Book Reviews


Reviewed by Milad Odabaei, Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley, milado@berkeley.edu

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The present state of scholarship on Iran in the English language can be identified by three distinct yet interrelated trends. One trend has centered on the historical, political and intellectual developments that culminated in the 1979 Revolution. The second and more recent is composed of ethnographic treatments of post-revolutionary Iran. The third, less sociological and more theoretical, addresses the historical complexities of Iran beyond the Revolution and its predominantly Islamic and anti-Western ideology.

Iranian Identity and Cosmopolitanism emerges within this scholarly terrain. It is composed of seven essays, an introduction by the editor Lucian Stone, and an appendix that offers a brief and helpful theoretical sketch of cosmopolitanism as it develops within European intellectual history. The essays emerge at the intersection of the three scholarly trends identified and predominantly contribute to the first two. They help explain revolutionary and post-revolutionary political discourses by elaborating on how they are related to “cosmopolitanism.” They take “cosmopolitanism,” however, in the terms that Bryan Lueck’s appendix to the volume characterizes as “sociological”—that is, a descriptive account of cross-cultural interactions and trans-national dynamics that are not bound by the nation-state (170). As a result, while the entries succeed in representing some of the complexity of Iranian identity as it crosses
cultural and political frontiers and as it exceeds the Iranian state, they fall short of theorizing Iranian cosmopolitanism. The theoretical construction of cosmopolitanism and its ethical and political registers are related back to its place in European history and is then mobilized for understanding the contemporary history and politics of Iran.

Ramin Jahanbegloo’s examination of the post-revolutionary intellectual and political discourse, “Iranian Intellectuals and Cosmopolitan Citizenship,” offers the most direct representation of cosmopolitanism as transnational and cross-cultural exchange. Faced with the violence of the Iranian state, Iranian intellectuals and civil society actors have been grappling with “the problem of ethical citizenship outside the framework of state power,” and have developed a “framework of caring for the other through the bonds of love, empathy, and concern” (31). “For this generation of Iranian intellectuals,” Jahanbegloo explains, “the concept and practice of cosmopolitanism provides an ontological umbrella for all political and cultural meanings and understanding.” (31) Jahanbegloo traces the history of the contemporary ethos of cosmopolitan in Iran to that of the nineteenth century Iranian intellectuals who inspired the Constitutional Revolution of 1906. He argues that the Shah’s suppression of Muhammad Mossadeq’s “liberal-nationalist” movement and the subsequent rise of Islamic and Marxist ideologies amounted to a denial of cosmopolitanism. The discourse of “westoxification” and antagonism towards intercultural exchange, he argues, foreclosed the possibility of democracy in Iran (29).

The contributions of Reza Afshari and Nasrin Rahimieh reiterate Jahanbegloo’s characterization of the intellectual and political closures of cosmopolitanism in pre- and post-revolutionary Iran. However, Afshari’s essay, “On the Assumed Dichotomy in the Structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Unbearable Burden of Being an Intellectual in Iran,” questions the political and cosmopolitan significance of modern Iranian intellectuals. Instead he draws on two ethnographic accounts of post-revolutionary Iran and emphasizes the fluid, hybrid and playful culture of urban youth as they resist the prescriptive cultural code of the Islamic Republic.1 Rahimieh’s contribution, “Armenians in Iran, or the Limits of Cosmopolitanism,” draws on her autobiography and the work of the Armenian-Iranian writer Zoya Pirzad to highlight the limitations of intercultural exchange in Iran that predates the Islamic Revolution.


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Diverging from the general liberal narrative of Jahanbegloo, Afshari and Rahimieh, yet emphasizing exchange, Farhang Erfani and Shahla Talebi consider how cosmopolitanism and capitalism relate to one another; they suggest that the indeterminacies of Iranian identity emerge within the trans-national and cross-cultural spaces produced by capital. In his essay, “Cosmopolitanism: Neither for, Nor Against, to the Contrary,” Erfani highlights the absurd, almost cartoonish, nature of Iranian “cosmopolitan” identities. He recounts a series of dark and humorous anecdotes about himself as a self-identified post-structuralist philosopher who appears to spend a significant portion of his finances on psychoanalysis. His “cosmopolitan” identity is the consequence of a history of political persecution by the Islamic Republic, residence in an Iranian Mujahedins’ (MEK) camp in Iraq, “success” in securing French political asylum, regular “random” selection by airport security en route to delivering lectures on Derrida, and a provincial grandmother from Tabriz who anxiously crosses Iranian, European and American borders to visit her children and grandchildren scattered by the violent history of her country. In “Cosmopolitan Resistance and Territorial Suppression: A Story of Dissidence and the Islamic Republic of Iran,” Talebi renders visible the gendered nature of cosmopolitanism and nationalism as they have emerged in Iran. On the one hand, Talebi shows how the cosmopolitan flows produced by the circulation of capital and the liberal project of universal emancipation “violate” the harim (“border,” “interiority”) of the nation-state. One the other hand, she shows how the Iranian state guards itself from the tajavoz (“penetration,” “rape”) of its enemies and thereby preserves its sense of self while, at the same time, feminizing political dissidents as “receptive” agents of imperialism—subjecting them to rape as a proper form of torture.

