

# What American and European Scholarship on the Iranian Revolution Has Omitted

Written by Chloé Bernadaux

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CHLOÉ BERNADAUX, JUN 4 2020

The fall of the Shah as a result of peaceful demonstrations led by millions of Iranians in the country remains one of the most puzzling mysteries for social scientists. The establishment of the Iranian Republic independently from external armies' aid, from the resort to armed struggle and unprecedented from any civil war, continues to be subjected to intense scholarly debate among Iranian and Western scholars alike. It is observable that the literature emerging immediately after the Revolution both in Iran and in the West mirrors the traditional historiography of social movements based on Big-men theories and institutions. This was illustrated by the massive focus around the personality of Khomeini as the leader of the Revolution, especially in the historiography published in Iran, called "*Nehzat*" or "the movement" (Sohrabi: 4). However, institutions and Big men such as Khomeini did not initiate this Revolution from below on their own. In this context, recent scholarship has intended to provide more sophisticated explanations of the Revolution based on economic, cultural and socio-political examinations.

These predominant scholarly explanations however often reflect Big-Theories in so far as they aim at identifying a structural pattern and reflect scholars' anxiety around the necessity to categorize Iran within a recognizable model for prediction of future revolutions. Some other scholarship however has intended to explain the singularity of the Iranian case by identifying the peculiarities of Shi'a cultural revolutionism or resorting to similar culture-based accounts. However, each of these answers account for only one part of the Iranian puzzle and a "give and take effect" continues to dominate the historiography on the Iranian Revolution. In fact, due to the diversity of factual aspects, narratives and experiences of the Revolution, different layers of analysis must be identified in order to deliver a comprehensive account. For the purpose of this essay, I have identified the following layers of explanation: What was the motive for Iranians to take to the street? Where does the feeling of injustice stem from? (1); How was this feeling activated and what form of expression did it take? (2); How was solidarity created and articulated among Iranians? (3).

This set is not restrictive; however, it allows for a more precise understanding of what each of these scholarly explanations studied here aim at covering. This classification also remains fluid in so far as some explanations are closely intertwined, as observed throughout this essay. The first part of the analysis focuses on the explanations based on the narrative of the social breakdowns emerging during various periods of the Shah's reign (I); while the following part gives increased attention to the role of religious values and the underlying role of the clergy, which both theoretically reflect the "social movement model" according to Misagh Parsa (II). I contend that these two sets of explanations primarily aim at explaining the first two layers exposed above. However, scholarship has put less emphasis on the factors for solidarity and organization, which remain essential for a comprehensive understanding of the practical aspect of the Revolution from a network perspective (III).

### Scholarly accounts of "social breakdowns"

#### *The socio-economic transformations of the 1960s and 1970s*

Several observers such as Robert Looney have focused on the socio-economic transformations in Iran during the last two decades of the Shah's regime. In this respect, two distinct orientations can be identified. A first strand of analysis

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focuses on the impact of the participation of Iran in a campaign for the rise of oil prices in 1972 and of the simultaneous inflation rate increase – which reached 25% in the late 1970s – on the living standard of many Iranians, who observed higher prices of living and intensified inequalities (Amanat: 619). Another strand of studies emphasizes the socio-economic impact of the modernizing policies of the Shah led in the framework of the White Revolution. In this respect, several studies have demonstrated that the land reform originally imposed to weaken the landed elite has negatively impacted poorer peasants, who were forced to migrate to the city for their survival. These agricultural policies caused the rise of a class of urban poors as well as the burgeoning of slums, which later proved to be a space attracting large support for the Revolution (Najmabadi: 213).

This explanation was powerful in order to account for the socio-economic origins for this feeling of injustice, however it fails to provide an understanding of how this feeling of injustice was activated. From a comparative perspective, many other oil-producing countries in the region observed a rise in the oil price with similar effects on the poorest stratas of the population with no revolution taking place (Kurzman: 85). Furthermore, there is no empirical evidence showing that the poor brought Khomeini into power; in contrast to the wide range of evidence pointing to the poor's larger role in the post-revolutionary stage (Bayat: 39). In other words, the positionality of being poor and oppressed does not entail political or revolutionary action. In fact, I contend that socio-economic factors are meaningless in themselves if they are not tied to explanations focusing on the rise of solidarity networks and political actions for survival (Bayat: 42). On the one hand, the socio-economic transformations of the 1960s and 1970s are particularly relevant to account for the “awakening” of this feeling and perception of injustice among Iranians. On the other hand, these explanations fail to consider the role of the designation of whom is responsible for this injustice as well as the role of external forces in articulating these feelings of injustice.

