

NATIVISM, ORIENTALISM AND THE LEFT

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Since the mid-1980s Iranian intellectuals, mainly those of us on the left, have pondered the origins and ramifications of the coalitions, ideologies, and discourses of the Iranian Revolution and the evolution of the Islamic Republic. We have examined the anti-imperialist discourses of the left organizations, the various dimensions of Khomeinism, the breakdown of the populist coalition and rhetoric, the emergence of an official Islamic ideology, and the marginalization of secular and Marxist discourses. We have tried to understand the failure of the left project by studying the resources that had been available to the clerical movement, and compared them to the mobilizing capacity of the left organizations. We have acknowledged that the discourse of *gharbzadegi* ("westoxication") was a powerful rhetorical weapon in the hands of the Islamists, and that Islamic populism and the politics of "authenticity" constituted a compelling set of practices, while the left missed the opportunity to formulate an alternative discourse and practice based on concepts of human rights, women's rights, and democratic participation. More recently, we have observed from afar the diversification of Islamic discourses and the re-emergence of oppositional forces in the form of what may be called the Islamic feminism of *Zanan* and the neo-Islamic political philosophy of Abdolkarim Soroush. Since the early 1980s, many books and articles have addressed these issues and trends,¹ although perhaps none in as comprehensive a fashion as Merzad Boroujerdi's *Iranian Intellectuals and the West*.²

Boroujerdi's book makes an important contribution to our understanding of the revolutionary discourses and the aftermath of the revolution by grounding them in an intellectual history. The book consists of seven chapters, a prologue and an epilogue. These chapters deal with concepts of otherness, Orientalism, Orientalism-in-reverse, and nativism (ch. 1); the other-ing of rentier state (ch. 2); the other-ing of the West (ch. 3); the clerical subculture (ch. 4); lay religious intellectuals (ch. 5); academic nativism (ch. 6); and debates in the postrevolutionary era (ch. 7). The intellectuals discussed at length in the book are Seyyed Fakhroddin Shadman, Ahmad Fardid, Jalal Al-e Ahmad, Ali Shariati, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Eshan Naraq, Hamid Enayat, Daryush Shayegan, Reza Davari, and Abdolkarim Soroush. Boroujerdi seeks to show that "the cognitive map, nomenclature, and discursive practices of the modern Iranian intellectual elite demonstrates that the ideology of the revolution was not *ab initio* Islamic", and that there was "remarkable continu-

ity in Iranian thought before and after the 1979 revolution" (p. xv). The continuity lies in the nativist discourse of religious as well as non-religious intellectuals, an attempt to forge an "authentic" national identity unsullied by Western influence. As Boroujerdi shows, the West has made a very deep impression on Iranian intellectuals, many of whom have been preoccupied with distancing themselves from the West and with trying to establish the superiority of Iranian or Islamic culture, civilization, and knowledge.

The strengths of the book are many: it is very well written and meticulously researched. It explicates the nativist discourse in its Islamic and non-Islamic versions. The book shows us that nativist ideas predate the Islamist intervention and were present among Pahlavi-era intellectuals such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Eshan

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Naraghi, and Jamshid Behnam. The discussion of why Iran has not been able to develop secularism, in contrast to Turkey, Russia, India, Morocco, and so on (p. 24) is cogent and persuasive.³ The book introduces readers to Iranian intellectuals they may not have been familiar with, or had forgotten about, such as Shadman and his concept of the *fokoli*, and Jamshid Behnam and his attempt to show moral bankruptcy of the West.

And Boroujerdi presents their ideas in a way that offers both a balanced summary and a critical commentary. I found Boroujerdi's comparison of Shariati and Nasr particularly interesting, and his critique of both thinkers valuable.

I also appreciated the discussion of the more recent debates among Islamic modernist such as Soroush and Islamic postmodernists (or, perhaps more accurately, Islamic Heideggerians) such as Davari. The book refers to new material and Persian-language sources that will be very useful to other scholars. It provides a helpful appendix catalogue of Iranian intellectuals and political figures.

