land while also working on the newly established *çiftlik* as sharecroppers or on a seasonal basis. The *çiftlik* constituted on waste (*mevat*) land remained the legal property of the state, and the owner was liable to pay the ordinary taxes levied on all direct producers on the land. As such, his privileges were also liable to be revoked.

The second category of distinguishing factors concerns the degree of commercialization, the use of money, and the presence of local markets. In general, Ottoman towns remained important as did local markets and short-distance and regional trade. Empty lands distant from urban markets did not prove to be attractive sites to be exploited in large-scale agriculture. In such regions as the central Anatolian plateau, reclamation of land seems to have been a small-scale undertaking, resulting from population movements. The only instance of freshly settled, commercial agriculture oriented to distant markets could arguably be found in the Balkans. These settlements were distinguished not only by fertile soil, but also the easier access to long-distance markets. In fact, according to one of the first applications of the eastern European model to the Ottoman case, large estates based on the utilization of servile peasant labor appeared in the Balkans precisely because export markets seemed to play an important role in the local economy.⁶ Yet, subsequent research has shown this conclusion to be misleading, because *çiftlik*s in the Balkans were rarely if ever managed estates. Even when commercialization played an important role most landlords were unable to "enclose" and remained as collectors of taxes.⁷ It was attempts to overtax rather than the enslavement of the peasantry which characterized the Balkan *çiftlik*.

Despite their proximity to European markets and the relative ease of transportation, the export trade from Ottoman lands never developed to any significant degree. Aside from the arguable case of the Balkans (and that of nineteenth-century Egypt, which is outside the purview of our discussion), there is no indication that Ottoman exports originated in rural units of production resembling estates. Exports were predominantly agricultural, but unlike what would be expected of estate-dominated regions, no single product ever accounted for more than a small fraction of the total export revenues. Even toward the end of the nineteenth century, when railways could be built and steamships regularly traversed the eastern Mediterranean, a mono-crop pattern did not evolve. The biggest item in exports accounted for around one-eighth of the total.⁸ The absence of a mono-crop pattern reflects the absence of large-scale commercial exploita-

tion. Exports originated predominantly in peasant production and derived from peasant surpluses, not from landlord-managed estates. Peasants were not quick to change their patterns of diversified production, hence the volume of exports increased slowly; the Ottoman lands exhibited a mediocre performance in terms of integration into world commodity networks.⁹ This is significant both because it is indicative of the absence of the plantation model and because it determined that internal trade would not lose its importance. Commerce and monetization based on the domestic economy conducted along traditional networks continued to be primary.

The crucial argument concerning the dissimilarity of the Ottoman case with historical examples of the estate-agriculture model derives from the political balance developed among the overlords, peasants, and the central authority. In the case of Europe the model is bound up with understanding the genesis of the absolutist state, which grew increasingly autonomous from the landowning aristocracy. In the Ottoman case, however, the logic is necessarily the opposite: since the strongly central "absolutist" state is the pre-existing condition, the corresponding question would have to inquire first if a landholding class could develop, and secondly, if this class could wrest any autonomy out of the central authority. Without pretending to write a history of the Ottoman state, it is possible to assert that there were indeed periods when a group of powerful notables emerged, and, particularly during the eighteenth century, this group almost developed as a class, conscious of its interests and willing to defend and promote the same.¹⁰ What characterized the members of this potential class was that they owed their status to the initially bureaucratic positions they occupied, which then became the vehicle for the usurpation of economic power. In other words these *ayan* had been provincial administrators and tax farmers whose ideally and previously revokable tenure or farm had gained permanence due to the incapacity of the central authority. The terminus of such a development could have been the birth of hereditary landownership with an aristocracy-like class sufficiently autonomous to withstand a summary re-appropriation of all power by the central authority. They would then have used their gained immunity to monopolize the land and to impose on the peasantry servile obligations or to reduce them to the status of landless workers. In other words, the strong model of estate agriculture would have become operative.