While Talebi’s chapter suggests the impossibility of cosmopolitanism as a form of dialogical exchange, Bahbak Mohaghegh’s contribution, “Cosmopolitan Violence as Cosmological Reckoning: The Poetics of the Night-raid, the Martyred Body, and the Execution-spectacle,” explicitly engages cosmopolitanism as a form of violence. Reading the poetry of Mehdi Akhavan-Sales, Reza Barahani and Ahmad Shamloo within the context of Mossadeq’s coup, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi’s retaliation, and the Iranian Revolution, Mohaghegh argues that the experiences of cruelty, betrayal, torment and annihilation in the midst of these events are not a failure of Iranian cosmopolitanism but its violent realization. The Enlightenment civic principles of freedom, justice and human rights, he
argues, appear amidst these events as smokescreens of the clandestine yet transparent fact of marshal law (112). Mohaghegh’s poetic figures stage a “cosmological reckoning” with “cosmopolitan violence” and make possible the narrativity of the historical identity of Iran in crisis. Akhavan’s “nightly guest,” “forlorn gypsy,” and “untuned melody,” Barhani’s “rotten well of history,” and “underground man,” as well as Shamlu’s “first and last dawn,” “Abel standing on the platform of contempt,” and self-flagellating “honor of the universe,” are the expressions of the Iranian “I” as it traverses the prison of not only the King or Ayatollah, but also of being, in order to find it anew.

In Alireza Shomali and Ebrahim Soltani’s “Metaphysics, Secularism and Cosmopolitan,” the authors set out to identify the epistemic and cognitive preconditions of cosmopolitanism to argue that the necessary secular and democratic prerequisites for its emergence are missing in Iran. Drawing on the critical reflections on democracy and secularism by Charles Taylor, Jose Casanova, and Jürgen Habermas, among others, Shomali and Soltani identify the prerequisite condition for democracy and secularism as one in which “citizens’ religiosity is seen by the religious citizens themselves as compatible with their democratic rights to authorship of the law” (36). They briefly locate this condition in Western traditions and broadly describe them as “post-secular” and “post-metaphysical.” Next, they look for “local” Iranian resources that promote a post-secular and post-metaphysical way of thinking and find one such a resource in the works of Iran’s “New Mu’tazilites” and their representative intellectual Abdulkarim Soroush. In the authors’ estimation, Soroush’s “phenomenology of prophethood,” which assumes that “Muhammad was always already in-the-world-with-others-linguistically,” provides Iran with a post-secular possibility, while his negative theology provides its “postmetaphysical” conception of nature (46–47).

Shomali and Soltani’s attention to the epistemic and cognitive conditions of politics, as well as their thematization of the Islamic tradition, is certainly a welcomed contribution to the volume. Locating cosmopolitanism within the history of Europe is necessary for understanding how it might be used to theorize identity in Iran. However, the authors tend to overlook the heterogeneity of modern political culture therein. By identifying the “New Mu’tazilites” as representative of the country’s “traditions” and as potentially generative of a democratic, secular, and cosmopolitan future, they risk reducing Islam to nothing more than a politically expedient ideology. The reader might be struck by the similarity of the authors’ attempt to that
of the Islamic revolutionaries. Overlooking the historical heterogeneity of Iran, both groups imagine a notion of “Islam” available for cultural and political production. The irony is that this vision was realized in the post-revolutionary “Cultural Revolution,” and the construction of the “Islamic Republic”—the very context that Shomali and Soltani find inhospitable for a “dignified and noble life” and that they wish to transform (36).

Notwithstanding, the most remarkable feature of *Iranian Identity and Cosmopolitanism* is an intimate staging of its subject matters. In the pages of this volume, and also elsewhere, the reader is offered the authors’ testimonies of the carnivorous politics of belonging in and around Iran, before and after the Revolution, and during the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988). We receive the authors’ testimonies in English and in light of a diasporic crossing of linguistic, cultural and political borders. The author’s reflections, as well as their shortcomings, convey the indeterminacies of political persecution, statelessness, and exile as a mark of Iranian identity in the modern period.

A shortcoming that is shared across the entries is the narrow and unsynthesized construction of the heterogeneity of Iranian identity and cosmopolitanism. Most remarkably, the entries in the volume take the West as the only site of cross-cultural and transnational exchange. This is not to deny the significance of the West as a site of exchange. It is, however, identifying a characteristic of Iranian cosmopolitanism that is mesmerized by the West, seeks to emulate, reject, or “critically engage” it. Missing are cross-cultural and transnational exchanges with the non-West that are constitutive of Iranian identity and traditions. The trans-national network of Shi’a seminaries, for instance; or the trans-historical synthesis of scholastic education in late medieval and early modern Europe with the Arabic and Persian philosophical and literary archive in the curricula of Qom and Najaf’s seminaries; as well as the exchanges within the Persianate world such as those between Persian intellectuals in Iran, India and the Caucasus in the nineteenth century.3

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The frameworks through which we understand Iranian cosmopolitanism will surely become modulated as they are thought with and through such different historical cases. Moreover, in so far as “Iran” is a heterogeneous living culture irreducible to a nation-state, cosmopolitanism must be explored in its constitution. Liberal valorization of exchange and critical attention to it, or the rejection of exchange in the reactionary self-fashioning of “Islam” and “Iran” both in the past and in this volume share an inattentiveness to Iran’s irreducibility to the historical and cultural construct of the nation-state.