INTERVIEW

Iran's Past and Present – On the historiography of modern Iran

Why has the history of Iran's left been erased?

Friday 5 January 2018, by ABRAHAMIAN Ervand, SADEGHI-BOROUJERDI Eskandar (Date first published: 20 April 2017).

In this interview Ervand Abrahamian, one of the preeminent Iranian historians of his generation, speaks to Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi about his fifty-year career and the ideas that have shaped both popular and scholarly understandings of the events, political organizations, and movements that defined Iran and its politics in the twentieth century.

Whether it be his work on the communist Tudeh Party, the Iranian labor movement, the CIA-MI6 orchestrated coup of 1953, or Ayatollah Khomeini and the question of populism, Abrahamian's writings continue to set the tone for debates in both Iran and the West.

Of equal importance is Abrahamian's contribution to the historiography of modern Iran, in which he reinterpreted the methods of Marxist historians such as Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm, and E. P. Thompson, among others. Abrahamian's work unpacks the meaning of class, contestation, and social change in a country whose history has all too often been interpreted with either Orientalist fantasy or nativist nostalgia. His books are bestsellers in Iran, where they are read and discussed widely. He is currently in the process of writing a monograph on the history of the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi (ESB)
For readers unfamiliar with your work, would you mind speaking briefly about where you grew up and what led you to pursue the study of modern Iranian history?

Ervand Abrahamian (EA)
I was born in Tehran, attended the first three grades of the nearby Mehr School, and then was sent off to boarding school in Britain. These were the tumultuous years of oil nationalization, so my family, like most, was highly engrossed in politics and listened to radio news every evening — as I did during summer holidays in Iran. In my last year at boarding school, our teacher introduced me to the writings of R. H. Tawney and Christopher Hill. I have no idea what the teacher's politics were, but he obviously had impeccable taste.

At university, I mainly studied European history with Keith Thomas — a former student of Christopher Hill. Through him, I was introduced to historians associated with the journal Past and Present, such as George Rude, Eric Hobsbawm, Lawrence Stone, E. P. Thompson, Victor Kiernan, Brian Manning, and Rodney Hilton.

By the time I graduated, I knew I wanted to study modern Iran, but British universities at the time did not recognize contemporary history as a legitimate discipline. So I applied to a political science

department in North America, not realizing that such departments were exclusively interested in how societies could be "modernized" and how the world could be made safe for US interests. Since neither of these two questions interested me, I pursued my interest in exploring modern Iran on my own, through the lens of Past and Present.

ESB
While Iranian Marxists such as Ehsan Tabari and Bijan Jazani used historical materialism to explain the nature and dynamics of Iran's economic and political development, perhaps your best-known book, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (1982), is framed, at least in part, by the historiographical method of E. P. Thompson and the contention that "class is not a thing, it is a happening." What do you think Thompson brought to the study of Iranian history that more conventional Marxist approaches did not?

EA
E. P. Thompson was a towering figure for a number of reasons — not just for historians of Iran, but also for Marxist historians throughout the world. First, he shunned applying broad, sweeping theory to long periods of history, and was more interested in empirical history. Second, he recognized the importance of culture and consciousness in the making of class, while still giving due credit to other factors such as economics.

In recognizing this, he was also aware that culture, including religion, is itself not static but constantly evolving due to social changes. Third, unlike many social historians, he refused to leave politics out of history. Fourth, he wrote for the ordinary intelligent reader, avoiding political jargon, academic mumbo-jumbo, and intellectual obscurantism.

In short, he was a historian's historian, steeping himself in a specific time and place, reading everything relevant from the period, and then coming up with a resounding work rich with empirical information. Intellectuals such as Ehsan Tabari and Bijan Jazani were primarily political activists, not historians who had immersed themselves in a specific period of history. They had neither the time nor the opportunity — nor, probably, the inclination — to delve into the mundane depths of history.

