

After Khomeini: Iran Under His Successors by Saïd Amir Arjomand. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. 268p. \$24.95.

Iran's Intellectual Revolution by Mehran Kamrava. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 267p. \$85.00 cloth, \$35.99.

Democracy in Modern Iran: Islam, Culture, and Political Change by Ali Mirsepassi. New York: New York University Press, 2010. 219p. \$42.00.

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One of the central questions of the literature on comparative political theory has been the issue of how developing countries have encountered Western modernity. A great deal of the existing narratives deals with how Western thinkers see the “virtues” of modernity and how they lament the “barriers” that exist to modernity’s embrace on the part of people in the developing world. What often gets left out is the view from the other side, i.e., the “underside of history.” The three books under review in this essay deal with the predicament of modernity in a developing country.

In *After Khomeini* Saïd Amir Arjomand, a professor of sociology at Stony Brook University, presents a fascinating account of the challenges faced by the only theocratic state born through a revolution after the demise of its charismatic founder. He presents a cartography of the complex structure of power in post-revolutionary Iran (dual authority between elected and appointed ruling bodies) and maintains that Iran is progressively becoming a neopatrimonial regime where the Supreme Leader’s “agglomeration of personal power” (p. 181) is hard to miss. Writing from the vantage point of a sociologist steeped in the literature of comparative revolutions, Arjomand maintains that the 1979 revolution enhanced rather than demolished the power of the state. As happens with most revolutions, a new constituency -- which he refers to as the “lay second stratum” -- was empowered by the revolutionary upheaval. These nouvelle fonctionnaires (civil state employees, local administrators, military and security officers, judiciary and Office of Leadership personnel) have increasingly tried to infringe on the power of the “first stratum” -- i.e., the establishment clerics -- through ideological aggrandizement, political maneuvering, theological acrobatics, and commandeering the hydra-headed military-security institutions.

While President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad represents the hardline faction of the second stratum (p. 149), many of his opponents in the reformist camp also enjoy a similar pedigree and have hailed from the same humble backgrounds. Arjomand reserves some of his harshest indictments for this latter group. He maintains that while in the eyes of many Iranians the initial élan of the revolution has long been exhausted, the reformists are “hoisted on their own petard” and “pathetically trapped in the net of their bombastic revolutionary discourse” (p. 107).

Perhaps the most original part of the book is chapter six where Arjomand touches upon such issues as social stratification, economic inequality, urbanization, social mobility through education, mobilization of women, provincial autonomy, local politics and presidential populism. On the basis of the empirical data he provides, Arjomand maintains that post-revolutionary Iran has experienced an “integrative revolution,” i.e., “an explosion of political mobilization and participation” (p. 112). While one can contest the accuracy of some of his statistics, the conclusion he reaches is beyond reproach. Alas, one would have hoped that instead of fleetingly adumbrating the implications of such crucial trends the author had more thoroughly discussed their weighty ramifications.

Mehran Kamrava’s *Iran’s Intellectual Revolution* starts with the following opening salvo: “There is a new revolution brewing in Iran... It is a revolution of ideas, a mostly silent contest over the very meaning and essence of Iranian identity, and, more importantly, where Iran and Iranians ought to go from here” (p. 1). In this book the author cogently frames the vivacious intellectual universe of post-revolutionary Iran in the context of three meta-discourses: religious conservative, religious reformist, and secular modernist.

For the last three decades the religious conservative discourse “has sought to theoretically justify the continued dominance of the traditionalist clergy over the entire political system and the cultural life of the country. The discourse has sought to strengthen the theoretical foundations and the practical powers of the absolutist institution of the Supreme Religious Guide, the *Velayat-e Faqih*” (p. 2). Despite the religious conservatives control of the state machinery, Kamrava maintains that their discourse, which “eschews theoretical and doctrinal innovativeness unless absolutely necessary by evolving political circumstances” (p. 80), has fatal flaws and has lost much of its legitimacy in the eyes of Iran’s burgeoning middle class.

The religious reformist camp poses a challenge to the legitimacy of the traditional exegesis of religious conservatives and consequently to their unbridled political power. The intellectuals situated in this camp condemn the mutation of Islam as a religion into ideology and don’t consider this metaphysical juggernaut appealing. As one leading intellectual of this tradition, Abdolkarim Soroush, has counter-intuitively argued, it is the revolution that has imposed a straitjacket on Islam. “Religion is for the next life, not this one. The danger to Islam is that the revolution will give it a perpetual bad name.” Like many of their counterparts in the Arab world (i.e., Mohammed `Abid al-Jabiri, `Abd al-Kabir al-Khatibi, Mohammed Arkoun, Hasan Hanafi, and Rashid Ghannouchi), Iranian religious reformers disdain the anti-intellectualism of Islamic fundamentalists, are committed to intellectual reformation, and embrace the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, having witnessed for the last three decades the errant excesses and cruelty of Iranian theocracy, they are perhaps more wary than their Arab counterparts of the dangers of religious dictatorship.

It is a fact that over the course of the last decade or so the pendulum of Iranian public discourse on the subject of democracy has shifted rather significantly towards

secular views. Accordingly, a noticeable number of religious reformists are increasingly gravitating toward the intellectual positions articulated by secular modernists who call for privatization of religion (p. 174) and a critique of the archaic ideas of an Islamic theocracy. These intellectual semi-defectors agree that political and social rights are secular issues and their articulation and resolution resides with human beings. While many in the secular modernist camp have welcomed this metamorphosis, others maintain that in the aftermath of the Enlightenment, “reason” refers to autonomous intellect and therefore inserting the adjective “religious” in front of “intellectuals” -- as done by the principal protagonists of the religious reformist camp -- is a contradiction in terms. These skeptics claim that their objection is more than obtuse sectarian squabbling, but rather it is about the incommensurability of two different *Weltanschauungs*.

