**Research Narrative**

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**“The Politics of Disavowal: Revolutionary Iran in the Wake of 68”**

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To what extent was the 1979 revolution in Iran world-historical? What makes a revolutionary event revolutionary? These questions challenges two prominent analytic tendencies in the study of revolution in Iran and, I would contend, the study of social movements and resistance in the broader Middle East since. Despite their valuable insights, social scientific analyses of institutional continuity can render revolutionary events a minor term in the unfolding of history. At the same time, attempts to write more global histories of the revolution in Iran by importing models and exemplars from elsewhere––even and including the category of a post-colonial revolution––can rob the event of a distinctly revolutionary quality. In contrast to both tendencies, my research considers the 1979 revolution on the presumption that a revolutionary event is revolutionary if and when it transforms the way we think, the categories we use to understand not only the event itself, but also events beyond itself.

This line of inquiry suggests an emphasis on the revolution’s singularity, or its historical specificity. Contra long-standing explanations of the event as a popular (“Iranian”) movement manipulated by charismatic (“Islamic”) elites, recent scholarship has made a welcome turn to thinking the lived experience of the 1979 revolution as “unthinkable” and “indeterminate.” Where this scholarship over-emphasizes singularity and specificity, unwittingly creating a fetish of “indeterminacy” removed from shared global patterns of historical development, my research theorizes the “indeterminate” quality of the 1979 revolution as a feature of its historical moment.

In particular, I am concerned with the discursive conditions that made certain political economic transformations possible from below. As distinctly revolutionary resistance took form in Iran, the world entered into what many now call a neoliberal age––an age characterized by state-initiated policies designed to disavow state-directed economic policy. That age was concurrently characterized by the rising prominence of individual human rights discourse. My work attends to these contingencies. In so doing, I propose that a study of revolutionary resistance in Iran over the course of the 1970s might act as a vantage to reflect on the changing quality of resistance in a so-called neoliberal age.

This line of inquiry arises from the historiographical perspective offered by the 2010-11 Arab uprisings. As soon as the uprisings occurred, scholars of Iran began to draw comparisons to the 1979 revolution in Iran. More often than not, their reflections traded on presumptions about what the Iranian or Islamic revolution was. Those wary of recent unrest emphasized the dangers of an Islamist ideology capable of manipulating popular social movements. Those favorable to the uprisings and their democratic potential emphasized points of contextual difference between two events separated by more than 30 years of history. Despite their disparate objectives however, both formulations rested on a critique of Iran’s undesirable post-revolutionary outcomes; in so doing, they sought to retain the contingency of unfolding events in the present.

Efforts to disentangle the lived experience of revolution in 1979 Iran from teleological narratives prefiguring post-revolutionary outcomes go a long way in rectifying these accounts. The indeterminacy of the 1979 revolution should teach us to account for the indeterminacy of the Arab uprisings (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2016). A study of the broader history of indeterminacy in the 1979 revolution at once further affirms this valuable insight while altering assessments of contemporary social movements in the Middle East.

My research suggests that revolutionary resistance in Iran took shape through a politics of disavowal. After 1968, the Pahlavi state precluded opportunities to openly express political discontent. By consequence, the strategic expression of political objectives in ostensibly “non-political” terms became one prominent norm amongst others. My research follows this practice as it appears in various corners of Iranian oppositional politics over the course of the 1970s––in Islamist discourse, in liberal human rights activism, in public defenses by Marxist political prisoners, and finally in everyday experiences of the revolution as an event.

Political theorist Wendy Brown famously presents neoliberal political rationality as an instance of disavowal: a rendering of the political (*homo politicus*) in terms of the social (*homo oeconomicus*). How did these practices of disavowal become a normal and habituated feature of public life? The answer to this question requires entertaining the possibility that neoliberal political rationality emerged as much from popular politics in the global south as it did from policy prescriptions in the global north. To this end, the aspect of revolutionary resistance identified in my research affords more global, less provincial grounds from which to theorize neoliberalism. At the same time, it raises the possibility that the logics of revolt in 1970s Iran, and hence the event, bore world-historical import.

There is evidence to support the association I draw between this strategy of resistance and the emergence of a neoliberal age. In the early 1970s, the pre-revolutionary Pahlavi state played an under-examined leadership role in the passage of a New International Economic Order. This came on the heels of hosting the first international human rights conference in Tehran in 1968. In opposing the Pahlavi state, Iranian oppositional activists unwittingly worked in parallel with neoliberal ideologues opposed to “economic nationalism” and individual human rights activists frustrated with the limits of Third World étatism.

My research considers a vast and diverse archive, including state records, petitions, international NGO communiques, diplomatic records, activist literature (pamphlets, open letters, and bulletins), court proceedings, periodicals, prose fiction, memoirs, speeches, posters, popular cinema, and ethnographic interviews. I read this material in Persian, French, and English.

The book manuscript comprises 9 chapters and an introduction. I have polished written drafts of Chapters 1 and 2, where I consider the dialectic between Pahlavi state parallels with the NIEO (Chapter 1) and oppositional activists’ concomitant parallels with the rise of individual human rights NGOs and neoliberal ideology in the 1970s (Chapter 2). I have un-revised dissertation chapters that address Islamist ideology (Chapter 4), popular culture (Chapter 5), vanguard mobilization (Chapter 6), and everyday experiences of revolution (Chapter 7). I am currently writing a chapter on “non-political” politics (Chapter 3), and researching the implications of my argument for discussions of post-revolutionary state consolidation (Chapter 8) and the historiography of the event (Chapter 9).

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