For those of us who have pondered the defeat of the left, it is sobering to be reminded of the permissive approach of the Pahlavi state to the clerical subculture as opposed to the secular subculture as represented by the left and liberal groupings and intellectuals: "During the period between 1971 and 1975 writers witnessed the peak of censorship, horror, and intellectual suffocation when many engaged literati were imprisoned, blacklisted, or denied permission to write or publish" (p. 50). By contrast, during the early 1970s, three religious books, including the Quran, sold in the hundreds of

thousands; religious books as a percentage of all published books increased from 10.1 percent in 1963-64 to 33.5 percent in 1974-75; and in 1975-76, more than 154 works (books and articles) were written on Islamic topics compared to 48 works dealing with modern philosophers' views on social and literary subjects. Boroujerdi cites Amir Arjomand to the effect that there were 48 publishers of religious literature in Tehran alone, many of which had been operating since 1965. The sheer size of the clerical class, along with their intellectual activities, extensive network of mosques, and charitable foundations subsidized by bazaaris, supported the clerical counterculture. Moreover, as Mohamad Tavakoli has reminded me, from the late 19th century religious books always outnumbered other subjects. It is interesting, if disconcerting, to observe that the recent religious revival in Iran and other Muslim countries has occurred in the context of print capitalism and rising literacy and educational attainment.

In sum, one way of greeting Boroujerdi's book is that non-clerical intellectual thought contributed to the clerical ideological victory, albeit unintentionally. That is, the various nativist ruminations by the likes of Naraghi, Nasr, Davari, Shariati and others intersected with the occidentalism of Islamist thinkers to result in the anti-West and anti-secular doctrine of the early Islamic Republic.

As important as the book is, it has some minor and not-so-minor problems, including gaps and silences in its analysis and some definitional inconsistencies. I will discuss these and conclude by returning to the theme of nativism and raising some final questions.

Orientalism-in-Reverse and Occidentalism

The first chapter defines the book's main concepts, but we encounter some difficulties with the term "Orientalism-in-reverse". For although Boroujerdi writes that Orientalism-in-reverse is not the antithesis of Orientalism, his presentation of the nativist discourse of Iranian intellectuals suggests that it is. He writes that Orientalism-in-reverse is "more concerned with representing (or "big brothering") its own domestic constituency that with understanding and dominating the exotic other" (p. 13), and he rejects the term Occidentalism, yet he devotes an entire chapter to the "Other-ing of the West" by Iranian intellectuals, and goes on to show that Davari, among others, viewed the West "as a totally, a unified whole, and an essence" (p. 161). Boroujerdi defines nativism, as I once did, as the binary opposition between the "authentic" and the "alien" (p. 18), and in his epilogue he writes that "nativism commits the same mistake as Orientalism proper. It renders the -other opaque and undertakes an essentialist and unabashed criticism of that other while refraining from a harsh scrutiny of its own cherished assumptions". Here, in fact, Boroujerdi cites my 1989 article "Against Eurocentrism and Nativism", where I define Nativism as the mirror image of Orientalism, but the point is that Boroujerdi's downplaying of Orientalism-in-reverse in his first chapter is belied by the rest of his book.

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I should also point out that Mohamad Tavakoli uses the term Occidentalism to describe the very same process described by Edward Said, but in reverse: it is the Orient (or, in case of Tavakoli's work, "Persianate voy(age)urs returning the gaze, whether in a highly romanticized and idealized way or in a more negative manner that depicts Europe as inferior and corrupt and European women as deprived and prostituted."⁴

A second definitional problem occurs in the chapter on the Othering of the rentier state. This chapter left me somewhat perplexed, especially with respect to the idea, apparently borrowed from Afsaneh Najmabadi, that the absence of a "welfare consciousness" and the development of a rentier mentality eroded the bonds linking the state and civil society (pp. 30-31). Apart from the lack of a definition of "civil society", it is unclear how a "welfare consciousness" or its absence would undermine the legitimacy of the state. "Welfare consciousness", as defined by Boroujerdi following Najmabadi, is the perception of welfare benefits as rights/entitlements rather than "gracious handouts" from the Shah. But what

difference would that have made to the people's view of the withdrawal of benefits at a time of economic distress? In fact, one could argue that in a welfare regime (for example, in northern Europe) where entitlements are the product of the redistribution of peoples rather than high taxes, the withdrawal of benefits would get people far

angrier with the state than in an oil rentier context in which benefits and salaries are perceived as gracious handouts to which people do not contribute. I am not disputing the description of the Shah's regime as a rentier state lacking in legitimacy; I am simply pointing out that the concept of "welfare consciousness" is an unconvincing explanatory variable in the analysis of the regime's weakness.

