

SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

April 2, 2015

Annabelle Sreberny and Massoumeh Torfeh, eds., *Cultural Revolution in Iran: Contemporary Popular Culture in the Islamic Republic*, I.B. Tauris, 2013, 287 pp., \$96.00 US (hbk), ISBN: 9781780760896.

For much of the last two centuries, the term “culture” has been associated with models of progress, domination, or critique. From classical Marxist notions of culture as praxis of ideology to postcolonial approaches that reinvent modes of cultural perception into critical terrains, the concept has primarily been understood as something unique to human action. By the 1970s, culture as human praxis was elaborated upon further by Clifford Geertz’s interpretative ethnographic studies, which understood the phenomena as a mode of action or practice associated with agency and meaning-making. The shift to this interpretive approach underscored the way humans express, transmit, and cultivate themselves through culture, and, by extension, how they can also be (re)produced in shifting contexts. Cultural activities, which include most human expressive activities—including ethnographic accounts of culture—draw attention not merely to how they can be interpreted, but also how they are produced in shifting contexts. The most critical issue concerns the ways culture defines individuals or a society in shifting contexts. Culture is identity and inherent to that identity are divergent processes that maintain or change it.

When “culture” as identity is put together with “revolution,” however, an enhanced meaning is implied. The fusion of concepts carries the potential of something significant, a total change, a turning of time toward a promise. What promise? What characterizes “cultural revolution” is an epistemological concern for a radical change, the sort of change that first and foremost operates as an act of resistance, a total rebellion conscious of itself as it remakes history. As Mao Zedong saw it, cultural revolution, a concept so famously associated with the late Chinese Communist, is about a surge forward, a perpetual process toward an utopian ideal.¹ For post-war revolutionaries, Marxist or otherwise, resistance operated at the core of cultural practice. At its logical core, “cultural revolution” marks a tautology as culture itself carries the logic of the very revolution it serves to be its adjective.

What is wrong with the concept of culture? In her famous 1991 critique of cultural anthropology, Lila Abu-Lughod expressed misgivings about the idea of culture, and argued how writing about the concept operates, on various levels, as a way to reinforce distinctions

¹ See Timothy Cheek, *Mao Zedong and China’s Revolutions: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s Press, 2002).

that ultimately push for hierarchies. Her thesis is that the relationship between culture and society is hardly straightforward, and ways of producing knowledge about culture inherently reify its privileged position by studying the other. “Culture is the essential tool for making other.”² Culture is hardly external of power, and hence is always contentious.

Cultural Revolution in Iran: Contemporary Popular Culture in the Islamic Republic, edited by Annabelle Sreberny and Massoumeh Torfeh, is an example of a work that adopts the concept of culture too seriously. The sixteen essays collected in this volume, most of which were presented at a School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) conference in June 2009, offer a collection of views and studies on how various cultures are enacted, produced, and lived in contemporary Iran. The emphasis is on “popular culture.” Here studies of ideas, attitudes, images, visual representations, musical practices and other such phenomena overlap with cultures of resistance against strict codes imposed by the Islamic Republic over the mostly young population in Iran. In its fourth decade, the values and legacy of Iran’s post-revolutionary society are identified in these spaces of defiance, the sites of significant creativity expressed through popular culture that continues to push for a new Iran. The heroes are mostly the liberal middle class, restless youth and women who, through corporeal, textual, and technological practices, negotiate identities distinct from state ideology and Islamist codes of ethics.

Popular culture as agency and resistance is presented in five sections in the volume: “Social Context and Sexuality,” “Performing Arts and Cinema,” “Music,” “Representation,” and “Beyond Borders.” Though unevenly distributed in terms of chapters (Part V, “Beyond Borders,” has only one chapter), each section focuses on an aspect of artistic, musical, technological, or discursive practices in varied popular cultural contexts in urban Iran. The first chapter, written by Annabelle Sreberny, a respected media scholar at SOAS, provides a broad account of the relationship between culture and politics in the Islamic Republic. Chapters in Part I are perhaps the most sociological in terms of academic discipline, wherein Pardis Mahdavi (Chapter 2), Mahmoud Arghavan (Chapter 3), Azadeh Kian (Chapter 4), and Mehri Honarbin-Holliday (Chapter 5) offer studies of socio-cultural movements in the post-revolutionary era with a focus on gender and sexuality. The second section focuses on performance cultures with authors, Liliane Anjo (Chapter 6), Parmis Mozafari (Chapter 7), and Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad (Chapter 8), providing studies of Iran’s theatrical, dance and cinematic cultures with the young and women playing a key role.