Ali Mirsepassi's *Democracy in Modern Iran* presents a forceful intervention in this very debate. Following in the footsteps of the American philosopher Richard Rorty, who maintained that democracy is more about creating democratic institutions than ostentatious philosophical contemplation, Mirsepassi -- a sociologist who teaches at New York University -- criticizes the endeavors of secular and religious Iranian intellectuals alike for trying to articulate a definition of democracy deduced from a set of metaphysical principles or totalizing epistemological assertions. He takes issue with those who argue that democracy is about the embracing of “progress,” “scientific rationality,” and “reason” (p. 20). Nor does he believe that democracy “is a state of mind,” a quest for “politics of truth,” or the march of a “consciousness of freedom.” From such a vantage point, Mirsepassi sees a great deal of commonality, rather than discord, between the reformist and secular discourses enunciated by Kamrava. He reprimands those intellectuals who maintain that critiquing the epistemological and philosophical foundations of traditional political thought, from a modernist perspective, is the only way to make sense of why modernity was abrogated in Iran and how the country can eventually become democratic. In other words, Mirsepassi's *bête noir* are those intellectuals who uphold the view that in order for Iran to become a democratic state it first needs to have an intellectual house cleaning whereby the citizens come to realize the values of modernity, secularism, and the like. He considers this totalizing and “timeless speculative” line of reasoning to be a “flamboyantly imagined philosophical vision of total change” (p. 2) and, alas, the dominant paradigm of the Iranian intellectual universe.

Mirsepassi's interlocutors retort that in order to comprehend the shallow modernity Iranians have presently inherited, intellectuals need to undertake a painstaking critique of the country's philosophical tradition in order to holistically answer the following question: What conditions made modernity possible in Europe and led to its abnegation in Iran? In the eyes of these philosophically-minded modernists, social science-type explanations of the Iranian predicament are deficient in answering the above question because they are often grounded in ideological positions and/or mechanistic materialism or simply misapplied.

While one can sympathize with Mirsepassi's main claim that an anti-foundationalist approach to democracy is preferable to an ideational approach, it is baffling that he does not provide the reader with a set of “sociological” explanations as to

why the “philosophical view” has remained the triumphant orthodoxy so far. The reader remains oblivious as to why this approach has managed to resonate so strongly with the intellectual elite. This shortcoming may be attributed to the observation that *Democracy in Modern Iran* is in many ways a work of advocacy by a public intellectual who through his frequent writings in Iranian media and visits to the country has managed to insert himself into intellectual deliberations taking place there. Contrary to Kamrava who was simply reporting on intellectual currents and debates without taking sides, Mirsepassi is himself a party to the debate and may have overstated the differences between the two approaches. Can he really claim that the Magna Carta, the Federalist Papers and the ideas of such thinkers as Mill, Rousseau, Jefferson and Madison had no role to play in the development of democracy in the Western world?

One can also take issue with Mirsepassi’s appropriation of Rorty by pointing out that whatever Rorty says about democracy is primarily about *liberal* democracy. Like Rawls, Rorty believes that democracy has primacy in contemporary western liberalist societies exactly because a certain epistemology (pragmatism) and a certain philosophical view (secular liberalism) are already imbedded in these societies. In other words, we can stop worrying about truth not because it is unimportant and inconsequential to democracy but, rather, because we have already articulated what we mean by truth; philosophically as well as historically. Mirsepassi’s reading overlooks Rorty’s philosophical armor in defense of liberal democracy. Furthermore, the application of the ideas of this liberal/secular/pragmatist philosopher to a country like Iran where the ruling elite claim divine mandate, legalistic Islam is the nomenclature of statecraft, the body politic is divided, laws are applied arbitrary, and non-liberalist truth-claims are still in vogue is problematical to say the least.

As for Kamrava, regrettably he does not situate his analysis in terms of the economic and social transformations of Iranian society over the last three decades. Taking into account such factors as the rapid urbanization of the population, enlargement of the higher education system, attenuated nature of class relations, empowerment of new social groups, boldness of women’s and youth movements, etc. could have given more heft to the author’s analysis of the trajectory and dynamics underpinning each of these three intellectual currents.

Arjomand, Kamrava and Mirsepassi all mainly concentrate on the post-Khomeini phase (“the second republic”) of Iranian polity and are in concordance that the grandiose experiment of the Islamic republic has failed. Arjomand and Mirsepassi also criticize the platform of Islamic reformists, but from different angles. While Arjomand is critical of the persistent attachment of these intellectual activists to a revolutionary discourse and their political timidity in challenging the “clerical monarchy” (p. 91), Mirsepassi takes them to task for being seduced by abstract thoughts about democracy. Unfortunately, none of the three authors really engages with the impressive body of political science literature on democratic transition or the persistence of authoritarianism to help us situate Iran in a larger theoretical framework. Similarly, engagement with the perceptive writings of scholars like Rajeev Bhargava, José Casanova, Alfred Stepan, and Charles

Taylor could have further enriched discussions of the present and future prospects of “public religion” in Iran.

Many years ago an astute analyst described the 1979 Iranian revolution as the victory of “ignorance over oppression.” Arjomand, Kamrava and Mirsepassi each manage to demonstrate that the Iranian society has come a long way in addressing the obliviousness charge but, alas, oppression endures. In their own unique ways, each author has provided us with valuable insights into the epistemological tumult, theological fury and recondite politics of post-revolutionary Iran. Three decades after the revolution more empirically-based studies of Iran’s Byzantine political structure and its political elite are needed to account for the durability of theocratic authoritarianism.