Nor is it true, as Boroujerdi states in this chapter, that capital-intensive industrialization was occurring in Iran at a time of massive unemployment (p. 33). Whatever problems the Iranian economy had, large-scale unemployment was not one of them. Unemployment is a relatively recent phenomenon in the Middle East, including Iran.

Minor Points

In the prologue Boroujerdi refers to the proliferation of publications on Shiism and the clergy and the dearth of studies on non-clerical intellectuals. One study not mentioned in the relevant footnote is Hossein Bahriyyeh's *State and Revolution in Iran* (St. Martins Press, 1981), probably the first book that dealt with ideological and intellectual origins of the Iranian revolution. Ali Mirsepassi and I also have an article, published in *Radical History Review*, that examined some of the issues raised in Boroujerdi's book, albeit in a much less comprehensive fashion.

I think the appendix should have distinguished leftist and Marxist political activists from the others. A point that Ali Mirsepassi and I emphasized in our joint paper was that the left is an integral part of the political culture and social structure in Iran (as I know Boroujerdi

to be in agreement with), and I think that studies of intellectual history should underscore this. I also wonder about the absence of some intellectuals and political figures from the listing, such as Jafar Pishevari (leader of the Fergheh Demokrat and of the short-lived Azerbaijan Autonomous Republic), Bahman Nirumand (author of *Iran: The New Imperialism in Action* [Monthly Review, 1969], and subsequently an activist), and Jahanir Amouzegar, who has published numerous studies on the Iranian economy. (But perhaps economists are, by definition, not intellectuals.)

Finally, a book on the intellectual history of the revolution may be forgiven for over-emphasizing its subject matter, but was it necessary to repeat, without criticism, Edward Said's statement that "There has been no major revolution in modern history without intellectuals: conversely, there has been no major counterrevolution without intellectuals. Intellectuals have been the fathers and mothers of movements and, of course, sons and daughters, even nephews and nieces" (p. 22). Where does that leave workers and peasants in the family tree?

Gaps and Silences: On Women and the Tudeh Party

Since I view the world, history, and scholarship through a Marxist-feminist sociological lens, I cannot but be struck by the implication of Boroujerdi's book that the world of ideas and of received wisdom is the world of men. Can it be true that the intellectual history of modern Iran is entirely masculine? Have women made no contributions, either to nativist thought or to its "other"? And what of expatriate feminist critiques of *gharbzadegi* by Afsaneh Najmabadi, Nayereh Tohidi, and myself?⁵

At the very least I would have expected an excursion into the writings of early Islamic republic women ideologues such as Fereshteh Hashemi, Azam Taleghani, Shahin Tabatabai, and Zahra Rahnava. The discussion of Soroush and of Islamic modernism if Boroujerdi's book would have been complemented by a discussion of Shahla Sherkat and of Islamic feminism.⁶ There is some consensus that the Islamic-feminist magazine *Zanan*, which Sherkat

edits, may be moving away from a focus on Islamic law and in the direction of more secular subjects. *Zanan* did not participate in the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, September 1995), due to the government's role in coordinating NGO activities, and was critical of the position adopted by the Iranian delegations in Beijing.⁷

The other gap and silence in the book is on the Tudeh Party. Boroujerdi's suggestion that non-religious oppositional groups such as the Fedaii and the Mojahedin, and especially some of their intellectuals, were part of the nativist discourse, raises the question of the extent to which the Tudeh Party and its intellectuals diverged from this approach and were perhaps part of an alternative intellectual path. Intellectuals from the Tudeh Party translated many

European works, Soviet works, and Marxist scholarship. The Tudeh Party also had an interesting interpretation of ancient Persian history and of the character of Mazdak, and sought to link the "progressive" Islamic and pre-Islamic intellectual trends. I would have linked Boroujerdi's book to include a discussion of the ways in which the Tudeh Party intersected with or diverged from the nativist thought, along with a discussion of key intellectuals such as Eshan Tabari.