Part III continues the discussion on culture as resistance with a focus on music. While in Chapter 9, “I am an Original Iranian Man’: Identity and Expression in Tehran’s Unofficial Rock Music,” Bronwen Robertson examines Tehran’s unofficial rock music subcultures, in Chapter 10, “Neither ‘Islamic’ nor ‘Republic’: Discourse in Music,” Nahid Siamdoust looks at the interplay between traditional music and rap and rock, and the resulting fusions of musical genres that challenge not just the authoritarian politics of the Islamic Republic but also the state’s claim on religion. Siamdoust’s chapter is the most original and sophisticated in the volume and deserves serious study by students of the cultural history of Iran.

The description for Part IV, “Representation,” is not clear, but the title vaguely implies ways that post-revolutionary actors (self-)represent culture to shape identities. In Chapter 11, Vit Šisler, a scholar of new media studies, offers another sophisticated study of culture in post-revolutionary Iran with a focus on video games. The chapter is less interested in showing “resistance” in cultures of video games, and more concerned about complex

² Lila Abu-Lughod, “Writing Against Culture,” in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, ed. Richard G. Fox (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1991), 143.

symbols, rituals, and myths that are constructed through the indigenous production of video games by private entrepreneurs and state-funded cultural industries. Chapter 12 is also an impressive work on satirical culture in the Iranian media. Katja Föllmer, a German scholar of modern Iran, discusses satirical practices through various mediums of communication, arguing that despite state censorship Iranian satirical publications continues to be vibrant and creative.

Chapters 13, 14, and 15 continue with the notion of cultural representation as a way to construct identity through creative action. While agency plays a key role in Naghmeh Samini's "Gendered Taboos in Iran's Text Message Jokes" (Chapter 13), Alice Bombardier's very interesting study of mural painting in Chapter 14 considers the relationship between visual art and urban space as a new political experience. This chapter is one of the only studies in the collection that looks at state culture and its (re)production in public space. Chapter 15, "From the Pen to the Rotary Press: Women Book Publishers in Post-Revolutionary Iran," by Anna Vanzan, returns back to the issue of agency and identity with a focus on print publications by women. The study of gender relations in print publications is intriguing and goes beyond the mere logic of "resistance" as advanced by some earlier chapters.

The final section, Part V, is a single chapter by Amin Moghadam. This is a unique study that looks at culture, economy and migration in a transnational context. Moghadam's chapter presents a good discussion on the art and material cultures of cross-border economic and cultural activities. These activities are advanced by a network of Iranian immigrants as new economic actors in the metropolitan life of the United Arab Emirates. This is the only chapter in the book that seriously considers social class, a point that deserves credit as a result of an extensive study of Dubai-based Iranians. However, the problem with the last chapter is that it is not clearly tied to the other discussions in the volume, both thematically and theoretically. This disconnection is not the fault of the author but the editors whose task is to connect the chapters in the introduction. It is in the first chapter where the editors should provide the reader with an overview of the essays, and accordingly connect and expand on the discussions presented in the book, even if they diverge in theme and approach. What is also missing in the first chapter is a theoretical discussion of culture from various scholarly perspectives. The narrative on culture mostly stays on the surface level without delving deeper into key concepts, thereby presenting culture as something self-evident, natural, and unproblematic. It is also odd to note that there is a photo of biscuits, taken by Sreberny during a short visit to Iran (Really? A photo of biscuits!) to showcase the contradictions of "contemporary Iranian life" (10). This, I argue, is a subtle hint of Orientalism in that the reference to Iran's cultural contradictions is meant to underline the irrationality of a country undergoing change toward modernity.

