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Orientations

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Introduction

ARANG KESHAVARZIAN AND
ALI MIRSEPASSI

In that unbounded moment, I saw millions of delightful and horrible acts; none amazed me as the fact that all occupied the same point, without superposition and without transparency. What my eyes saw was *simultaneous*; what I shall write is *successive*, because language is successive. Something of it, though, I will capture.

Jorge Luis Borges, *The Alpeh*[1]

The men and women that made the 1979 Iranian Revolution were of their time and place. We could not expect them to be otherwise, short of certain arguments that they were "guided by the eternal." As researchers, we face a similar predicament of spatial and temporal specificity. Yet, neither time nor space are isolated; they become meaningful analytical categories when "made" in relation to larger social processes interconnecting times and places.

Despite being drawn from diverse disciplinary backgrounds and theoretical persuasions, the contributors to this volume all share one condition; they live and write about Iran's revolution and the founding of the Islamic Republic with over four decades of reflection, hindsight, and reappraisal of causes and consequences. This expanding time horizon distances us from the events and emotions leading to the fall of the Pahlavi monarchy and founding of the Islamic Republic. Such separation may enable deeper appraisal. It may permit examining a wider array of archives and a broader recovery of the forces involved in mobilizing people for mass rallies, coordinating strikes and bazaar closures, and articulating political demands in party pamphlets and public statements. This additional time, however, does not necessarily

[1] Jorge Luis Borges, *The Aleph and Other Stories: 1933–1969*, trans. and ed. Norman Thomas Di Giovanni (New York: Bantam Books 1970), 13.

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guarantee either certainty or consensus. Yet, the creeping doubts and speculations can "contribute to the possibility of understanding."[2]

This volume, too, is a product of its intellectual time and place. It therefore must contend with the challenges of synthesizing our contemporary concerns with those of the people and places integral to making the revolution possible. We write about the making of 1979 at our own specific historical conjuncture. To begin with, draconian US sanctions make the everyday lives of Iranians arduous and erect barriers to the circulation of people, commodities, and ideas. Secondly, the Islamic Republic's ideological filters shaping its foreign policy together with the securitization of domestic politics have mediated Iran's place in international society in ways that deter exchange and collaboration. In academia, the social sciences and humanities have gone through more than a quarter century of being deeply marked with popular and intellectual interest in globalization, cosmopolitanism, and transnational connectivity and mobility.[3] In the process, methodological debates and initiatives have grappled with the task of writing global history, designing multi-sited ethnographies, and defining the relationship between the local and the global, the particular and the universal, or the authentic native and external other. The thrust has been to decenter nationalist historiography, if not to move against "methodological nationalism."[4] With this context in mind, we envision the making of the Iranian Revolution not as a byproduct of globalization,

[2] Albert O. Hirschman, "The Search for Paradigms as a Hindrance to Understanding," *World Politics* 22:3 (1970): 333.

[3] See, inter alia, Luis Eduardo Guarnizo and Michael Peter Smith, "Locations of Transnationalism," in Michael Peter Smith and Luis Eduardo Guarnizo, eds., *Transnationalism from Below* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1998), 3–34; Anna Tsing, "The Global Situation," *Cultural Anthropology* 15:3 (August 2000): 327–360; Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 91–112; James Ferguson, *Global Shadows* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); C. A. Bayly, Sven Beckert, Matthew Connelly, Isabel Hofmeyr, Wendy Kozol, and Patricia Seed, "*AHR* Conversation: On Transnational History," *The American Historical Review* 111:5 (December 2006): 1441–1464; Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori, eds., *Global Intellectual History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); Engseng Ho, "Inter-Asian Concepts for Mobile Societies," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 76:4 (November 2017): 907–928; Neil Brenner, "Beyond State-Centerism? Space, Territoriality, and Geographical Scale in Globalization Studies," *Theory and Society* 28:1 (February 1999): 39–78.

[4] Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller, "Methodological Nationalism and Beyond," *Global Networks* 2:4 (2002): 301–334.