Related to this is the absence of a consideration of intellectual work that revived pre-Islamic history and symbols. Mohamad Tavakoli's research shows that in the 18th and 19th centuries, "Iran-centered" histories displaced dynastic and Islam-centered chronicles. In order to recover from historical amnesia, people re-invented pre-Islamic Iran as a lost utopia with Kayumars as a Persian prophet predating Adam, Mazdak as a theoretical and practitioner of freedom and equality, Kaveh-yi Ahangar as the originator of "national will" (*hinmat-i milli*), and Anushirvan as a paradigmatic just, constitutional monarch.⁸ It would be interesting to consider the extent to which such intellectual endeavors could be characterized as nativist, and if so, whether this legitimizes nativism.

Concluding Thought: Can there be a "Good" Nativism?

In my 1987 *New Left Review* article on the left and revolution, I emphasized the left's populism and the intersection of its anti-imperialist discourse with the Islamic populism of the clerical-dominated regime. But I ended the article by expressing the hope that a new discourse and politics would arise: "it will be possible for the left to re-enter the political arena and to define an Iranian practice, an Iranian idiom, an Iranian road to socialism."⁹

Should all nativism be regarded as a negativity? If nativism, especially in its Third World variety, is viewed as a strategy of self-renewal and an essential component of modern nationalist discourses, then it could be viewed sympathetically. And if it includes strategies such as appropriation of historical figures and terms towards the formulation of broad concepts of equality, nationhood, and justice (say, Mazdak in the Iranian case, or Sandino in the Nica-

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raguan case), then this too could be a positive rather than a negative form of nativism. One may even argue that such local intellectual endeavors are inevitable, linked as they are to geopolitical or global processes, including neo-colonialist intrusions. In his book on discourse and ideology in Japanese nativism, Harootunian shows how as a reaction to the pervasive influence of Chinese culture on Japan, nativists began in the late 18th century and throughout the 19th century to forge a Japanese sense of difference and identity grounded in folk tradition, agricultural values, and ancient Japanese culture.¹⁰ In his book he treats nativism as a discourse and shows how it functioned ideologically in Japan. However—and this is where the analogy is relevant—Harootunian shows "how in time nativism, conceived as a defense of difference, itself became the site of sameness. With the proclamation of Japanese identity in the name

of cultural unity and ethnic homogeneity, what had begun as a visible discourse on the social was transmitted into an invisible ideology devoted to securing a consensual order".

Nativism, therefore, occurs in response or reaction to foreign domination and cultural imperialism, often in the context of nationalism or nation building, and as an effort to forge an "authentic" or indigenous identity. It represents an attempt by intellectuals who are engaging with Western philosophy and foreign powers to ground themselves in their own history and culture. In and of itself, this is not objectionable and is probably necessary. Indeed, discourses of equality, human rights, and justice are strengthened when grounded in culture and history and shown to be truly universal. Nativism is problematic when it becomes a hegemonic discourse that denies multiple interpretations of the authentic, the indigenous, and the good; or when its "other-ing" becomes dichotomous, binary, an extreme; or when it insists on particularity and difference (as in the case of the Islamic Republic).

Seen in this light, the intellectual enterprise represented by some of the writers Boroujerdi mentions may be regarded as necessary and positive.¹¹ Indeed, Boroujerdi's sympathetic reading of Soroush would suggest that he, too, is cognizant of the necessity and legitimacy of theorizing and philosophizing that is grounded in historical, cultural, and even religious idioms. Of course, what is interesting about Soroush is that he engages in a critique of *feqh-e sonnati* armed with knowledge of Islamic theology and Western philosophical thought; moreover, his Islamic modernism is an important counterweight to the hegemony of the "other-ing" Islamic nativists. What is disconcerting, however, is Soroush's apparent avoidance of the topic of women's position in Islam, or on the Islamic Republic of Iran.¹²

What I am suggesting - albeit somewhat tentatively - is that perhaps we cannot avoid nativism and should not condemn it. Perhaps, in the end, the ingredients for a secular discourse and a pluralist culture - in an Iranian idiom that engages with and indeed borrows from Western philosophy - lie in the contributions of, inter alia, Al-e Ahmad, the Tudeh Party, Abdolkarim Soroush, and Shahla Sherkat. As far as I can discern, there is some nativism in them all, in the positive sense.

