

# A Social Constructivist's Explanation of the Iranian Revolution

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In March 1953, joint British-American intelligence secured authorisation for the overthrow of then Prime Minister of Iran, Mohammad Mossadeq, leading to months of propaganda activities, opposition funding, and destabilisation campaigns (Abrahamian, 2001: p203). The authorisation for the coup d'état had come about as a result of Mossadeq's embroilment in a struggle for control over the Iranian oil industry, which would eventually prove to be a losing battle for Mossadeq (Gasiorowski, 2013: p4). His fall was followed by Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's ascension to power and in the decade that followed, a period of secularisation and modernisation occurred as the Shah's powers of absolute monarchy took hold (Balaghi, 2013: p73).

On the 11<sup>th</sup> of February, 2014, Iranians commemorated the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their 1979 Islamic Revolution, from here interchangeably referred to as the "Iranian Revolution" or the "1979 Revolution". This event saw the rise of popular demonstrations against the Shah's authoritarian rule over the country and ended with the establishment of the world's first Islamic state in modern times (Parvaz, 2014). The extent to which social forces influenced the overhaul of Iranian society presents an advantageous case study to be explained by social constructivism in the context of International Relations theory and attests to social constructivism as a powerful explanatory tool in the study of revolutions.

By applying and evaluating social constructivism's utility in explaining the Islamic Revolution, this essay seeks to understand how this phenomenon might lend itself to constructivist understanding and to evaluate why constructivism is better placed compared to the other traditional theories of International Relations (Krishnaswamy, 2012). In its consideration of non-material forces, this essay argues that social constructivism equips theorists with the necessary assumptions to both accurately understand events that preceded the revolution, as well as the events that followed, and provides a firm base of knowledge upon which other occurrences of similar natures may be applied.

### A Constructed Revolution

For the purposes of the argument being advanced here, it should be noted that the period following Mossadeq's removal and ending with the eventual ouster of the Pahlavi rulers saw a rise in the average standard of living in Iran (Buchan, 2013: p418). Such is the drawback of relying upon material conditions to understand the events comprising the 1979 Revolution; that there exists gaps unaccounted for with regard to sole considerations of material forces and a non-reliance on the role of ideologies, ideas, norms, public arguments and discourse, all of which inevitably matter in societal transformations (Lynch, 2005). In order to best understand the Islamic Revolution, which by its very name implies an ideological dynamism present, attention should be paid to the prevailing discourses in Iranian society, as discourse is a reflection of beliefs and interests, shaping and establishing accepted norms of behaviour (Walt, 1998: p4).

The first of many ideas attributed to the plethora of causes behind the revolution is the decline of monarchism in international politics during the period (Buchan, 2013: p419). The disappearance of kingships around the world between the Second World War and 1979 placed the Shah's rule in a vulnerable position amidst the sea of

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republican countries emerging globally. The second of these causes were the tensions created by the Shah's reforms – reforms towards modernisation and secularisation that would put him at odds with the Shia clergy dominating Iranian conceptions of self-identity and tradition (Amineh & Eisenstadt, 2007: p131). Third and most important to this essay is the exhibited relation between religion and the revolution; that is, the fall of the monarchy as a result of gradual influential decline and the subjugation of the state to clerical sovereignty (Arjomand, 1985: p51).

As shall be elaborated, these revolutionary factors fall wholly under the remit of social constructivism as a cognitive theory rather than any other theory based upon materialistic considerations. To the extent that the Islamic Revolution proves to be a result of economic grievances, this essay argues that it was ideological and cultural motivations that ultimately served as the bedrock for revolutionary fervour, without which, there would have been none. In this instance, social constructivism's status as a social rather than a political theory allows it to emphasise details that would otherwise be brushed aside as trivial or inconsequential (Adler, 1997: p323), thus benefitting those seeking to understand the Islamic Revolution as a social phenomenon.

