



# DURHAM MIDDLE EAST PAPERS

REFLECTIONS ON THE ORIGINS OF THE REVOLUTION  
OF 1979 IN IRAN: WHY HISTORY MATTERS

Michael Axworthy

Durham Middle East Paper No. 99

THE ANN LAMPTON MEMORIAL LECTURE

---

# DURHAM MIDDLE EAST PAPERS

---

INSTITUTE FOR MIDDLE EASTERN AND ISLAMIC STUDIES

REFLECTIONS ON THE ORIGINS OF THE REVOLUTION OF  
1979 IN IRAN: WHY HISTORY MATTERS

Michael Axworthy

**Institute for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies**  
**Durham University**  
**Al-Qasimi Building**  
**Elvet Hill Road**  
**Durham**  
**DH1 3TU**  
**Tel: +44 (0)191 3345680**

**Durham Middle East Papers No. 99**  
**ISSN 1476-4830**  
**October 2019**

The Durham Middle East Papers series covers all aspects of the economy, politics, social science, history, literature and languages of the Middle East. Authors are invited to submit papers to the Editorial Board for consideration for publication.

The views expressed in this paper are the author(s) alone and do not necessarily reflect those of the publisher or IMEIS. All Rights Reserved. This paper cannot be photocopied or reproduced without prior permission.

---

## ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

---

The Institute for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (IMEIS), within the School of Government & International Affairs, is a Social Science-focused academic institute of excellence, research-led in ethos, with a track-record of internationally acclaimed research outputs across all sub-areas of its activity. Success in this respect obtains largely from the interdisciplinary nature of the Institute's activities and the fruitful interaction of political economists, political scientists, historians and Islamicists, as well as with colleagues from Anthropology, Arabic, Archaeology, Geography, Business – all linked together by their collective focus on the study of the Middle East and the Muslim world in the widest sense.

---

## ABOUT THE PAPERS

---

Established in the early 1970s the multidisciplinary series includes topics on all aspects of the social sciences and arts in the Middle East, written by leading and emerging scholars in their respective fields.

---

## EDITORIAL BOARD

---

**Professor Anoush Ehteshami**

*Exofficio member*

Professor of International Relations  
in the School of Government and  
International Affairs

**Dr Colin Turner**

Reader in Islamic Thought in  
the School of Government and  
International Affairs

**Professor Clive Jones**

Professor of Regional Security in  
the School of Government and  
International Affairs, Durham  
University

**Dr Carly Beckerman**

*Art editor*

Assistant Professor in the  
International Relations of the Middle  
East in the School of Government and  
International Affairs

**Dr May Darwich**

Assistant Professor in the  
International Relations of the Middle  
East in the School of Government and  
International Affairs

---

## ADVISORY BOARD

---

**Professor Rory Miller**

Georgetown University, Doha

**Professor James Piscatori**

Australian National University

**Professor Beverly Milton-Edwards**

Queen's University, Belfast

**Sir Harold Walker, KCMG**

Member, Luce Foundation

**Mr Richard Muir, CMG**

Chair, Luce Committee

# THE ANN LAMPTON MEMORIAL LECTURE

---

## 2018

Michael Axworthy was a noble scholar, and policy analyst, whose gentleness manifested itself in his sensitivity towards his subject matter and in his exchanges with his peers and students. For this he was universally loved. But Michael's scholarship remains a testament of his laser-sharp mind and tremendously rich reservoir of knowledge. His insightful and lucid writings on Iran stand him out as one of this century's greatest commentators on that country and a man of integrity whose analytical judgements single him as what has been referred to as a 'humane western interpreter' of that country. Michael gave one of his last public speeches here in Durham in March 2018 and electrified us with his powerful reinterpretation of the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. He was an outstanding Lambton Lecturer and it is fitting that we have the pleasure of publishing one of his last pieces of writing. His untimely death has been a blow to the field and to those who valued his calmness, passion and humanity. We will forever be grateful to have had the chance to host him in Durham, enjoy his company and to have received his wisdom.

*Professor Anoushiravan Ehteshami*  
*May 2019*

# INTRODUCTION

---

A few years ago I was having coffee with some neighbours where we live in Cornwall, when their teenage son abruptly asked me why there had been a revolution in Iran in 1979.

He knew I was an historian specialising in Iran, and thought I should be able to answer what was to him a very natural question. After a moment's hesitation, I decided I should do my best to reply rather than evade the question or laugh it off, so I did my best.