ESB
Your research of Iranian crowds was influenced by George Rudé, a member of the Historians' Group of the Communist Party of Great Britain, and his seminal work on crowds during some of the major political upheavals defining modern Europe. In your application of Rudé's insights to Iran's Constitutional and Islamic Revolutions, what were some of the misconceptions you set out to counter?

EA
Rudé made three important contributions: first, he recognized the important role of the crowd in European history; second, he countered Gustav Le Bon's notion that the crowd was an "irrational" and "dangerous mob"; third, he vividly depicted the various "faces" in the crowd — their social composition. Reading Rudé and hearing him lecture one summer in New York, I was struck how pertinent his work was to Iran. In fact, the crowd had played an even more important role in Iranian than in European history — in the Constitutional Revolution of 1906–9, in the labor movement of 1941–46, in the oil nationalization campaign of 1951–53, and, of course, in the Iranian Revolution of 1977–79.

I have tried to test his three main findings on crowds on Iran: their role, their rationality versus irrationality, and their social composition. Clearly, this theory has not had much impact in Iran. Establishment intellectuals, especially beneficiaries of the 1979 revolution, continue to wax eloquent over Le Bon, seemingly oblivious of Rudé. They prefer to see crowds as dangerous mobs, easily

manipulated and hired by “foreign hidden hands.”

ESB
Your doctoral dissertation defended at Columbia University in 1969 bore the title “Social Bases of Iranian Politics,” and was the first sociological and political study of the Party of the Iranian Masses (Hezb-e Tudeh-ye Iran), arguably the most important socialist political organization in Iran’s history. What drew you to work on the Tudeh and what do you take to have been its broader political and cultural impact in Iranian society?

EA
Studying the social bases of the Tudeh was a good way — perhaps the only way at the time — of studying Iranian politics from below, and focusing not on the elite at the state level, but on ordinary folk who invariably get the “enormous condescension of posterity” — mechanics, oil workers, laborers, peddlers, teachers, tailors, housewives, nurses, truck drivers, and shopkeepers. It was these ordinary people who, despite differences in religion, ethnicity, education, and gender, joined the party and the labor unions, and thus rudely intervened in state politics, historically deemed to be the special preserve of the ruling class. The Tudeh Party was unique in what it did. It remains so.

ESB
You have been an assiduous chronicler and critic of the destructive role of British and American imperialism in Iran during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This is particularly the case in your most recent book, The Coup: 1953, the CIA, and the Roots of Modern US-Iranian Relations.

Could you say why you thought another book on the watershed episode of the 1953 coup had to be written, and what you thought was missing in previous accounts of the nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) and the overthrow of Mohammad Mosaddeq at the hands of an MI6-CIA orchestrated coup d’état?

EA
As you say, much has been published on the oil nationalization crisis, starting in 1951 and culminating with the coup of 1953 — some of it sympathetic to Mosaddeq. However, even the sympathetic works tend to resort to Orientalism to explain the final catastrophe. They repeat endlessly that the United Kingdom and United States offered Iran a reasonable settlement including acceptance of nationalization, but Mosaddeq was unable to accept their terms because of personal and cultural shortcomings. He was mercilessly depicted as “irrational,” “childlike,” “effeminate,” “obstinate,” “tiresome,” “eccentric,” “fanatical,” “xenophobic,” “emotional,” “Oriental,” “a Robespierre,” “a Frankenstein,” and a demagogue obsessed with a Shi’i “martyrdom complex.”

These standard works missed two important details — and, of course, the devil lies in the details. First, the United Kingdom and United States were willing to accept the “principle of nationalization” so long as the principle was not put into actual practice, and the oil industry remained firmly outside the hands of Iran and instead in the solid “control” of Western oil companies. In fact, after the coup, the companies gained full control in the format of the Oil Consortium. Second, the United Kingdom refused to contemplate any “compensation” based on the actual value of the oil installations in 1953. Instead, it thought of an “astronomical” sum based on projected profits extended to the end of the century.