## **The End of a Dynasty**

Examining first the assault upon monarchism as a viable system of governance in a post-World War Iran, there exists an abundance of literature articulating Iranian perceptions of the monarchical state as an entity opposite to the Iranian people, pursuing fundamentally different visions and ideals (Karimi-Hakkak, 1991: p508). The reconceptualization of myths and legends to fit the caricature of the Shah as a "demon" to the Ayatollah's "angel" demonstrates the imbueing of anti-monarch feelings into the Iranian consciousness and understanding of state power structures (Karimi-Hakkak, 1991: p507). The constructivist belief that international relations are consisted of social facts, which are facts only by human agreement, demonstrate the malleability of cultural perceptions (Adler, 1997: p323) – in this instance, this essay refers to the shift in Iranian attitudes toward monarchism, from societal acceptance to collective antagonism.

This idea of the monarchy as an undesirable form of political governance further found itself bolstered by the proliferation of democratic theories of politics in contemporary thought (Arjomand, 1985: p43). This would play into the marked rise of leftist organisations in the post-World War II period, fuelled by anti-imperialist sentiment, all of which culminated in the nationalisation of the oil industry and the rise of Mossadeq to the prime ministership of Iran (Keddie, 2001: p588). These attitudes remained in existence in the years following the 1953 coup d'état leading up to 1979 and provided a single banner under which the Ayatollah could rally disparate political factions together (Arjomand, 1985: p44).

Where constructivists stress that the epistemic interpretations of the material world ultimately affect the manner in which the material world is shaped (Adler, 1997: p322), it can be seen here that the reified structures of the Iranian monarch only survived as long as the collective consciousness of the Iranians saw fit to hold those structures in place. As circumstances changed and the Shah begun taking the blames for the crises of the 70s, the political legitimacy accorded to his rule by Iranians transferred to that of the Ayatollah, never to return to the Shah again (Arjomand, 1985: p44). Yet, questions remain as to why this shift occurred and how the Ayatollah emerged as the new figurehead of the Iranian government. The answer to this lies in the growing discontent with the Shah, the rise of the Shia clergy, and the gradual command of religion over the organisation, ideology, and proclaimed goal of the revolution (Halliday, 2001: p188), all of which shall be discussed further in this essay.

## **The Growing Discontent**

Following the decline of the Shah's popularity among the Iranian populace, this section seeks to understand the developments that would break the structures of support upon which the monarch had existed for so long. It is to be averred here that the 1979 Revolution was partly brought about by emerging perceptions of the Pahlavi dynasty as tools of Western or Westernised powers, particularly the United States and Israel (Keddie, 2001: p594). With reforms made by Mohammed Reza over issues such as those dealing with land distribution, voting for women, and the presence of the American military in Iran, the Shah became susceptible to accusations of Western imperialism from the exiled Khomeini (Buchan, 2013: p420). This antagonism towards Westernisation was further directed toward

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what was perceived to be “Western economic penetration” in the expansion of European capitalism and its ideological and cultural consequences (Amineh & Eisenstadt, 2007: p132).

In addition to these unwelcome attitudes toward “Westernisation”, resentment was also directed at the perceived failures of modernisation, putting different classes at odds with the autocratic government (Keddie, 2001: p592). The economic decisions made by Mohammad Reza that had resulted in inflation, port congestion, and the shortage of amenities further ensured the diminishment of the Shah's prestige and served to embolden the opposition which had been lying dormant since the early 1960s (Buchan, 2013: p421). Yet still, there was the new generation of intellectuals condemning not only the Shah's attempts at modernisation, but also romanticising the conservative traditions of Islam in order to confront these forces of modernity (Amineh & Eisenstadt, 2007: p148).

In the accounts cited, the Shah was associated with Western imperialism and secularism, the expulsion of both of which was called for by Khomeini (Ghods, 1989: p228). Again, beyond the economic factors and materialistic actions leading to this comparison, much of the language employed suggests the adoption of a new construction of the Shah in lieu of his identity as the country's legitimate ruler. Where structures of international relations and politics are argued to be social rather than material (Wendt, 1995: p71), it is evident that the portrayal of Mohammad Reza as a puppet of Western interests and the delegitimised ruler of Iran falls under social constructivism's explanatory capabilities, especially where it is also argued that interpretations of the material world eventually take effect on the manner in which the material world is shaped (Adler, 1997: p322). Yet the extent to which religion then emerged as the defining characteristic of the 1979 revolution remains a topic of discussion for the following section of this essay.