“...THE QUESTION  
INVITES A COMPLEX  
ANSWER ...”

Like many simple questions, it is one that is quite difficult and complex to answer, and is capable of many different answers. But any historian of modern Iran has to take some kind of view on it, and the different views taken by different historians often reflect, in turn, the different sectors of opinion and political groupings that were involved in 1979. Because the revolution was violent and divisive, so too the opinions of Iranians and others about it are often strong and intransigent. So the question invites a complex answer that may bring violent disagreement down upon it. Nonetheless, it is the duty of an historian to make the attempt.

To give an outline account and set the scene for the uninitiated, the bare facts of the revolution can be quite briefly told. It began in a period of economic uncertainty, after the oil-fuelled boom of the early 1970s had begun to falter, with rising inflation and unemployment. In 1977 the Shah's government relaxed some of its previous repressive measures, permitting the reappearance of some expressions of dissent from the liberal left. But an attack in a government-backed newspaper on the exiled Ayatollah Khomeini in January 1978 led to a demonstration by religious students in the shrine city of Qom in which a number of demonstrators were shot and killed by police.

Fuelled by condemnations from Khomeini outside Iran and from other clerics within, a cycle of further demonstrations and shootings followed, after intervals of 40 days each time. The demonstrations (mainly involving young students and people from the bazaars) got larger and more violent, and the number of dead increased. Over the summer and early autumn workers frustrated at low pay joined demonstrations and went on strike – the strikes in the oil industry being especially damaging. On 8 September (afterwards known as Black Friday) martial law was declared and a large number of demonstrators were killed in Tehran. After this the Shah lost whatever credibility he had left and the general wish (aligning with Khomeini's long-standing demand) was for him to go. Strikes and demonstrations continued and increased in intensity, especially in the religious season of Ashura in December. Troops began to desert, and on 16 January 1979 the Shah fled out of the country. Khomeini returned on 1 February, troops loyal to the Shah's government gave up the struggle ten days later and at the end of March a nationwide referendum gave overwhelming support for an Islamic Republic.

There you go – those are just the bare bones of a narrative. It may tell us part of the why, but only part. But narrative has its place. In his 2005 book, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran*<sup>1</sup>, Charles Kurzman stressed the importance of understanding

each stage in the development of the revolution, of each event and incident, because only then was it possible to understand how a succession of actions and responses altered the perspective of a whole population so that it came to reject the authority of a government it had previously accepted as normal (this process of rejection is something that Ryszard Kapucynski also writes about interestingly in his book *Shah of Shahs*<sup>2</sup>). In my book *Revolutionary Iran* I also followed a narrative method, and wrote about the 40 – day cycle between days of mourning that became days of protest in the first half of 1979 as a Revolutionary Lung, breathing life into the revolutionary movement.

Kurzman is a sociologist, and he called his analysis an anti-explanation, but one might more properly call it an historical explanation<sup>3</sup> – indeed the kind of historical explanation that emphasises the reconstruction of the pressures acting on people and groups at specific points of time, when decisions are made. More specifically, in that respect, it has similarities to the kind of history advocated and practiced, albeit in a different context, by the school of British 20th century historians that included Lewis Namier, Herbert Butterfield and Maurice Cowling. Ironic because Cowling in particular had little good to say of sociology – one could take Kurzman's term anti-explanation as a kind of recognition of that disciplinary gap. But I digress.

## “THERE ARE MANY DIFFERENT ANSWERS TO THE QUESTION OF WHAT HAPPENED...”

One point I would like to make today is that the revolution of 1979 was not successful because all Iranians thought the same way, but because for a brief time a large majority of Iranians, despite differences between the social and ideological groups to which they belonged, came together, accepting the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, to demand an end to the monarchy. It is important to grasp this, because after 1979 those groups again diverged, and have had their own partisan views of the revolution since, and what went wrong. There are many different answers to the question of what happened in 1979, as I said at the outset.

Of course there was one group who never agreed with the revolution and never accepted Khomeini, even for a short period, and that was the supporters of the monarchy. One may take Gholam Reza Afkhami and his book *The Life and Times of the Shah*<sup>4</sup> as representative of this group. As I wrote in a review of that book for *Prospect* magazine in 2009<sup>5</sup>, Afkhami and other monarchists have a problem with the 1979 revolution. Their view is that the Shah was a strong, competent king who wanted the best for his people and did great things for his country. He should not have been deposed. So why was he? Why did the revolution happen at all? In the title of an earlier book, from 1985 (*Thanatos on a National*

*Scale*<sup>6</sup> ) Afkhami seemed to suggest that it was attributable to a collective national death wish. Others (and it seems, the Shah himself, in his last days in exile) believed that the Americans and the British had somehow created the revolution. The point is, and one can only have sympathy with this, many people who were supporters of the Shah before 1979, and others, still have not worked out why it happened.