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nor merely a local or national phenomenon, but as an expression of the wide interconnectedness shaping a radically unequal and disjointed, yet inextricably interrelated world of simultaneities.

What happens if we begin to consider Iran's revolutionary processes and situation as simultaneously part of a global phenomenon? As we enter the fifth decade of the Islamic Republic, this volume sets this as its task, to treat the global as neither preceding nor succeeding the revolution. This requires consideration of how those political movements, which targeted the Pahlavi monarchy and mobilized the nation, intersected with and even coproduced different versions of world society, be it *jahan*, *dunya*, or *bayn ol-mellali* in Persian, or the international, universal, postcolonial, the Third World, planetary, and more. In doing so, this collection of essays poses new questions, revisits archives, and articulates new chronologies and temporalities. Our energies are less focused on understanding the revolution in terms of causes and outcomes, something that the existing literature has done with much vigor. Instead, the collection is centered on examining the revolution as an intricate process filled with contingencies, dialogical interplays, and foreclosed pathways. This is an emergent approach that maintains that "the revolution as simultaneously multiple things, all of which contained multiple contingencies, and thus as a contingency-filled phenomenon, its post-revolutionary future was not easily borne out of its revolutionary present – highlighting aspects of the history that are marginalized, ignored, or remain unwritten."[5]

***

The scholarship conducted in proximity to the 1979 revolution was the product of the academic and intellectual life of the 1970s and 1980s in two senses. On the one hand, much of the English-language scholarship on the revolution to come out in the immediate aftermath of the uprising was written by young faculty and graduate students working on Iran in the US or UK prior to the revolution. These were research projects written in parallel or close proximity to the events themselves. These books and articles, published between 1979 and 1990, were primarily inspired by approaches, methodologies, and questions of the English-speaking scholarly community and strong convictions about

[5] Naghmeh Sohrabi, "The 'Problem Space' of the Historiography of the 1979 Iranian Revolution," *History Compass* 16:11 (2018): 1.

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what were the indispensable rudiments for good theory. Much of the scholarly works published immediately following the revolution were guided by and framed within two principal scholarly traditions defining the time: the social scientific tradition and the humanistic approach.

The *social scientific tradition* of the late 1970s was composed of assorted academic disciplines and worldviews which shared an elective affinity through their commitment to positivist methodology to decipher societies and people. These studies included modernization theory, dependency theory, and political economy approaches. These notable scholarly traditions were deployed in Iranian studies as much as scholarship on other parts of the Middle East, South Asia, Latin American, and elsewhere. They were the defining trends in European and American academic environments. Modernization theory was very much concerned with measuring the degree of accommodation and resistance to "Westernization" by "traditional societies," while Marxist-influenced works adopted capitalism as the benchmark to evaluate Iran's "feudal society."[6] This social scientific tradition labored to demonstrate how modern institutions (capitalism, representative government) and ideas (labor movements, liberalism, communism, etc.) had already been established and rooted through social development.[7]

The political economy approach defining the Marxist framework provided analysis of class interests and the nature of the state, as well as the formation of social movements.[8] Some of these works on class also theorized global capitalism and imperialism in innovative and sophisticated ways. Other works were influenced by important academic debates about modernization, such as the criticisms advanced by

[6] Abbas Vali, *Pre-capitalist Iran: A Theoretical History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1993).

[7] Amin Banani, *The Modernization of Iran, 1921–1941* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1961); Marvin Zonis, *The Political Elite of Iran* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971); Leonard Binder, *Iran: Political Development in a Changing Society* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1964); George Lenczowski, ed., *Iran under the Pahlavis* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1978).

[8] Fred Haliday, *Iran: Dictator and Development* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979); Nikki R. Keddie, *Iran: Roots of Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981); Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982); Hossein Bashiriyeh, *The State and Revolution in Iran, 1962–1982* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984).

