

Preface

*In this our round of coming and of going
Beginning and conclusion pass all knowing;
No wight in all the world can tell us truly
Whence we have come and whither we are going.¹*

(Omar Khayyam)

Society is perceived in this study as an enduring social group whose members have developed, organized, and institutionalized patterns of relationships through interaction with one another, and who act under the structural constraints of the state in which they live. This delineation differentiates the concept of “society” from that of “nation,” which roughly can be defined as a community of people who share history and belief in common traditions, interests, and purpose. This is an important distinction because conceptualization of societal responsibility that involves responsibility of citizens on the basis of citizenship and social membership, and not based on their national identity or other kinds of entrenched cultural affinities. In this context, the responsibility of individual members of society is derived from an obligation to act for the benefit of society at large.

This book argues that individuals should be held accountable as the primary agent in shaping his/her life and such accountability needs to be explicitly acknowledged in order to matter. This is social responsibility, which is the missing pillar in the current conceptualization of Iran. The main predicament in Iran does not lie in polity or economics, but rather in the fact that Iranians repeatedly have evaded responsibility for their own deeds. It is imperative for us to come to a realization that the nature of the State anywhere is to a great extent the product of its social environment and context. In other words, a State is more or less a reflection of its citizens.

¹Whinfield EH (1901) (trans) The Quatrains of Omar Khayyam: the Persian. K. Paul, Trench, Trübner, 2nd edition, p 340, versus 508. The text is available at: <http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044096173026;view=1up;seq=403>. Also see <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/umar-khayyam/>

This book subscribes to the notion that masses are the most important factors in the overall scheme of a nation. As a result, it critically reviews some orthodox and popular perceptions of Iranian history, both inside and outside Iran that hindered any meaningful betterment of the society. For instance, beliefs that hold the imperial countries and their agents responsible for the state of affairs in Iran have constituted an image of Iranians as passive bystanders with no power to change their destiny, despite the fact that the popularly backed 1978 Islamic Revolution has overturned the entire social, economic, and political fabric of the country. In short, such popular narratives have portrayed Iranians as subjugated masses throughout history. The standard paradigm in these sorts of inferences resembles a fast-food advertisement: within one minute the story of an entire drama unfolds.

Corollary to the above observations, **this book asserts that the appropriation of extrinsic notions such as democracy without critical narrative/thinking only serves as a slogan, symbol, and deception, and to a great extent prevarication, which provides no fresh air to breathe and no vacant place to build.**² What is not clear is why we should want to pursue such democratic notions that Schumpeter³ defines as a system in which rulers are selected by competitive election, and Popper⁴ defends it as a system of control, an instruction if you would, to determine what the winners and losers should and should not do; the only system in which citizens can get rid of government without bloodshed. One of the major problems in such an appropriation is that it is inevitable not to differentiate between an adopted idea (medium) from its intent (message), and hence devalue the message while celebrating the medium.⁵

This book is also highly attentive to the various roles our actions play in determining our being throughout our finite lives. This conviction lies in the belief that nothing could be more contradictory in life than an essential being that has been inactive; a being that has fashioned nothing, particularly his own life. Such sedentary life would resemble an existence of a mere lifeless entity that is deprived of will. **Throughout this book, I, as a witness observer, intend to underline that our chosen paths, as Iranians, to elevate ourselves above our condition have perpetually failed due to our habitual aspiration that forms based on wishful thinking;** an informal cognitive fallacy that assumes that a desire for something is adequate to attain it, irrespective of existing conditions. This deficit has indeed allowed us to embark on a course of action that at first seems to be the “dream stage,” but soon it becomes clear that such make-believe can never be reconciled with our cultural reality. These daydreams have always culminated in bewildering outcomes, which have indeed inflicted irreversible harm to Iran and Iranians’ aspirations.

²See Kuttner R (2003) The Ideological Imposter. In Flippin R (ed) The Best American Political Writing, Thunder’s Mouth Press, p 65.

³Schumpeter JA (1942) Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy. Harper & Brothers.

⁴Popper K (1962) The Open Society and Its Enemies. Routledge and Paul Kegan. Paul PLC.