One element in this, and in the Shah's view before 1979, was that the Shah and his regime had largely been looking the wrong way. Abbas Milani makes this and related points in his biography of the Shah.<sup>7</sup> The Shah was focussed on the communist threat – on the remnants of Tudeh and related underground groups, on the possible activities of Soviet agents, and so on. He believed economic development and greater material wealth would overcome political problems. His contacts in Western governments, notably the US, tended to think that way too, and encouraged him. The clergy were thought of either as part of the junk of the past, to be bypassed by secular modernisation, or, for what influence they might have, as allies against the communists. They were not taken very seriously.

The next group to consider is the leftists – broadly, people who supported the revolution because they wanted a socialist or communist revolution, and regarded the alliance with Khomeini as a temporary necessity of realpolitik. This grouping contained various elements in 1978-9. There were supporters of the old Tudeh party, there were left-leaning elements of the *jebhe melli* – the National Front, the coalition that had backed Mosaddeq, and there were more radical groups, like the Fedayan-e Khalq, who after the disillusion of the Mosaddeq episode, had taken a more radical and militant approach since the late 60s. Also the Mojahedin-e Khalq. There were generational and social differences between these groups also – the more militant and radical ones tended to have a younger membership, and they have sometimes been characterised as the university-educated children of older middle class leftists or liberals.

This group was the one the Shah had been most worried about, and that his secret police, SAVAK, had targeted most energetically, to such effect that by the late 70s most of their overt activity was in exile. But they revitalised themselves within Iran once the revolution gained momentum. After Khomeini had consolidated his position of supremacy the leftists generally felt bitter resentment that, in their view, their revolution had been stolen from them by the clerics. This is not the place to go into the rights and wrongs of this in detail; but suffice to say that, perhaps because many Iranian academic commentators on these matters in the West come from this kind of background,

analysis tending in this direction is quite commonplace. To support it, there is a prehistory of revolution, in which, for example, the Writers' evenings at the Goethe Institute in the autumn of 1977, dominated by leftist authors and poets, were the precursor to the large-scale protests and demonstrations of 1978. For the Islamic version of the revolution, the crucial precursor events were demonstrations in Qom at around the same time following the death of Khomeini's son Mostafa in Iraq. Each side has its own version.<sup>8</sup> In reality, all these events were significant and the role of leftists and Islamic elements were interwoven. But it illustrates the way that accounts of the revolution have diverged according to factional allegiances and grievances.

One of the books that shows this leftist bitterness most clearly is the formidable collection *Women of Iran*, published in London in 1983<sup>9</sup>, with the contributors using pseudonyms. The annulment of the Shah's family law and the imposition of hejab in 1979 were two of the clearest signals early on that leftist and feminist expectations were not going to be realised. Another book written from this perspective, vivid if delivered at another level, is Marjane Satrapi's graphic novel *Persepolis*.<sup>10</sup>

More important though, for our purposes today, are the writings of Ervand Abrahamian, and especially *Iran Between Two Revolutions*,<sup>11</sup> which indeed began as a project

to explain the social origins of the Tudeh party. One might say that it ended as an attempt to explain why the revolution of 1979 was not a Tudeh or a leftist revolution, and that question is addressed squarely in Abrahamian's conclusion to the book. Broadly speaking, his answer is the personality and unique position of Khomeini, the ability of the clergy to connect with the urban poor, and the failure of the left to engage the rural poor; but in addition he also makes plain (in this and other books) that because of the devastating persecution by SAVAK, the left were in no state to offer coordinated leadership in Iran in the late 70s.

I hesitate to argue with Abrahamian; his books are generally excellent and I have used them extensively both in my own research and for teaching. But it is a little odd to start from a position of materialist determinism, saying that ideological and political phenomena reflect underlying economic structures and developments, only to end by acknowledging the power of charisma and the grip on popular thinking of a spiritual leader.