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dependency theory.[9] An important debate ensued among sociologists and others centered on Theda Skocpol's work on the nature of rentier state and the vulnerability of the Pahlavi regime. Skocpol's intervention occurred in the aftermath of the publication of her seminal work, *States and Social Revolutions*, in the same year as Iran's revolution.[10] In her examination of the Iranian Revolution she sought to argue that her structuralist approach, that revolutions are not "made," but "happened," applied to the Iranian case because the Pahlavi state's dependence on oil revenue made it institutionally vulnerable and because Shia Islam as "a world-view and a set of social practices long in place can sustain a deliberate revolutionary movement."[11]

This emphasis on the role of Shia Islam in the revolution echoed the second approach to the revolution among this first generation of scholarship, that is, the *humanistic scholarship* on Iran and Islam. The time-honored tradition of scholarship on Iranian "classical" culture (religions, literature, and philosophy) enjoyed a much longer history in the Western academy. Unsurprisingly, it received generous support from the Iranian government. The scholars of "humanity" at this time worked within the scholarly discourse pioneered in Western European societies that had built colonial empires. It was a scholarly tradition that is currently regarded – often disdainfully – as "Orientalist."[12] This convention was predisposed to privileging the study of canonical texts, while taking an interest in questions already raised and framed by European scholars. It gave almost sole attention to the premodern period while remaining dismissive toward studies of the modern history and culture of Iran.[13] This is not to suggest that the

[9] John Foran, *Fragile Resistance: Social Transformation in Iran from 1500 to the Revolution* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), and *Taking Power: On the Origins of Third World Revolutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[10] Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

[11] Theda Skocpol, "Rentier State and Shi'a Islam in the Iranian Revolution," *Theory and Society* 11:3 (May 1982): 276.

[12] Interestingly, Edward Said's now classic critique of this scholarly tradition was published at the same time as the Iranian Revolution: Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978). Said applied this line of analysis to media coverage of the Iranian Revolution in *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

[13] Henri Corban and Hossein Nasr are two well-known scholars.

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scholars of Iranian "classics" were a homogeneous group. Although their approaches and questions were often alike, they clashed on certain issues. Some insisted on an epistemic endurance in Iranian history and culture, stemming from the ancient (pre-Islamic) to the post-Islamic period. They also imagined Iranian culture as an embodiment of the Zoroastrian and Islamic traditions, contending that Iranian culture had substantially contributed to the formation of Islamic civilization. Others fashioned a rather harsh way of thinking about Islam and its relations to Iranian history and culture. They deemed Islam an alien influence upon Iranian culture, critiquing it as almost a colonizer's burden and imposition. They therefore studied the search for the "recovery" of the genuine Iranian culture, untainted by Islam.[14]

Against such established conventions, however, the 1979 revolution suddenly exploded many accepted assumptions. The revolution perhaps marked the starting point for a major transformation of what had been known as Iranian studies until 1979. The "classicists" and social scientific scholars of Iran all at once realized that theory could no longer support their "disciplinary territories." The securely mapped academic boundaries began to unfurl and throw open an unfamiliar epistemic terrain. What had seemed so clear, stable, and routinely taken for granted, now became yesterday's scattered debris. The social scientists were forced to study ideas and institutions of a reality they had "normally" considered of a different time and even world in "modernizing" Iran.[15] Similarly, the Orientalist scholars, perhaps more willingly, started to think and write about what appeared to them as a contemporary reincarnation of "medieval" Iranian Islam.[16]

Many of the symbolic representations of the revolution, including Shia rituals and ulama rhetoric, were familiar to classicist scholars of

[14] A notable example is Aramesh Doustdar's writings: *Emtena' e tafakkor dar farhang dini* [The impossibility of religious thinking] (Paris: Khavaran Publication, 1994) and *Derakhshesh hay-e tire* [Dark sparkles] (Cologne, Germany: Andishe Azad Publication, 1993).