Technically, Mosaddeq never “rejected” any final offer. He merely asked for clarification on how compensation would be calculated — on current value or on future profits. The Eisenhower administration refused to clarify. All the conventional histories overlook this “minor” issue. The Americans were just as interested as the British in preventing successful nationalization. After all, a successful one would have set a bad example elsewhere, especially in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf,

Indonesia, and Venezuela.

This stark fact, that Americans had as much at stake as the British, is invariably ignored in histories of the coup. Instead, American academics prefer to place the coup squarely in the context of the Cold War — not in that of north versus south or imperial versus anticolonial conflicts. The Cold War served as a good justification for almost any outrageous action. One could use the Cold War to justify throwing one's grandmother under the bus.

ESB
Why do you think in recent years there has been an attempt to revive a revisionist account of the coup, seeking to minimize the role of UK-US intelligence services, and instead placing the lion's share of the blame for Mosaddeq's ousting on domestic actors, including Mosaddeq himself?

EA
The attacks on Mosaddeq come from diverse directions. The royalists attack for obvious reasons, but surprisingly they try to link the coup not to military officers organized by the CIA-MI6, but to clerics such as Ayatollahs Behbehani and Kashani. It is as if they want to shift to others the "credit" for their so-called "Shah-People's Uprising." This speaks volumes to the unpopularity of the coup.

The Islamists, for their part, have their own ideological reasons for undermining Mosaddeq. After all, he was a secular nationalist who refused to exploit religion in politics and was an avowed product of the Enlightenment — repugnant to the religious-minded. Moreover, some young intellectuals brought up under the Islamic Republic have become enamored of the free markets and free enterprise advocated by Western neoconservatives and neoliberals. For them, oil is not a sovereign and precious natural resource, but a "curse" financing a despotic state. They seem to view the whole oil nationalization campaign as misguided and passé.

ESB
In your book, *Khomeinism* (1993), you argue that the ideology of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and the movement he led should be understood as a form of Third World populism. You contrast this interpretation with the predominant narrative in Western media, which often casts Iran's revolution as an atavistic, fanatical, and fundamentalist backlash against modernization.

There, you cite the work of Richard Hofstadter, whose famous essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" has made something of a comeback in recent years. In retrospect, how do you view your contribution to the debate around "Khomeinism," and what traits do the histories of American and Iranian populism share?

EA
The Khomeini movement, at the height of the revolution, contained a wide spectrum of political elements. Khomeini himself and his closest disciples, such as Ayatollah Beheshti, realized that to bring down the shah they needed to speak on behalf of the mostazafan (dispossessed). Thus, they resorted to the language of radical populism. However, the anti-shah movement also contained elements that were economically conservative and even reactionary — elements representing the bazaar petit bourgeoisie. In Khomeini's last years, and even more so after his death, these conservative elements have become more and more assertive.

Thus, we now have a republic that continues to speak with the rhetoric of radical populism, but pursues socio-economic policies that at heart are conservative. For example, the regime has ruled that land reform should not limit ownership, since such restrictions would violate the sacred rights of private property enshrined in the shari'a. Populism in Iran shares much with populisms elsewhere in the world. It looks radical from outside, but its inner core is conservative. The obvious difference

between present-day populism in the United States and in Iran is that while the former is a threat to the whole plant, the latter is a detriment mostly to its own people.

ESB
You're currently in the process of researching a new book on the Iranian Revolution of 1979. What do you regard as the radical left's contribution to the revolution? In much of the extant historiography it has been either exaggerated or ignored altogether, and it continues to be a polarizing issue.

EA
The new left played an indirect but nevertheless important role in the revolution. The guerrilla movement, especially the Marxist Fada'i, throughout the early 1970s kept alive the spirit of resistance and the conviction that the regime had feet of clay despite all its oil money and military accruals. Meanwhile, the old left — especially from the 1940s — had instilled in the political culture the important notion that citizens have inalienable socio-economic rights. The main slogan of the Tudeh had been: "Bread for All, Housing for All, Education for All."