As an illustration, an interesting comparison can be drawn with the US' sanctions today. Since the bulk of the blame is put on the US instead of the Iranian government for the economic decline in the country experienced by Iranians, the regime does not collapse. This perspective points to the perception of a “money revolution” among scholars, which is based on the false assumption that economics is the sole factor that matters in society. Furthermore, it mirrors the similar American misperception practiced before the Revolution that investing money in the Shah was sufficient in order to guarantee the regime's stability. This economic determinism is however problematic as it assumes rather unproblematically that social solidarity exists to take advantage of crisis conditions.

## *The disjuncture between economic and political modernizations*

Another scholarly explanation revolves around the fact that the economic modernization emerging with the reforms led by the Shah during the White Revolution did not translate into more political rights. While the development push of the Pahlavi state enabled the growth of the urban working and professional salaried classes, these have not entirely been absorbed by the state (Harris: 73). Even though these policies were directed towards their benefit, these groups consistently formulated public demands to the state during this period. In fact, these reforms created a heightened sense of expectations for political rights that did not come about.

This scholarship is hence particularly powerful in contradicting the “Rentier States Theory”. Instead of accepting this corporatist welfare regime and acting as co-opting forces, working and professional salaried classes consistently used social welfare programs as a foundation for further demands. This narrative thus puts great emphasis on the agency of social classes. In this framework, Harris' account is enlightening in providing that the classical formula “no taxation without representation” is not ultimately reversible in showing that elite competition cannot win without popular mobilization. Furthermore, this explanation is relevant in explaining why the working and professional salaried classes conducted the first set of demonstrations in the wake of the Revolution. Furthermore, this account also contradicts modernization theory by pointing to confrontations between different groups of modernizers, highlighting the complexity of “modernization” instead of branding it as an abstract yardstick.

## *The cultural divide between society and government*

Another predominant scholarly explanation of the Revolution is the growing divide between society and government. To a large extent, this divide is attributed to the politics of cultural modernization led by the Shah, which was widely

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perceived among Iranians as an emulation of the West. In the 1960s and 1970s, many Iranian students were sent abroad; and secularization as well as Western cultural productions were largely promoted. In fact, foreign productions picturing the US as a land of opportunity dominated Iranian channels. Moreover, trends in music stemmed from the cosmopolitan forces of pop and rock music performed in Iranian cabarets and on television; with the state giving greater value to global music than traditional Persian music and denigrating traditional artists such as Farrokhzad as anti-modern (Siamdoust: 46).

Furthermore, the Shah's top-down imposition of an unfamiliar environment in the countryside while implementing its welfare programs during the White Revolution is revealing of the cultural divide between state and society at this period. For instance, the obligation of the women teaching in the Literacy Corps to remove the veil illustrates the incapacity of the Shah's central institutions to connect with Iranians' everyday lives and beliefs (Harris: 72). These policies combined with the dire infrastructure in the country, in contrast to the massive elitist projects oriented towards enhancing the Shah's prestige, participated to create a sense of dehumanization and alienation within society.

Furthermore, the economic disparity between US training personnel and their Iranian counterparts as well as the condescending attitude of the former to the latter added to this feeling of alienation, and participated to the evolving rhetoric on the US from depictions of a benevolent country to ones of the Great Satan (Amanat: 649). According to this scholarly explanation, these policies and discourses led to revisionist trends within society replacing the discourse on modernization with the one on "Gharbzadegi" or "Westoxification", framed by the intellectual Jalal al-Ahmad (Amanat: 690). This concept shaped the nativist discourse on the return to an authentic culture, which is based on a new understanding of mysticism and Islamic philosophy within Persian culture to transcend Western corruption. Interestingly, this discourse is also illustrated by the dichotomy between the chaste body of Iranian culture and the foreign polluting agent (Amanat: 695), which focuses on cultural notions of "us" and "them" and operates the shift from backwardness to decadence. In this respect, the discourse on authenticity in the form of an idealized past aims at countering the cultural imperialism of the West violently imposed for political and economic domination (Najmabadi: 207).