⁵For instance, in envisioned state corporatism, property would not be seen as private booty, but as a procuration of the entire community, not as an expression and means of personal power, but as a trust or fief for which the proprietor owed accountability to the state as well as public.

The 1906 Constitutional movement is an ample example of this phenomenon. The dominant thoughts in the pre-constitutional era were generally pegged to extrinsic political/philosophical developments. Among them, French ideas were a dominant penetrating factor in intellectual life in Iran.⁶ For one thing, many intellectuals as well as clergies⁷ who participated in the constitutional movement, according to Laetitia Nanquette, belonged to French-style Freemason Lodges, allegedly defending progress and modernism under eye-catching mottos like “the Awakening Iran” (Bedari-ye Iran), recognized by the Grant Orient of France.⁸ Most notable among them was Mīrzā Malkom Khan, an ardent constitutionalist who was “credited” with the introduction of freemasonry in Iran.⁹ In fact, Mīrzā’s essay, *Ketābča-ye ḡaybī yā daftar-e tanzīmāt* (Booklet inspired by the unseen, or the book of reforms), is the earliest known systematic exposition in Persian of a constitutional system.¹⁰ The essay was the first Persian text to introduce key terms such as *qānūn* (codified law and, later, constitution), *eṣlāḥāt* (reforms), *majles-e šūrā* (consultative council), *mellat* (nation), *mellī* (national), and *ḥoqūq-e mellat* (rights of the people), and it is the earliest known systematic exposition in Persian of a constitutional system.¹¹

In retrospect, it is not surprising that the attempt to convert Iran into a modern version of a French nation-state did not succeed. This is mainly due, I contend, to the fact that change (reform or progress) cannot be attained by standing on ostentatious intellectual ground and lecturing laymen about notions that are utterly extrinsic and irrelevant to their daily lives. More to the point, I argue that ideological mimicry, no matter how novel the assumed ideas may seem, has limited contemporary Iranians’

⁶For the impact of the French Revolution on development of Constitutional discourse in Iran, see Tavakoli-Targhi M (1990) *Asar-e Agahi az Enqelab-e Faranseh dar Shekl-giri-ye Engalab-ye Masrutiyat dar Iran* (Age of Awareness of French Revolution in forming Constitutional Revolution in Iran). Iran Nameh 8 (3) (Summer 1360/1990), p 411–439; Tavakoli-Targh M (1990) *Refashioning Iran: Language and Culture During the Constitutional Revolution*. Islamic Study 23 (1–4), p 77–101; Tavakoli-Targh M (2000) *Persia and the French Revolution*. In: Yarshater E (ed) *Encyclopedia Iranica*; Keddie NR (1995). *The French Revolution and the Middle East*. In: Kiddie NR (ed) *Iran and the Muslim World; Resistance and Revolution*, Macmillan; Mohammadi M (2003) *Enqelab-e eslami dar moqayesseh ba enqelab-ha-ye Faranseh va Russieh* (Islamic Revolution in comparison to French and Russian Revolutions). Ma’aref.

⁷For instance, according to Janet Afary, Shaikh Ibrahim Zanjani, son of a leading theologian and a member of the first Majlis, was a member of Freemasonry. He was also the prosecutor in the special tribunal that sentenced Shaikh Fazlollah Nouri. (Afary J (1996) *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1906–1911: Grassroots Democracy, Social Democracy & the Origins of Feminism*. Columbia University Press, p 265).

⁸See Nanquette L (2013) *Orientalism Versus Occidentalism: Literary and Cultural Imaging Between France and Iran Since the Islamic Revolution*. I. B. Tauris, p 207, footnote 19.

⁹Algar H (1970) *An Introduction to the History of Freemasonry in Iran*. Middle Eastern Studies 6(3), p 276.

¹⁰See Amanat A (2011) *Constitutional Revolution i. Intellectual background*. Encyclopaedia Iranica. Available at: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/constitutional-revolution-i>.