## The Religious Rise

By acknowledging the role of perceptions and social constructions in the development of Iranian thought, social constructivism serves well in explaining the evolving recognitions of political legitimacy in the country's leadership. Still in this section lies the strongest argument for the relevance of social constructivism in the understanding of the Islamic Revolution – that is, the theory's account of the religious motivations underlying the revolution and its ability to explain the impact of Islam on the features of the ideology behind the Iranian Revolution. After all, where religious representations are collective expressions of realities (Adler, 1997: p325), a strong case indeed exists for social constructivism's value in interpreting the very nature of the Islamic Revolution.

The extent to which Islam affected and shaped the revolution was indeed dependent upon the socio-political and economic conditions of pre-revolution Iran (Amineh & Eisenstadt, 2007: p134). The growing discontent discussed earlier served to heighten inter-class tensions and provided the necessary impetus for the reformation of Iranian society and power structures. Yet the reason behind the “Islamification” of the Iranian political landscape may be explained by Iranian perceptions of the “enemy” in the years leading up to the 1979 Revolution (Keddie, 2001: p594). In the fifty years that the Pahlavi dynasty had forced the Westernisation of Iran, the Iranian response to these changes enveloped a desire to return to “authentic” Islamic values.

A consequence of these desires saw the rejection of progress and a regression of Iranian society to earlier models of social and political practice (Halliday, 2001: p188). Indeed, it is agreed that a unique characteristic of the Islamic Revolution was its affirmation of tradition and culture as opposed to the adoption of new ideas or beliefs in an effort to exact social change (Arjomand, 1985: p55). Or put further, “the Islamic revolutionary ideology is the teleologically distinct mark of the Islamic revolution in Iran” (Arjomand, 1985: p61). The invocation of religion in the uprisings seen here would result in the establishment of the Islamic Republic (Halliday, 2001: p188), and the fundamentalist nature of this movement would indeed be observable in its institutionalisation as regimes of Shi'ism's politicisation, exemplified by the Ayatollah's conceptualisation of himself as the Supreme Leader of the Islamic community or *ummah* (Rakel, 2007: p163).

Again drawing upon the precepts of social constructivist thought, it is to be found that the direction of societal progress draws upon not only physical forces and constraints, but also upon subjective interpretations of situations and collective understandings of authority and legitimacy (Adler, 1997: p321). In this case, the authority and legitimacy of Iran's new leadership would be sourced from appeals to religion and an understanding of Islam as the

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symbol and organising centre for the mass mobilisations of the 1979 Revolution (Halliday, 2001: p198). Indeed, drawing upon Alexander Wendt's oft-cited observation, it may be said that authority is what the Iranians had made of it (Wendt, 1992: p395).

## **A Reflection on Retroactivity**

An objection may potentially be raised against the utility of social constructivism in its descriptive powers of the Iranian Revolution due to the benefit of this essay being written several decades after the phenomenon's occurrence. Therefore, the extent to which the observations made thus far are valid shall depend upon the transferability of these observations to events of similar nature as well as the applicability of this theory to the events that would follow the Islamic Revolution. To that end, focus shall now be directed toward an analysis of both Iranian foreign policy in a post-revolutionary context, as well as the proliferation of popular demonstrations in the Middle East in 2011, more commonly known as the Arab Spring. This shall be done to assess the limits of social constructivism's explanatory capacity and to further argue for its worth in the case study employed.