While contradicting the discourse on modernity, this narrative draws on dependency-theory as it shows that Pahlavi policies were subservient to Iran's alienation and dependence on the West. In this respect, an interesting aspect of this scholarly explanation its framing of the Revolution as an anticolonial struggle as well as asserting a historical continuity between the Islamic Revolution and the earlier national struggle that started with Mossadegh. As Najmabadi clearly puts it: "We are dealing with a new phenomenon that presumes a century-old attempt to come to terms with the West, first by emulating it and trying to catch up with it, and now by rejecting it and trying to eradicate all its effect." (Najmabadi: 217). In this context, these top-led denigrating policies laid the ground for the resort to religion as a traditional element embedded within society in order to articulate grievances from below. In other words, if the state communicates that its society does not matter, that it is backwards, and a movement stemming from traditional elements already present within society is communicating that it matters; Iranians will tend to support this latter movement, which explains the rise of the clergy. In this respect, this scholarship was particularly successful in explaining the role of Islam as a political tool to frame demands for independence from the West, as well as in accounting for the role of intellectuals such as Ali Shariati in articulating the grievances of the people. More precisely than an explanation purely centered on socio-economic transformations, reasoning in terms of divide between state and society permits to assess how this feeling of injustice was activated and towards whom.

In fact, if political conditions do not allow one to reach a certain socio-economic status for no reason other than corruption, a widespread sense of alienation among society can act as a potential motivator for popular mobilization. One possible drawback of this scholarship is that it fails to explain why Islamic resurgence did not happen sooner during Reza Shah's rulership and only at the end of the 1970s. In fact, until the summer of 1979, protests only attracted a few thousand Iranians (Kurzman: 32). In the context, it is false to describe the Islamic Revolution as a sole reaction to the modernizing measures of the 1960s and 1970s.

## Explaining the peculiarities of Iran: the religious component within society

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## *Shi'a revolutionarism*

Some authors such as Theda Skocpol in her article *Rentier State and Shi'a Islam in the Islamic Revolution* have pointed to the role of the Shi'a tradition of revolutionism. This tradition is centered around the narrative of "Karbala" or martyrdom as the defining element of the Iranian identity since the Safavid era. This element is powerful in order to account for the cultural capital that was resorted to during the Revolution as well as the framing of nativist Islamic discourse by Ali Shariati for the intellectual articulation of the Revolution. In fact, Ali Shariati, with the creation of Hosseinieh Ershad, aimed at establishing a modern religious institution that would resort to Shi'a archetypes in order to articulate in religious-intellectual terms the motives and strategies of revolt against political oppressors (Amanat: 697). Particularly representative of the saliency of Shi'a revolutionism as cultural capital is the framing of Mustafa Khomeini's death as a mirror to the martyrdom of Imam Hussain in 680 CE. The initiation of the forty day mourning cycles, which transformed into an instance of popular mobilization against the Shah, are in fact instructive of the importance of Shi'a traditions as relevant cultural capital in the context of the Revolution. The slogan "Everyday is Ashura; every land is Karbala", sang during demonstrations in 1978, illustrates the role of symbolism for the emergence of popular mobilization.

However, a sole over-emphasis on the role of ideology, without contextualizing it within wider network dynamics, can be viewed as a form of Orientalism representing Iranians as mere fanatics. Furthermore, this explanation obstructs from the fact that the turn towards Islam did not come from Islamists, but secular leftist intellectuals, who were branding this new "home-grown" Islam (Kurzman: 76), which reinforces the validity of Shi'ism as cultural capital primarily.

## *The independence of the clergy*

A refined focus on religious components of the Iranian society focuses on the historical independence of the clergy as an opportunity for the Revolution. Under the Qajars, an accepted task division was established between the clergy and the bureaucracy: the clergy ran the religious schools, administered the legal affairs of Muslims and its financial structure was strictly independent (Najmabadi: 208). While the clergy remained disillusioned with the Constitutional Revolution and politically inactive for the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the politics of the Shah after 1953 Coup against Mossadegh – then perceived as a national hero – brought about the recomposition of clerical elements who assumed active ideological leadership. In fact, their failure to oppose would undermine their position as guardians of morality within society (Najmabadi: 209). In this context, Khomeini with his book *Kashf al-Asrar* assumed a unique role in articulating clerical opposition to the Shah's reforms. Another aspect of independence ought also to be stressed: while the Shah increasingly oriented his cultural policies towards the Left, he left enough room for the religious circles to organize and to relay messages of dissent articulated in a religious manner (Amanat: 698).