Houchang Chehabi has written an excellent book on the Freedom Party.<sup>12</sup> I probably sympathise with liberals like Mehdi Bazargan and Ebrahim Yazdi on the one side, and Shapur Bakhtiari on the other, more than anyone else in this story. I have an underlying view that the human history is, in the broadest terms,

the story of the expansion and development of human consciousness, self-awareness and understanding of the world over time, and correspondingly, the expansion of human autonomy and freedom to shape our existence over time.

Accordingly, I would like to be able to say that the Iranian revolution should have been a liberal revolution, following on from the constitutional revolution of 1906-11 and the period of Mosaddeq's prime ministership, with the goal of realising political freedoms, the rule of law, properly representative democratic government and so on. Undoubtedly a lot of Iranians were hoping for that in 1979. And one could make a case that Mehdi Bazargan came surprisingly close to achieving that kind of leadership as Prime Minister in that year. But ultimately, it won't wash. Whatever it was in the 1950s, the level of support for the liberals in 1979 was not sufficient, and Bazargan only had such power as he did because Khomeini gave it to him. Perhaps today, after Khatami and 2009

## “IN MY VIEW WE NEED TO LOOK AT THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION AS IF RELIGION MATTERED...”

and now Rouhani, it's coming closer. But it's still not here yet. Well, there we have a range of ideas about the revolution and why it happened, from various quarters, but none entirely satisfying. I could go into further detail about the origins of the revolution, the effects of the White revolution programme, the failure of the Shah's regime to allow for a degree of political activity as a safety valve for the stresses of modernisation, the alienating effect of rapid urbanisation, and so on, but that would be familiar ground to many; it would tell us plenty about why the revolution happened, but would not address what I think is the main point, which is about what happened next. What about religion? In my view we need to look at the Iranian revolution *as if religion mattered* (a phrase taken from Simon Green, discussing Maurice Cowling<sup>15</sup>), rather than always pushing it to one side or explaining it away in terms of something else, as so many contemporary western academics do, even those who do not consider themselves Marxists.

The Iranian revolution took place at a time when the standard expectation among westernised elites in the Middle East and in governments in Western

countries, the working assumption if you like, was that the Middle East in general and Iran in particular were developing and would continue to develop in a secular, western direction; toward industrialisation, urbanisation, secularisation, greater inclusion in world economic markets, greater material prosperity, and possibly, western-inspired forms of democratic government. The Shah in particular believed that economic growth and material prosperity would drive out dissent. The Islamic revolution overturned those assumptions and reasserted the importance of religion and indigenous traditions. For many secular-minded people in the west, and not just the west, that still seems bizarre and hard to accept. This is I think the question behind the question my neighbour's son asked, and the one I have chosen to focus on. Revolutions are supposed to be radical and progressive, pushing aside older forms and structures like religion. In this one, religion returned to dominate. Why did it happen?

Part of the explanation is the position of the clergy in Iranian society. Under the late Safavids, the clergy had been close to the monarchy and had been powerful in politics. This position was broken by the Afghans' destruction of Safavid rule in 1722 and the decades of civil war and trauma that followed. The clergy were blamed by some for the fall of the Safavids, and suffered loss of property, as well as sharing in the general suffering of the country.<sup>14</sup> Some emigrated, to

Iraq, to India or to the southern shore of the Persian Gulf. But through the latter part of the eighteenth century, and the nineteenth, while the Qajar monarchy remained relatively weak, the Shi'a clergy grew stronger again. They developed a hierarchy of appeal and guidance on the one hand, supported by a hierarchy of money payments on the other, with money and appeals rising up to senior clerics considered to be specially qualified to give guidance based on the shari'a. This meant that clergy became important authority figures, especially in villages and smaller towns where there was little or no sign of central government; but also in larger towns and cities, where they developed strong and close links with the bazaar class of merchants and artisans. Often clerical and bazaar families intermarried. The clerical network was almost a government in waiting, with a cohesive hierarchy of authority and deference, arrangements for handling large amounts of money, connections to even the most remote parts of the country, and social connections too that broadened its class base, so as to make its influence dominant in many urban centres, small or large. Roy Mottahedeh<sup>15</sup> and Said Amir Arjomand<sup>16</sup> are good to read on this.