The possible scenario, however, remained hypothetical. The *ayan* were unable to transform their transgression of the patrimonial mandate into a more lasting autonomy. Thus, they were unable to break the ties of mutual defense between a strong state, which re-

sisted the formation of an intermediary estate, and the tax-paying, independent peasantry. The ayan remained content to exploit the tax-collecting relationship, to consolidate and diversify their revenue bases, to use their influence in avoiding competition to obtain the tax farms, and perhaps to marginally increase the impositions on those direct producers with fiscal liability. In short, they never successfully challenged the authority of the central state. It was thus not surprising that they entirely and drastically lost the status they had usurped when the central authority took the initiative to reassert its prerogatives during the first half of the nineteenth century. Hence the single most noteworthy episode in Ottoman agrarian history that can be construed as the beginnings of a development along large-scale commercial exploitation remained a truncated version of the model because the essentially independent status of the peasantry did not suffer any change.

The state was, of course, the crucial element in the failure of the ayan. Ultimately, the identification of landlord interests with those of the central authority underwrote the power of the European seigneurs. In the Ottoman case the central bureaucracy maintained its self-avowed mission to uphold the status of an independent peasantry—both for reasons of fiscal expediency and because the alternative would have amounted to recognizing rival nodes of authority. Hence, the ideological contract stipulating the exchange of order and justice emanating from the state against revenue from the direct producers was upheld. The power won by the ayan remained interstitial and episodic and depended for its exercise entirely on the weakness of the state. When the state made the attempt to re-establish its authority the ayan quickly capitulated.

Perhaps the most revealing component of the systemic inertia conducing to the central state's ascendancy over centrifugal tendencies was coded in the legal context. Unlike its obvious pre-capitalist counterpart—feudalism in Europe—the Ottoman political and legal system never developed a category of alienable property rights. As early as the thirteenth century, jurists in France had begun to worry about the application of Roman concepts of absolute property rights to feudal practice.¹¹ The so-called conditional property of feudalism contained the concept of "private" property for the lord and soon evolved to recognize private property rights for the serfs as well. This was a smooth transition, via the revival of Roman Law, to capitalist property rights. Not so, however, in the Ottoman Empire, which arguably inherited a combination of eastern Roman and Islamic practice. Here, absolute property for the subjects was never recognized, and, in addition to the legal dictum of the sultan enjoying the

"ownership" of the entire realm, the actual practice suggested strongly that confiscation of subjects' possessions as the ultimate sanction was never far away.

Although confiscation was justified by reference to law, its very arbitrariness made it into a weapon that became a naked index of the balance power. So, it was conceivable that at certain times (notably in the eighteenth century) and in certain places, the balance of power would obtain in such a way that would-be landlords enjoyed property rights which seemed almost absolute. The problem with balance of power, however, is that it is, by definition, subject to change; and, failing the qualitative transcendence into socially recognized and enforceable legal ratification of claims to property, it remains a flimsy ground on which to build the kind of economic organization characteristic of lands with a feudal heritage. "Almost" is never good enough when the ever-present threat of confiscation has to be reckoned with. Besides, the ideological compact between the state and the *reaya* was such that even after the ambiguous declaration in 1858 which recognized titled and alienable property on land, the "social recognition" of private property, in other words its subjective acceptance by the peasantry (*reaya*), was much later in arriving. On the whole, in Islamic Law (*shari'a*), village communities had recourse to a body of legal doctrine which could be interpreted by the *ulama* to defend their customary rights to land.¹² As a result, except in Syrian and Iraqi provinces, tax and rent collecting landlords were not able to "enclose"—even after the Land Code of 1858.