Beginning first with an examination of Iran's post-Revolution foreign policy, it is to be observed that two groups of the Iranian political elite exist, the Conservatives and the Reformist factions, each with differing goals and emphases (Rakel, 2007: p166). Where the ideology of the former oriented around the identity and ideals of the Islamic revolution, the latter holds ideals such as international trade and national interest to be the fundamental principles of foreign policy. This was not always the case, and in the years under the leadership of the Ayatollah, two principal guidelines summarised Iranian foreign policy; the first was the Islamic Republic's decision to distance itself from both the "Eastern" and "Western" sides of the Cold War, emphasising instead Islamic authenticity and identity (Rakel, 2007: p167). The second saw its attempt to strive for the "Export of the Revolution", seeking the advancement of revolutions abroad by rhetoric, financial support and action. In both cases, Islamic principles dominated and still continue to dominate the foreign policy of Iran, albeit evolving governmental conditions forcing the alternating priority focuses between national and Islamic interests (Soltani, 2010: p199).

In this instance, social constructivism has been argued to be the most logical base upon which analyses of foreign policy should be conducted (Houghton, 2007: p24). After all, an appreciation of foreign policy decision making requires an understanding of cognitive psychological approaches and collective social constructions (Houghton, 2007: p42). To that end, an examination of Iranian foreign policy under post-Revolution Khomeini rule and after suggests a solid place for social constructivism in the myriad of religious and ideological factors present in the upper band of Iranian society. Where Iranian efforts to advance its regional influence has been observed in its support of Hezbollah in Lebanon, such acts may be explained and accounted for by the motivations and processes encompassed by a social constructivist approach to foreign policy analysis.

Continuing yet to the final subject of analysis, this essay will seek to identify patterns of similarities between the 1979 Revolution and the mass movements occurring in the Arab nations. In this, we find the uniform overthrow of the Iranian Shah as well as that of the presidents of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, all of whom had seemed secure for several decades (Keddie, 2012: p150). As in both incidents, mass mobilisation came with calls for popular control of government in response to economic difficulties, and in both incidents, hostility to foreign influences seen as subservient to the United States and Israel comprised one of many components of the respective movements (Keddie, 2012: p152). Without attempting to imply a causal connection between the two occurrences, this essay argues that constructivism's place as a theory of social structures enables a valuable understanding of movements such as the 1979 Revolution and the 2011 uprisings in which collective action had taken place in response to social forces and structural norms (Hartmann, 2013).

However, due to the very ontological and epistemological nature of social constructivist theory, the adaptability of its assumptions to situations of varying circumstances diminishes its ability to provide exhaustive explanations of social phenomena. In the case of the Iranian Revolution, its fundamentally religious nature and outcomes could not be applied likewise to the 2011 uprisings, which were focused on calls for accountability and governance reform (Nadal, 2013: p53). Similarly, the exteriority of religion and the centrality of globalised norms in the 2011 uprisings affecting Sunni countries (Keddie, 2012: p151) forces social constructivism to re-examine the role of principles and ideals

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within the collective consciousness of the revolting masses, the subject of which should be discussed in a separate work. This said, the same characteristic of social constructivism emphasising the importance of ideas over material forces enables the consideration of cognitive factors underlying both the movements and renders the theory still relevant with regards to discussions of contemporary topics of international relations.

## Conclusion

In evaluating social constructivism's ability to explain events and social phenomena, this essay endeavoured with an application of the theory's assumptions to the Iranian Revolution of 1979. By examining the motivations and causes behind the Revolution, social constructivist thought is shown to be relevant in its considerations of ideas, beliefs, perceptions, and understandings. The Islamic Revolution as a social phenomenon in turn appropriately lends itself to social constructivist theory, which seeks to understand the societal structures changing and evolving in the course of post-Mossadeq Iran up to the ouster of the Pahlavi Shahs.

Where this analysis was carried out on the declining importance of the Iranian monarchy and the rising stature of the Shia clergy, enormous reliance was placed on social constructivism's depiction of ideas and norms in the evolution of Iranian society and thought. This discussion was then carried onto the foreign policy arrangements taken by key decision makers in the Iranian elite, applying the same motifs of cognitive understanding to reach a better appreciation of Iranian politics. The extent to which social constructivism has proven useful in a retroactive application of political analysis is argued by this essay to be tremendous, and the promise of social constructivist approaches for such utilisation thus appears to be assured.

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