Repeatedly, since the late nineteenth century, when secular government faltered, ordinary, pious Iranians turned to the Shi'a clergy for leadership – they were the other authoritative institution in Iranian

society. This happened in 1892, in 1906, in 1953 (at least to some extent) and 1963. So it is perhaps at least as legitimate to ask why an Islamic revolution did not happen before, as to ask why it came to pass in 1979. Up to the 60s and 70s, the clergy, faced with the challenges of social change, economic change and western influence, had as a body been divided and uncertain about how to respond; sometimes siding with liberal intellectuals, sometimes with the monarchy. Traditionally most of them disdained and avoided politics. In the first Iranian revolution of the 20th century, 1906-1911, one leading cleric, Fazlollah Nuri, was executed by resurgent revolutionaries after he sided with the monarchy in a coup.<sup>17</sup> In 1953, the defection of another cleric, Ayatollah Kashani, from the coalition behind Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq weakened Mosaddeq, and prepared the way for a coup planned by the British and the US.<sup>18</sup>

Familiar with this history, by 1979 Khomeini was determined that having achieved success in the revolution, the clergy would not again be pushed aside or exploited by more secularised, leftist or pro-western elements in the country. He understood the essentials of power in Iran and he was ruthlessly determined to stay in control. This is my central answer to the question about the revolution; the clergy were the natural alternative for Iranians to turn to when monarchy faltered; the

other substantial, serious, surviving institution in the country; and when they did so, they found in Khomeini a leader who was both capable enough to take up that responsibility, and determined enough to ensure that others did not encroach upon it.

There is an important caveat to emphasise however; the clergy should not be thought of as a monolithic bloc all sharing the same views on these matters.<sup>19</sup> Like any group of intellectuals, they were disputatious and given to faction. Many ulema in the late 1970s were much more moderate than Khomeini, or followed still the more quietist, traditional Shi'a position, avoiding political involvement altogether. Before the revolution was successful, Khomeini's doctrines on Islamic government were known to relatively few and accepted by fewer still; essentially only by his own small circle of immediate adherents, mostly his ex-students.<sup>20</sup>

Important figures like Ayatollahs Taleqani and Shariatmadari differed from him in important respects, and the latter came to confront and oppose him in the aftermath of the revolution (unsuccessfully). Other major figures like Ayatollah Abol-Qasem Khoei (in Iraq) disagreed with Khomeini's ideas fundamentally and held to their position after the revolution.<sup>21</sup> Many clergy in Iran were coerced to follow Khomeini's line during the revolution by Khomeini's popularity and the zeal of his young

## “...KHOMEINI ALSO BENEFITED FROM A RESURGENT ENTHUSIASM FOR ISLAM...”

followers; this realignment within the ulema was in itself a significant part of the revolution.

Khomeini's adamant position from the early 70s that the Shah had to go, although it looked extreme and improbable initially, meant that as the rest of the country lost trust in the Shah's government, Khomeini and his position moved from the periphery to the centre of politics, much as Russians had rallied to Lenin's adamant insistence on Peace in 1917 as the Kerensky government weakened and faltered. Khomeini was also careful, in the final phase of his exile, in Paris, to sound appealing to a broad range of opinion, while cleverly avoiding statements of his underlying convictions that would have been divisive.

Khomeini also benefited from a resurgent enthusiasm for Islam, in opposition to westernization and foreign interference in the country. Since the early 50s and the shipwreck of liberal politics in the Mosaddeq episode, many intellectuals like Jalal Al-e Ahmad had turned away from Tudeh and Marxism, back toward Islam as the focus for identity and resistance to political and cultural encroachment from the West. This was taken further by Ali Shariati, who was popular among young student demonstrators in 1978 and 79. Khomeini never acknowledged Shariati, but never denounced him



either, and in some of his speeches he seems to have lifted some ideas and slogans directly. In his book on the Shah Abbas Milani points up the way that the number of seminarians grew in the 1960s and 70s, and the difficulties the Shah and his government had in comprehending that phenomenon.<sup>22</sup>

Even without the additional revolutionary emphasis that Ali Shariati put on it, Shi'ism gave plenty of scope for popular protest at unjust rule. One could say that distrust of authority and an expectation that it will be corrupt and tyrannical is built into Shi'ism. In addition, the marches and other rituals associated with Ashura, the commemoration of Hosein's martyrdom, provide what one might call a practical template for popular collective protest.<sup>23</sup>

The powerful popular urge towards national independence and national reassertion, against the many humiliations of the past and against cultural encroachment in the present, was a major part of the revolution. Islam and Khomeini became the focus for that. It would be easy, as the 1970s recede in memory, to forget how intrusive and brash the western presence was before 1979, especially the US presence. One of the student hostage-takers, Massoumeh Ebtekar, later wrote as follows about it:

*Most of the Americans who lived in Iran behaved in a way that revealed their sense of self-importance and superiority. They had come to expect extra respect, even deference from all Iranians, from shoe-shine boy to shah... in our country, American lifestyles had come to be imposed as an ideal, the ultimate goal. Americanism was the model. American popular culture – books, magazines, film – had swept over our country like a flood. This cultural aggression challenged the self-identity of people like us. This was the idol which had taken shape within Iranian society. We found ourselves wondering, 'Is there any room for our own culture?'*<sup>24</sup>

Strikes were crucial to the success of the revolution in the latter part of 1978, but few of the rural poor and it seems not even a majority of the urban working class were actually involved until perhaps in the very last stages, in December 1978 and January 1979. The middle class led the revolution. I would suggest that the rural population were important, because even if not specially active in the revolution, the clergy knew they had their allegiance, at least more than anyone else did. The Shah had hoped to swing them behind him with the land reform of the White revolution programme, as a kind of Napoleonic peasantry – small landowners, nationalistic and loyal to the monarchy. But they didn't trust central government, especially not this one, that seemed alien, secular-minded and western-minded.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps they didn't trust anyone very much, but the mullah was at least familiar and a known quantity.

It was predominantly a Middle-Class Revolution in which the new middle class – western-looking, secularised, leftist or liberal – were eventually outmanoeuvred by the old middle class – clerics and bazaaris, religious conservatives. It is the irony of a conservative revolution. In Lampedusa's famous words, *Se vogliamo che tutto rimanga come è, bisogna che tutto cambi* – if we want everything to stay the same, everything has to change.

Why were the clergy and their mosque network in a position to assume leadership in 1978-9 when the left and liberals were not? The leadership of the left had been persecuted almost out of existence by SAVAK, whereas the clergy had largely been left alone. But why did the Shah leave the clergy alone? Because he thought they supported him? Because he thought they were out of the picture, and becoming more so? Or because they were too powerful, and (perhaps even only subliminally) he feared to persecute them? Or perhaps for a combination of these reasons?

As it turned out, Khomeini was a cleverer politician than the leftists and liberals had expected. With the help of others, notably Mohammad Beheshti, he outmanoeuvred them. It may be that Khomeini had originally hoped to rule with a light hand, but in the course of 1979 and then over the period of the Iran-Iraq war he consolidated tighter control. I am inclined to think that he was driven

to do so by events, and by his ruthless determination not to allow the prize of Islamic supremacy in the state to slip away, rather than that he planned an autocratic ideological Islamic state of the kind that came to be, with *velayat-e motlaq* and the Intelligence ministry, and the mighty Revolutionary Guard Corps, from the start. But the price has been that religion has been hollowed out by power, just as ideology was sidelined by the necessities of power in the French and Russian revolutions. The Shi'ism of the Islamic republic today is different from Shi'ism as it was before 1979, and many Iranians have rejected it, at least in the form offered by the regime.

Since 1979, despite much speculation and many predictions at different times of the imminent demise of the Islamic Republic, despite the vicious eight-year war and various other attempts at regime change along the way, the Islamic Republic has survived and has proved more stable than expected. It is reasonable to make a connection between this stability and the fact that the Republic is an Islamic Republic, unlike the anticlerical or secular regimes set up by the French and Russian revolutions, for example. Islam has given the regime deeper ideological roots in Iranian society than the innovative ideologies of the Jacobins and Bolsheviks achieved, which it is probably fair to say, most of the mass of the French and Russian populations never understood. Islam could have sustained a more liberal,

democratic regime; instead it has been used to sustain a less liberal, more autocratic form of government. Islam is more embedded in people's lives than those secular political ideas ever became; in the cultural/intellectual race, at least potentially, it has longer legs.

But those at the top of the regime run a risk – a known risk that people have been pointing out ever since 1979.<sup>26</sup> Shi'ism more than any other form of Islam is traditionally, acutely, almost obsessively sensitive to the abuse of political power. Islam still works as a support to the regime because a significant portion of the population still accept the regime's Islamic credentials. But when innocents are beaten up, tortured and shot for asking what has happened to their vote, when peaceful funerals are broken up by club-wielding thugs, and the gap between pious poor and corrupt members of the elite yawns ever wider, the risk run by the regime intensifies.