Both agricultural capitalism and estate agriculture based on the employment of unfree labor derived from a feudal past. Specifically, seigneurial rights bolstered with the legal framework of absolute property prepared for large-scale managed units. When the peasantry were not able to resist the imposition of greater obligations, export-oriented, landlord-managed, large-scale agriculture came into being. Compare, however, the Ottoman case. Since there was no prior feudalism, the peasantry were not confronted with an immediate adversary whose economic logic conflicted with their own practices. There was no tradition of intervention in the immediate production process of the peasantry. The position that the feudal lord occupied in the West had first to be invented. Hence, rather than seeking similarities to feudal practices in Ottoman realms, the direction of inquiry in Part II of this volume points toward a related and more fruitful question: when estate formation is not a ready option what are the alternative modes of accumulation?

The contributors generally agree in denying importance to the strong (managed estate) model of the *çiftlik*. From Mosul (Khoury), through the Fertile Crescent (Tabak) and Syria (Schilcher), by way of central Anatolia (İslamoğlu-İnan), and finally in the fertile and export-oriented plains of the Aegean littoral (Faroqhi, Frangakis-Syrett, Kasaba), they find the "çiftlik owner" collecting taxes, organizing trade, extending loans, and attempting to squeeze the peasantry. One constant, however, was that the *çiftlik* owner left the organization and the independent status of the peasant alone: even the mighty Kara Osmanoğlu family of the Aydın province were marginally involved in production and derived most of their revenue from tax-farming and commerce. By mid-nineteenth century the Kara Osmanoğlu family had lost their pre-eminence; they were just another urban patrician dynasty. In fact, forming a conspicuous estate might have brought the mighty down even sooner because the threat of confiscation was real and, as Faroqhi notes, wealth could rarely, if ever, be transmitted to a second generation. It is certainly true that no landlord family of the eighteenth or early nineteenth century was able to survive into the modern age with its fortune intact.

An agriculture based on small peasant farms was no impediment, however, to the world-market-oriented structuring of production patterns. Small and middle peasants responded to market signals (Khoury), reflected, in their organization and behavior, fluctuations in demand and prices (Tabak), and successfully contributed to the expansion of the export trade (Frangakis-Syrett). In fact, the significant increase in exports from the Aegean littoral coincides not with ayan ascendancy but with the consolidation of an agrarian structure dominated by small production (Kasaba). The conclusion to be drawn from these investigations is that world market demand was an important element that contributed to shaping the rural economy. The new structures that evolved allowed various degrees of indirect control to be exercised by the ayan, the *mültezim*, the merchant, and the creditor, all acting as intermediaries over the direct producer—who himself was a family farmer. Expanding land ownership and the formation of estates accompanied by an enserfment of the peasantry, however, never became an option. The final arbiter in any bid to form an estate remained the ability of the state to exercise its prerogatives, specifically that of confiscation. The careers of high bureaucrats punctuated by short tenures, frequent dismissals, and sometimes beheadings;¹³ the once mighty *derebeys* of Çukurova reduced to sinecured bureaucrats;¹⁴ the rapid fall of the feared masters of Anatolia that were the ayan, all point to a drastically lopsided equation in favor of the strong state which exercised its prerogatives with impunity.

The çiftlik as an estate, in those rare occasions when it was formed, was a fleeting and easily reversible phenomenon. Otherwise, the word often referred to that practice where wealthy officials, tax farmers, or merchants diversified their businesses to engage in a disparate collection of revenue-bringing investments with no legal ratification. For this reason, this çiftlik expanded in an economically irrational manner; there was no logic to it, no economic theory to understand and explicate it.¹⁵ Only the conjuncture and the weaknesses of the central authority could shed light on activities of the wealthy who tried to control the rural economy without incurring the state's wrath. As the papers in this volume demonstrate, they seized whatever opportunity arose interstitially within the restrictive context and practice laid out by the state. Hence the expansion of the çiftlik was unpredictable and most haphazard; in practice it became a collection of unlikely money-making practices that were in a particular moment possible. This is precisely the reason why "çiftlik" has remained so elusive and confusing a concept; it has been used to describe phenomena so diverse that it might be best to avoid the term altogether for purposes of clarity. The papers in Part II of this volume could have been written without using the word at all; they may, in fact, provide the groundwork necessary to retire the model built around the overworked concept.