¹¹Ibid.

ability to think of ideas that are pertinent to our own lives.¹² And yet, for more than 200 years, protagonists of these sort of ideological mimicries have insisted upon such mimicry as the essential ingredient for “progress” in Iran. Wilfrid Scawen Blunt,¹³ in his book *Secret History of the English Occupation of Egypt*, recalls a remarkable conversation he had with “a little old man with a long nose and very black eyes [Mirza] Malkum Khan, the Persian Ambassador [to Britain],” who was in the company of Philip Currie (British Ambassador to the Ottoman). According to Blunt, Mirza Malkum revealed to him, “...Europe, indeed, is incapable of inventing a real religion, one which shall take possession of the souls of men; as incapable as Asia is of inventing a system of politics. The mind of Asia is speculative, of Europe practical. In Persia we every day produce ‘new Christs.’ We have ‘Sons of God’ in every village, martyrs for their faith in every town.... I went to Europe and studied there the religious, social, and political systems of the West. I learned the spirit of the various sects of Christendom, and the organization of the secret societies and freemasonries, and I conceived a plan, which should incorporate the political wisdom of Europe with the religious wisdom of Asia. I knew that it was useless to attempt a remodelling of Persia in European forms, and I was determined to clothe my material reformation in a garb which my people would understand, the garb of religion.”¹⁴ Blunt ended the paragraph by observing, “It was strange to hear this little old man, in European clothes and talking very good French, recounting a tale so purely Oriental.”¹⁵

This book neither rejects novelty nor denies the emancipating power of Western ideas, but rather suggests that to attain possible benefits of these notions entails far more than a mere expression of intent. To proclaim that, for instance, “Iran must become Europeanized” only serves, at best, as a cosmetic purpose and nothing else. There is no doubt that effects of notions like liberty, democracy, rule of law, free general election, etc. had led to prosperity in the West. However, presenting them as solutions to our problems without taking into consid-

¹²To eliminate misinterpretation of this observation, some key clarifications are in order. First, my concern about mimicry is not absolute. In fact, it must be obvious that certain types of problems can and should be addressed in this manner. If a cure for cancer or a lost-cost procedure for desalinating water is ever invented, the more rapidly it can be emulated, given it is made available to everyone, the better. Second, history of social, economic, and political development in contemporary Iran clearly illustrated the fact that the quest for the solution is itself the problem. This is especially so in matter pertaining to conceptualization, policy-making, and institutional setting in the country. See, for instance, Pritchett L, Woolcock M (2004) Solutions when the Solution is the Problem: Arraying the Disarray in Development. *World Development* 32(2), p 191–212.

¹³Was an English poet and writer, who allegedly had anti-imperialist sentiment, and was a believer in an Islamic renaissance. According to Hamid Algar, “Blunt was an early British proponent of Arab separatism and of the establishment of an Arab pseudo-caliphate under British tutelage.” (See Algar H (1973) *Mirza Malkum Khan: A Study in the History of Iranian Modernism*. University of California Press, p 11, footnote 40).

¹⁴Blunt WS (1922) *Secret History of the English Occupation of Egypt*. Alfred. A. Knopf, p 62 and 63. Blunt later stated that based on Mirza’s observation, “if I was to effect anything either for the Arabs or any other of the Moslem peoples....I must first make myself thoroughly acquainted with their religious ideas.” Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid, p 63–64.

eration the eighteenth century Europe social, economic, and political circumstances under which these concepts were thought of, formed, and prevailed in addition to the time required for these notions to bear fruits, is an absolute travesty. The consequences of such mimicries have not only ravaged immense resources and valuable time but have also created a bewildering condition that drove the country into a delusional mindset, and hence hemmed in any meaningful progress in Iran¹⁶. The gravity of this condition can be illustrated by the fact that while it took England almost 500 years from the declaration of the Magna Carta, a document that is considered a cornerstone of individual liberties of British society and presents an ongoing challenge to arbitrary rule, in 1215 to hold the first general election in 1708, the Iranian first direct public election occurred only 5 years after the *supplementary fundamental laws were enacted*.