Part of the power of Islam lies in the fact that it is not susceptible to the control of the regime in the way that Jacobinism and Marxism were – it is an independent standard, that is ultimately beyond the reach of the regime. If a sufficient number support the Islamic Republic, that is a strength. But if a critical mass of believers among the Iranian people decide that the Islamic regime has become unIslamic; if they begin to call it the rule of Yazid, as they did

the government of the Shah, then Iran's rulers will be gone as if they had never been more substantial than a puff of smoke. It may be for something like this reason that the Iranian leadership appear to have been particularly rattled by the protests that took place in the last days of 2017, which seemed to involve a spread of lower and lower-middle classes, including from provincial and rural areas; people the regime has been accustomed to think of as its natural supporters, rather than the more educated elements that were the backbone of protest in 2009.

What of the future? Hegel suggested that history moved in a dialectic – that change manifested itself first in a thesis, stimulating opposition by an antithesis, followed by a synthesis incorporating elements of both principles or movements that had gone before, establishing a new thesis, and stimulating the next twist in the dialectic. One can see something like this at work in the French Revolution, with the ancien regime as the thesis, the revolution as antithesis, and the rule of Napoleon the synthesis. But the Iranian revolution, on this model, produced an antithesis that has not progressed to a synthesis. Can we say that progress to a synthesis is blocked in Iran? Why? We could say that until 1989 Khomeini's charisma gave added stability to the Islamic regime and enabled him (with remarkable success) to fix the system to continue on the same path, even after his death.<sup>27</sup> We can also argue

that oil and rentierism, in a familiar phenomenon known in other states also, bolsters the state and its institutions (including the Revolutionary Guard), and weakens the progressive classes and reforming elements in society; notably the independent entrepreneurial middle class. In addition, there is the argument, made already here, that religion gives the regime longer legs, albeit running a risk of undercutting itself. All these factors are at work in Iran to reinforce the status quo, to strengthen the hardliners in the regime, and to frustrate change. Will they continue to be successful against the contrary forces, of economic stress, and also, increasingly, climate change and drought? Who can say, but the Islamic republic has for a long time confounded those who have repeatedly predicted its imminent demise.

Something else arises from this – the continuing sense of urgency and importance we have about the revolution and attitudes to it. I think it is fair to take it as understood, that the 1979 revolution was an important and

## “...SOME PEOPLE ARE SCEPTICAL ABOUT THE VALUE OF HISTORY...”

formative event, and that it is necessary to have some understanding of why it happened. It changed our world. People of our generation think differently about things like politics and development and progress and religion because of it. It matters. History matters.

As with 1979, so with History more broadly, or so I believe at least. But some people are sceptical about the value of history. I would like to conclude with some comments about that. Sometimes I use the parallel of human memory when justifying history to students. Would you try to go about your daily tasks with all memory of what had happened to you in your childhood and previous life up to say last week, permanently erased? The idea is absurd. Memory is essential - it makes us what we are. Similarly with history, collectively.

History is not about dates and names. It is about the imaginative projection of the self into the position of others, as with novels and films also. This is vital because otherwise we are restricted to our own narrow experience in life. Vital

because we need to be able to put ourselves in the position of others, and to understand their perspective, if we are to cooperate with them, and avoid conflict with them, and to enrich our understanding of ourselves and our world beyond a cripplingly low level. It is just as important for neighbours over the garden fence as it is for the US and Iran, to choose just two examples. And history is vital because unlike novels and films it is about What Actually Happened – it involves a concern for and a quest for the truth.

Perhaps some people are wincing. I'll say it again - 'What actually happened' – *wie es eigentlich gewesen* (how it actually was) - the famous dictum of Leopold von Ranke. What Actually Happened has been out of fashion. It fell out of favour perhaps 10 or 15 years before I went to university. But if we abandon – or pretend to abandon, because in fact almost all scholarly writing still does pursue the truth – if we as academic historians abandon the idea of truth, firstly we cut away any serious justification for anyone to pay our wages. We make ourselves irrelevant. Secondly, more importantly, we leave the field open for others to tell lies. Fake News. How often have we heard Donald Trump invoke history? This is serious stuff. It is not fanciful to suggest that the fashionable disdain for truth and some of the adventures of postmodernism, passed on to students over three or four decades, have helped to open the way, in our

political and media culture more widely – predictably enough – to those for whom, in various ways, it is useful to be able to lie. History, like nature, abhors a vacuum. If we, as academic historians, detach our idea of history from the pursuit of What Actually Happened, and disappear off into safe, dark corners to absorb ourselves exclusively in historiography, or the sub-postmodern consideration of sources solely as texts, we abandon the field to would-be, wannabe or bad historians, and outright liars.