Moreover, the Islamic left, notably Ali Shariati, was very much influenced by European Marxists of the 1960s. One cannot analyze the new radical Islam without direct reference to Western Marxism. After all, Shari'ati was rightly described as the true "ideologue" of the Islamic Revolution.

ESB
What do you make of the criticisms leveled at both the Tudeh and the Organization of the Iranian People's Fada'i Guerrillas (Majority Faction), that they sacrificed "liberal bourgeois freedoms" on the altar of anti-imperialism, and in doing so, helped paved the way for the authoritarian consolidation of the Islamic Republic in the 1980s?

EA
In 1978–79 almost all political groups — with the obvious exception of the royalists — supported the revolution and the Islamic Republic. Various organizations moved into the opposition at different times and over different issues. The Tudeh and the Majority Fada'i moved into the opposition in 1982, when the regime made the fateful and disastrous decision to take the war into Iraq, having expelled the latter from Iran. The war ceased being one of national defense.

Much of the criticism leveled at the Left for supporting the regime comes from Islamic "liberals" who not only supported the regime but also were an integral part of that regime. After all, Bazargan was Khomeini's prime minister, voted for the constitution, and remained silent when the armies crossed over into Iraq. One could make a case for the Left remaining aloof from Khomeini and championing secular progressive causes — in other words, allying with the liberal National Front. This was a line taken by some Tudeh leaders. But they were undercut by the simple fact that the National Front itself capitulated to Khomeini early on.

ESB
In your article "Why the Islamic Republic Has Survived," (2009) you lay out the reasons for the clerically led regime's endurance and relative stability since 1979, namely economic and social populism and the welfare regimes subsequently instituted to the benefit of a sizeable cross-section of the population. As we have seen cuts in subsidies and calls for privatization (though this has often resulted in manifest cronyism and rent-seeking practices), do you take the social compact you delineated to be increasingly in jeopardy?

EA
Economists subscribing to the Washington consensus like to criticize the regime for wasting vast

resources on welfare and subsidies — for food, housing, education, infrastructure, medicine, and veterans. Such subsidies may not make sense financially, but make much sense politically — they have created an important link between the state and society, especially the poorer classes.

Economists began predicting the imminent demise of the regime almost as soon as it was installed in February 1979. The main reason their predictions did not come true is precisely because the regime established a fairly comprehensive welfare state. The gradual but consistent shift to the right in recent years naturally erodes this welfare state and thereby undermines the social basis of the regime.

ESB
What are the prospects for a more democratic, inclusive, and economically just Iran in the age of Trump? Considering the American president and his administration's saber-rattling, what is our democratic and political responsibility as students of Iranian history and politics?

EA
Your question raises two separate issues: Trump, and internal dynamics inside Iran.

Trump is at heart a con man spouting out verbiage to sell a particular product. During the campaign, he liked to bash Iran and the nuclear deal because he thought he could thereby get votes and the support of Netanyahu. He no longer needs their support. But the danger now is that as his economic promises evaporate, he may find it expedient to locate a foreign enemy. Iran could become such a target. It is no accident that right-wing populists the world over seek foreign adversaries once their economic promises evaporate.

If Iran does not become this target, its internal and natural trajectory will take it into a new arena. Ever since the 1960s, the predominant discourse of politics has been Islam, authenticity, nativism, and "return to roots." Such discourse has led to the present impasse where reform has stalled and the Right has gained predominance.

The new generation born after the revolution is less interested in searching for origins — and instead more interested in meaningful reforms that protect individual as well as social and economic rights. In doing so, they are discovering that their great-grandparents of the 1905–9 Constitutional Revolution had much to say relevant to the present — much more than the aimless search for nebulous roots.

P.S.

* Jacobin. 04.20.2017: https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/04/iran-left-tudeh-khomeini-nationalization-orientalism-oil-imperialism/

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