[15] Michael M. J. Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

[16] One early reaction to the rise of political Islam was an attempt to see it as a delusional or even "made-up" dream presented as reality; see Daryush Shayegan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une révolution religieuse?* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1991), and *Le regard mutilé, Schizophrénie culturelle: pays traditionnels face à la modernité* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1982), translated as Daryush Shayegan, *Cultural Schizophrenia: Islamic Societies Confronting the West* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997).

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Iran and Shia Islam. However, the idea that Islam (either in its doctrinal Sharia or mystical variety) could become an agent of radical change and political transformation was unthinkable for them. Henri Corbin was perhaps a prophetic Orientalist scholar who dreamed of such a revolutionary event. He died on October 7, 1978, thereby leaving us without his thoughts on the revolutionary unfolding. Nevertheless, one of the most interesting cultural explanations of the 1979 revolution was written by a historian of early Islam, Roy Mottahedeh. He has authored only a single book on modern Iran;[17] however, it is a fascinating narrative on several dualities intersecting in modern Iranian society. He suggested that sharp dualities had become familiar and rooted in the cultural, moral, and political experience of Iranians. These would sooner or later replace the superficially modern state. The Iranian masses, Mottahedeh argued, had never really felt that Pahlavi modernity welcomed them. It had no harmonious relationship with their everyday world. On the whole, the humanist studies of Iran focused on unearthing the "Idea of Iran" as they understood it. They either evaded attention to serious study of modern Iran, or they presented contemporary Iranian society as "a lost nation" in search of the vanished cultural identity.

The earlier scholarly literature on Iran primarily considered its history and culture as insular. The social scientific studies paid some attention to Iran's links to other regions and histories as a means to substantiate a universal model, but the humanist scholarship either treated Iran as a distinctive cultural unit or deemed it as part of a larger civilizational formation, such as Shiism or Islam. The scholars whose contributions are contained in this volume have been fortunate to study with and learn from many of the pioneering scholars of postrevolutionary Iranian studies. This volume presents a conversation with the scholarly productions passed down by this crucial generation as well as others.

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We began this project with a conference in which the participants were asked to reflect upon the Iranian Revolution as "the Global 1979." The global was not an answer but a question; it was not a destination,

[17] Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985).

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but a pathway. It was an invitation to think through the disparate and intricate events that culminated in radical social transformation by locating it within what is often now referred to as "the global." These events, however, were conceived quite differently in the years preceding the fall of the monarchy and the building of the Islamic Republic.

The responses we received to this provocation and our subsequent discussions constitute the substance of this book. Using different methods, theoretical tools, and archives, the authors have explored both more commonly studied topics, including US-Iran relations, leftist politics, and the women's movement, as well as often forgotten moments or ignored spaces. These include the death of a popular wrestler, politicization in provincial towns, and struggles over the meaning of guerrilla warfare before and after the revolution. They plumb the depths of these and other topics to draw previously hidden geographies and temporalities integral to creating the conditions for the fall of the Pahlavi monarchy and the founding of the Islamic Republic. What is at stake is not a theory of the revolution, but rather articulating a narrative of the revolution that centers on multiplicity and simultaneity of social relations and spaces that coexisted in the contingent-filled messiness of the revolution, or what Borges describes as witnessing the simultaneity of the "unbounded moment."

Similarly, the collection does not insist on a single conception of the global as either a place, a contemporary era, a model, or a yearning. The global is conceived, instead, as drawing together new relationships between spaces and events. These chapters insist on historicizing the revolution in ways that are contemporaneous with a series of other struggles and transformations. Thinking globally does not mean that the national, local, and fragment are demoted or even erased. Globality, on the contrary, heightens the specificities of certain places ranging from prisons and science labs to borderlands and US congressional committees, as will be illustrated in the subsequent chapters. Meanwhile, thinking about the global in this concrete manner has encouraged the authors to reconsider standard periodizations of history, unearth hidden or unthought historical episodes, and blur distinctions between regime and opposition or Islamist and secular. The authors reconceptualize geographic scales, transnational mobilities, or cosmopolitan sensibilities. This makes sense because, if one recalls that "the global" is a concept associated in recent years with the American

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