I am not arguing for Objective Truth in history. I read my RG Collingwood<sup>28</sup> as a student, although that is now a long time ago. Objective truth will probably always be beyond our reach. I am arguing rather for something more like scientific method, which approaches the truth by excluding error, and postulating more accurate hypotheses.

Finally, History is natural. People want to know what happened – they want to know it accurately, and they want to know why - like my neighbour's son. If we don't respond, then others will, and they won't do it properly. So let's do our job.

## END NOTES

---

- 1 Kurzman, Charles. *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran*, Harvard 2005.
- 2 Kapuscinski, Ryszard. *Shah of Shahs*, London (Penguin) 2006.
- 3 This draws partly from a conversation reported in Ved Mehta's *Fly and the Fly-Bottle* (Harmondsworth 1965) between Mehta and CV (Veronica Wedgewood (pp 162-168). In this conversation Wedgewood (in my view an underrated historian – and indeed Mehta takes a rather patronising attitude to her in this text) makes a defence of narrative history – of 'How' history as against 'Why' (more analytical) history. The crucial point is that the How often gives the key to the Why – without bringing the How to understanding in some detail, the Why may never be properly grasped. The How is essential to history and should never be looked down upon or overlooked.
- 4 Afkhami, Gholam Reza. *The Life and Times of the Shah*, Berkeley 2009.
- 5 <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/theekingandi> (accessed 16-11-18).
- 6 Afkhami, Gholam Reza. *The Iranian Revolution: Thanatos on a National Scale* (Middle East Institute 1985).
- 7 Milani, Abbas. *The Shah*, New York 2011 – for example pp 376-377, 436-437
- 8 see Axworthy 2013 pp 101-102 and note 74, p 447.
- 9 Azari, Farah. *Women of Iran: The Conflict with Fundamentalist Islam*, London 1983.
- 10 Satrapi, Marjane. *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, London 2003.
- 11 Abrahamian, Ervand. *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, Princeton 1982.
- 12 Chehabi, H E, *Iranian Politics and Religious Modernism: The Liberation Movement of Iran Under the Shah and Khomeini*, London 1990.
- 13 See the title of Simon Green's chapter in Robert Crowcroft, S.J.D. Green and Richard Whiting (eds) *The Philosophy, Politics and Religion of British Democracy: Maurice Cowling and Conservatism*, (London 2010). See also my forthcoming article 'Maurice and the Mullahs: Religion and Politics in the Thinking of Maurice Cowling, and in Revolutionary Iran'.
- 14 For the 18th century in Iran and the role of the clergy, see Axworthy (ed) *Crisis, Collapse, Militarism and Civil War: The History and Historiography of 18th century Iran* (Oxford 2018).

- 15 Mottahedeh, Roy. *The Mantle of the Prophet*, Harmondsworth (Penguin) 1987.
- 16 Arjomand, Saïd Amir. *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran*, Oxford 1988.
- 17 see Axworthy, *Empire of the Mind: A History of Iran* (London 2007), pp210-212.
- 18 Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran* (London 2013), pp 53-56; also Axworthy 'Home Grown', *Times Literary Supplement*, March 30, 2016 (Review article)
- 19 a point I have made elsewhere, but I am grateful to Paul Luft for reminding me of it here.
- 20 For these matters and an discussion of the doctrine of velayat-e faqih and the pamphlet Hokumat-e Eslami (Islamic Government) written by Khomeini in exile, see Axworthy 2013 pp 136-140.
- 21 Axworthy 2013 pp 96-97.
- 22 Milani 2011 p 376.
- 23 see Kamran Scott Aghaie *The Martyrs of Karbala; Shi'i symbols and rituals in Modern Iran* (Seattle 2004)
- 24 Ebtekar, Massoumeh. *Takeover in Tehran: The Inside Story of the 1979 US Embassy Capture* (Vancouver 2000) p61; see also Bill, James A. *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations* (Yale 1988) pp 379-382 and elsewhere
- 25 See Hooglund, Eric J. *Land and Revolution in Iran, 1960-1980* (Austin, 1982)
- 26 Eee Axworthy 2013 pp157-167; also Schirazi, Asghar. *The Constitution of Iran: Politics and the State in the Islamic Republic*, London 1997.
- 27 See Axworthy 2013 pp 305-307, and previous.
- 28 Collingwood, RG, *The Idea of History* (Oxford 1951).