This scholarly explanation formulates a more contextualized account for the singularity and complexity of the Islamic character of the Revolution. Furthermore, it explains the essential aspect of why the clergy was the major actor in the Revolution. However, this "organizational" explanation leaves out of the frame the fact that the mosque network was not controlled by the revolutionaries until winter 1978 and that religious circles were constantly infiltrated by SAVAK agents, which reduced their ability to conduct the Revolution on their own (Kurzman: 40). Furthermore, a methodological fallacy is observable as in this view the clergy is presumed to have homogeneous views. Moreover, the salience of the clergy's role is demonstrated according to this narrative in a backwards reasoning and explains the process from the outcome. This narrative of the Islamic Revolution hence misses a great amount of stages and factors such as the participation of a wide range of additional groups within society to the Revolution, from the Leftists to the Jews and women. However, this piece of scholarship remains a piece of the puzzle by pointing to the role of mosque networks in building solidarity for the formulation of collective claims.

## **The hidden piece of the puzzle in predominant scholarly explanations: religion as "fulcrum" in a "networked" society**

Thinking in terms of networks has often been left out of the frame in the study of the Iranian Revolution. Networks, described as frameworks in which people within a given society can socialize, constitute and hold the potentiality to

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build solidarity around the revolutionary movement. The tight solidarity nexus between the bazaar and religious circles exemplifies the centrality of networks for popular mobilization in the context of the Revolution. In fact, the death of Mustafa Khomeini on October 23rd, 1977 triggered the emergence of a new form of alliance between religious circles, the bazaar and university students against the Pahlavi regime.

Furthermore, on January 8<sup>th</sup>, 1978, the protest of the main bazaar in Qom in response to the defamation of Khomeini illustrates the emergence of a strong solidarity network as a basis for popular mobilization and organization around Khomeini's leadership (Ghamari-Tabrizi: 38). The bazaar, the clergy, white-collar employees and workers started in fact to mobilize together and to create a revolutionary atmosphere in the fall of 1977 and united around a common ground in order to articulate dissatisfaction against the state (Parsa).

Furthermore, a network analysis permits to give a clearer view on the central role of the clergy. In fact, since religious circles penetrated the lives of many Iranians with the daily mosque prayers and processions and maintained many personal ties with bazaar members, these possessed a privileged position to take the leadership of the Revolution with overwhelming support. In contrast, leftist claims could not translate into organization within society because leftists often came from aristocratic backgrounds and lacked the privileged connection that religious circles enjoyed with the people. This network perspective is in fact particularly effective in assessing what has been left out of the frame in common scholarly explanations, namely how the ends and means of various groups created popular mobilization.

## Conclusion

To conclude, scholarly explanations can be classified into two approaches. The first approach focuses on the social breakdowns of the pre-revolutionary period, and is relevant in explaining how the economic, social and cultural policies of the Shah resulted in a deepened divide between government and society. The second approach emphasizes the role of religious components within traditional society in order to account for the peculiarities of the Iranian case. Each of these accounts and categorizations reveals a set of anxieties surrounding the uniqueness of the Revolution as well as concerns about how to predict future revolutions. They fail to provide an all-encompassing explanation of the revolution, however each contribute one piece of the puzzle by uncovering the multiple aspects of the Revolution.

By questioning the validity of these scholarly explanations, Kurzman attempts to formulate an anti-explanation by looking at the role of ambiguity and contingencies as well as the instability of individual preferences (Kurzman: 125). However, I believe that individual preferences are intrinsically tied to structural factors and are worth being articulated to shape a more precise understanding of the Revolution. In this respect, current scholarship on the subject ought to gain in comprehensiveness by using the network paradigm, which is particularly powerful in shaping a more fluid view of institutions and people within society, refuting their immobility.

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*Written by: Chloé Bernadaux*

*Written at: Johns Hopkins University: School of Advanced International Studies*

*Written for: Narges Bajoghli*

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