There is an explicit modernist cultural outlook in most of this book, a way of presenting modernity (or being modern) through the subjects under study. In fact, one could even speak here of a certain cultural practice in the editorial composition of this work. The entire book can be seen as a cultural collection, an academic gallery, in which diverse experiences of "new" cultural experiences of Iran are arranged together in a novel exhibition, hence, quoting James Clifford, "given enduring value in a new arrangement."³ The arrangements display an imagery of "new" Iran, a modern Iran, sharply juxtaposed to tradition and religion, which the Islamic Republic as a set of religious ideas and practices best embodies.

³ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 231.

Tied to obsessions with the new is an implicit reluctance to bring to light the old, the aging, the sub and/or counter cultures embedded in experiences of histories, nostalgias, or remembrance of passing time. History is a mere afterthought in most discussions in the volume. The ideological framework that appears in many of the chapters is youth *as* social structure, the young representing a cultural symbolic context of a reified identity for a nation-state undergoing change.

In many ways, the most significant difficulty with the volume remains conceptual. Concepts such as “culture” or “state” are either described in binaries or simply presented as self-evident and are therefore unexplained and undefined. Iran’s contemporary cultures, in variations and conflicts, are unmarked, undefined, and unambiguous in the way they are practiced and, more importantly, the way they are academically conceptualized by most of the chapters. The Islamic Republic is by and large described as opposed to “society,” a model that underscores a Western liberal notion of politics with the state ostensibly operating outside the society it seeks to control and maintain authority over.

Moreover, the cultural approach advanced here too readily evokes a sharp distinction between resistance and power. Culture as resistance is depicted as consistently self-aware and conscious of power external to it. One can appreciate that most of the contributors are attempting to say something important about contemporary Iran, but they do so in ways that are too consistent and repetitive to be hardly original. It is a truism that under authoritarian political structure (or in fact any form of disciplinary institutions) some form of resistance takes place, or that conceptually we can discuss a domain of change against state practices that seeks to maintain the status quo for power. Yet it is also equally important to acknowledge the cultures of state power (Chapters 10 and 14 are exceptions), together with the influence of class, ethnic, and generational cultures.

Furthermore, what is critically missing from this volume is an account of what I call “cultures of silence,” that is, those actors who do not pertain with the privilege to express in ways artists, painters, poets, photographers, and filmmakers do. In fact, the most problematic feature of culture as resistance is the very fetishism of expression, as though human creativity only pertains to those who express themselves symbolically, bodily, or otherwise, no matter what their limitations as individuals or groups. This is indeed the discursive practice of hierarchy that Lila Abu-Lughod wrote about. The Iranians who are privileged in most of these studies are frequents of Tehran’s leisure spaces (Chapter 6), the literate and cultured sites (Chapters 7, 9, 15), Iranians who can afford expensive musical instruments (Chapter 9), and those who can travel and migrate beyond Iran’s shores (Chapter 16).

Most of the abovementioned difficulties are best articulated in Chapter 2. Pardis Mahdavi’s discussion of the Green Movement as a social movement tied to what she calls a “sexual revolution”—i.e., the changing mores of sexual life of young Iranians in the post-revolutionary era—is replete with normative assumptions about heterosexuality and monolithic conceptions of state power. Throughout the study, which is based on a longer book published in 2009, is a continual blurring of concepts of youth, sex, and politics. The Green Movement with diverse manifestations and divergent formations is primarily described as an expression of the youth movement, together with its cultural expressions around art, music, and drugs, which self-describes undergoing a “sexual revolution.” In essence, this “argument” amounts to nothing more than uncritically accepting the claims of those interviewed—i.e., those who described themselves as experiencing a “sexual revolution”—and determining, sociologically speaking, that there is a revolution of such sort. While the element of voice is significant, simply reiterating the discourse used by the subject

is not a valid way of describing and ultimately explaining social process. The failure to critically examine the ways and contexts in which discourses of “sexual revolution” are used, and more importantly the assumptions the concept carries in the way they are articulated by the young Iranians interviewed, undermines the logical integrity of this chapter.⁴

Overall, the situatedness of knowledge is a major problem in this volume. Most of the authors easily glance over the issue of positionality. How relative culture(s) and especially revolution(s) can be in the ways they are described by the contributors in terms of gender, sexuality, or arts is entirely overlooked in favor of narrating accounts in the persistence of resistance.