We should, however, also be able to recognize and condemn distorted discourses that seek to obliterate others, whether the "others" be dissidents, minorities, or the West. And we should be vigorously critical of discourses—nativist or otherwise—that ignore "the woman question" and neglect the scholarship and contributions of women.

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Notes

1. See, for example, Valentine Moghadam "Socialism or Anti-Imperialism? The Left and Revolution in Iran," *New Left Review* 166 (Nov/Dec. 1987): 5-28; Ali Mirsepassi-Ashtiani and Val Moghadam, "The Left and Political Islam in Iran: A Retrospect and Prospects," *Radical History*

Review 51 (1991): 27-62; Ali Ashtiani, "A Balance-Sheet of the Left," Kankash, I, I (Summer 1987), in Persian; Janet Afary, "The War Against Feminism in the Name of Allah: Making Sense of Gender and Fundamentalism," *New Left Review* (forthcoming, 1997).

2. Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (Syracuse University press, 1996).

3. Mohamad Tavakoli, historian of Qajar Iran who has also researched the Indian archives, disputes Boroujerdi's assertion of Iranian intellectuals' belated acquaintance with European philosophy and languages. He states that "familiarity with Western philosophy can be extended back to late 18th century" with the translation of Descartes and with reflections on the progress of Russia under Peter the Great, but concedes that this familiarity was not widespread and that breaks and ruptures in the intellectual tradition may have impeded the development of a secular discourse. (Personal communication, 29 March 1997).

4. See the following essays by Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi: "Women of the West Imagined: The Farangi Other and the Emergence of the Woman Question in Iran," Valentine M. Moghadam, ed., *Identity Politics and Women: Cultural Reassertions and Feminisms in International Perspective* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991); "Orientalism's Genesis Amnesia," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, XVI, 1 (1996): 1-14.

5. See Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Power, Morality, and the New Muslim Womanhood," in Myron Weiner and Ali Banuazizi, eds. *The Politics of Social Transformation in Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan* (Syracuse University Press 1990); Nayereh Tohidi, "Modernity, Islamization and Women in Iran," in Valentine M. Moghadam, ed., *Gender and National Identity: Women and Politics in Muslim Societies* (London: Zed Books, 1994); M. Moghadam, "Against Eurocentrism and Nativism A Review Essay on Samir Amin's Eurocentrism and Other Texts," *Socialism and Democracy* 9 (Fall/Winter 1989), and (on Iran) in *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* (Boulder; Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1993), Ch. 6.

6. See Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Debating Women: The Politics of Women's Journals in Iran," Mimeo, April 1996.

7. See Mir-Hosseini (ibid.). See also report on the Beijing Conference by Nayereh Tohidi, *Zanan*, 25, October 1995.

8. Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, "Refashioning Iran; Language and Culture During the Constitutional Revolution," *Iranian Studies* XXIII, 1-4 (1990): 77-102. The quote comes from p. 77.

9. Moghadam, "Socialism or Anti-Imperialism?," p. 28

10. H. R. Harootunian, *Things Seen and Unseen; Discourse and Ideology in Tokugawa Nativism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988. I am grateful to Mohamad Tavakoli for bringing this book to my attention.

11. Indeed, Mohamad Tavakoli insists that a re-reading of Jalal Al-Ahmad is imperative, and that the left can and should appropriate him as part of the secular tradition. After all, notwithstanding his populism, Al-e Ahmad read and cited Gramsci favorably. (Personal communication, 29 March 1997.) This is not my own view at the present time.

12. See Mir-Hosseini, op. cit.