The only viable lesson we can learn from others is that we must realize that we have been left with no choice but to ascertain a base that tolerates and encourages ideas that would reflect our own condition. The necessary condition to achieve this stage, first and most, **requires the bond of a common unity, or togetherness for a better word, among inhabitants of this ancient land. In this book, I assert that such common bounding is absent.** In this context, I argue in this book that our Iranian national identity, unlike European's nationalism that is based on ethnicity and "blood-kinship,"¹⁷ is founded on cohabitation and history of the ancient land. In short, Iranian nationalism is a phenomenon that rests in the historical conscious of Iranian people. A better understanding of Iranian nationalism can only be attained when one takes into consideration the ethnic diversity of the inhabitants that have coexisted for more than a millennium; the complex and nuanced relationship between Islam and nationalism; the manner in which non-Iranian scholars have reconstructed the history of this ancient civilization according to their own modern perspectives; arrays of local/regional uprisings for self-autonomy from the eleventh century onward, which have invalidated the application of conventional categorizations, e.g., ethno nationalism, civic (as opposed to ethnic) nationalism, peripheral

¹⁶Or better said in the eloquent words of Rumi, a 13th-century Persian poet: "khalq ra taqlideshan bar baad daad ae do sad laanat bar in taqlid baad". (People had been destroyed by mimicry I thousand curse this mimicry). (see Molana (Rumi), Masnavi, Daftar Dovom (Second Volume). Available at: <http://ganjoor.net/moulavi/masnavi/daftar2/sh15/>).

¹⁷For instance, Germans and Frenchmen considered themselves as constituting nations by a blood relationship; that they were, in some sense, natural races, nations by birth. However, Asian countries like Chinese nationalism or Japanese nationalism also share the similar claim. For instance, Sun underlined his rationale for a Han-centered nationalism, "The Chinese race totals four hundred million people; of mingled race there are only a few million Mongolian, a million or so Manchus, a few million Tibetans, and over a million Mohammedan Turks...for the most part, the Chinese people are of the Han or Chinese race with common blood, common language, common religion, and common custom-a single, pure race (See Zheng Y (1999) Discovering Chinese Nationalism in China: Modernization, Identity, and International Relations. Cambridge University Press, p 68). It is however noted that for those who are particularly concerned about the biological purity of their breed should be reminded of the witty remark made by R. Linton: "It has been said that the only group which would have any chance of maintaining absolute purity of blood would be one all of whose women were too hideous to attract the men of any other tribe and all of whose men were too cowardly to steal the women of any other tribe." (See Linton R (1936) The study of man: An introduction, Student's Edition, Appleton-Century-Crofts Inc, p 34).

nationalism, irredentist nationalism, unification nationalism; and domination of the ancient rituals such as Nouroz (the Iranian New Years) over the Iranian Plateau. **In this context, nationalism in Iran has diverged instead of converging into a modern sense of the word.**

Unfortunately, in search for causes of our perpetual failures to attain desirable progress, nothing is ever exposed except that for certain occasions (periods) one group has always been singled out as the perpetrator, i.e., Arabs in the Middle Ages, British and Americans in the contemporary period. In addition, there is an irresistible impulse among Iranians to blame *a state* for almost everything that is wrong at home. Instead of looking inward, we, as a people, persistently seek to uphold the perfect image of ourselves as innocent victims, which suggests not only that we have done no wrong but nothing at all was done which might possibly connect us with the predicament at hand.

The above arguments may be interpreted as the insidious suggestion that it is within the power of Iranians not to *suffer*, and that they only continue to do so because they are *unwilling* to give up their benighted way. In response, I would like to point out that while it is possible that the overall effects of scapegoating may have escaped peoples' attention, such lack of awareness, nonetheless, should not be considered as a validation of their deed. To this point, Foucault's observation is illuminating: "People know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what what they do does."¹⁸

I am hoping that this book opens the dialog about Iranians and students of Iranians studies to take into consideration that the most important aspect of a country is its people. What has been said in this book is nothing more than our philosophers, our thinkers keep telling us that we should do, from the ancient times to present, and somehow we manage to ignore them:

*"Know yourself; for if you know yourself
you will also know the difference between good and evil.
First become intimate with your own inner being,
then become the commander of the whole company.
When you know yourself, you know everything;
when you know that, you have escaped from all evil."*¹⁹

(Nasir-i Khusrau)

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¹⁸Dreyfus HL, Rabinow P (1983) Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics. University of Chicago, p 187.

¹⁹Arberry AJ (1958) Classical Persian Literature. George Allen & Unwin LTD, London, p 67.

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