In this imaginary mapping of Iran, it is no accident that Tehran and its middle class have a privileged position in most of the studies in the volume (except Chapter 5). Tehran’s middle class, as Mahdavi explains, has the cultural modality of the country to which all other socio-economic classes follow. This is Tehran-centrism at its best: all of Iran’s social life revolves around its expressive middle class, its “cultural bricolages,” youthful non-conformists, hedonistic boys, performing artists, neither Islamic nor a republic, but free-spirited, liberal individuals in search of expression, for change, for revolutionary change. True, the volume is not meant to be comprehensive, but it could have at least acknowledged the complex ethnic and racial landscape of a country that it claims to represent.

All in all, the above objections are not meant to undermine the importance of this volume. Most chapters are studies that offer unique perspectives on post-revolutionary Iranian society. They should be studied, referenced, but also critically engaged by students and scholars, particularly in the fields of communication, media, and cultural studies. A number of chapters are highly sophisticated and deserve praise. My contention in this review, however, has been a broad one, and with that I aimed to show how we should think beyond conceptual binaries that reinforce the ideological schema of culture as a self-evident phenomena for the sake of making an easy observation and analysis, or of evoking the admiration of traveling scholars to exotic and apparently contradictory lands such as Iran.

Is there a way of writing about culture by thinking beyond it? In other words, what would a “post-cultural” study of contemporary private/public life look like? For the most part, it would have to go beyond the limited rhetoric of expression and include an examination of what Billy Ehn and Orvar Löfgren call the “secret world of doing nothing”;

⁴ There is something journalistically descriptive about this chapter. The methodology of the study adopted is not ethnographic in the sense of writing a distinct human culture(s), as fieldwork study of detailed aspects of groups or communities under study, and how those processes may entail local-specific understandings. The method described is primarily based on interviews, which is a legitimate form of inquiry but not necessarily an ethnographic account with the potential to describe a nation-wide social movement as sexual revolution. For the most part, ethnographies are meant for local-specific studies, and most innovative ethnographic approaches shy away from making generalizations about a large population. But this audacious study has no problem in making general claims by employing terms as ambiguous as “sexual revolution.”

Without any evidence of a countrywide social transformation, the author attributes to the Iranian youth meanings, experiences, and intentions described by less than 200 subjects interviewed. There is little reflection or even an acknowledgement of ethnographer-subject relations; that is, a critical engagement with self-presentation of those under study, and the way the ethnographer represents her identity to those interviewed, and the influence such dramaturgical dynamics may have on the ethnographic study. Self-presentation is taken for a sociological fact, while the ethnographer stands outside of the ethnographic representation.

In this narrative, however, I see more of an Iranian-American imaginary of Iran than a study of Iran’s youth culture and its supposed sexual revolution. There is so much of middle class Iranian-American cultural sensitivity—the sort also found in Azadeh Moaveni’s *Lipstick Jihad* and Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tebran*—read into Iran’s youth culture that it would require a separate study to parse it all out.

things, people that hid themselves, act silently through traces in everyday/nightly life.⁵ Until then, we have a long way to go.

Babak Rahimi
Associate Professor of Communication, Culture, and Religion
University of California San Diego

⁵ Billy Ehn and Orvar Löfgren, *The Secret World of Doing Nothing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

© 2015: Babak Rahimi

Authors retain the rights to their review articles, which are published by SCTIW Review with their permission. Any use of these materials other than educational must provide proper citation to the author and SCTIW Review.

Citation Information

Rahimi, Babak, Review of *Cultural Revolution in Iran: Contemporary Popular Culture in the Islamic Republic*, *SCTIW Review*, April 2, 2015. <http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/500>.

ISSN: 2374-9288