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Tracking Iranian Cosmopolitan Options – At Home and Abroad
A Review Essay of Iranian Identity and Cosmopolitanism: Spheres of Belonging *and* Islam, Democracy, and Cosmopolitanism: At Home in the World

Lucian Stone, ed., *Iranian Identity and Cosmopolitanism: Spheres of Belonging*, Suspensions: Contemporary Middle Eastern and Islamicate Thought, Bloomsbury, 2014, 256 pp., $112.00 (hbk), ISBN 9781472567420.

Ali Mirsepassi and Tadd Graham Fernée, *Islam, Democracy, and Cosmopolitanism: At Home and in the World*, Cambridge University Press, 2014, 231 pp., $85.00 US (hbk), ISBN 9781107053977.

Here are two recent books on the theme of cosmopolitanism. The authors/contributors for both are mostly Iranian. Since Iranian identity figures in the title of one, Islam in the title of the other, the unsuspecting reader might reasonably expect some convergence in the subject matter. At the very least, one would anticipate a significant overlap in the issues raised, sources cited, outcomes charted, and actions favored.

Yet none of the above happens. The disparities between *Iranian Identity and Cosmopolitanism* and *Islam, Democracy, and Cosmopolitanism* inform not only the contentious nature of the key word they share—cosmopolitanism—but also the difficulty of having even an academic discussion about what are cosmopolitan options in the real world, in the everyday life of citizens whether in the Middle East, specifically Iran, or in North America, specifically the United States but also Canada.

Iranian Identity and Cosmopolitanism has numerous contributors. They represent a broad spectrum of Iranian intellectuals who have immigrated to North America. Their disciplines include history, political science, comparative literature, philosophy, and religious studies. The chapters are wide ranging in topics, from citizenship and democracy to dissidence and martyrdom. Women as well as minorities find their voices among these contributors, and the volume as a whole lives up to the hope articulated by the editor, Lucian Stone, in the Introduction: "to critically examine cosmopolitanism with specific reference to the Iranian nation-state, Iranian history and culture, and the lived experience of Iranians" (15).

But what does it mean to be a hyphenated Iranian, that is, an Iranian-American? And what does it mean for different generations of Iranian-Americans, not just those who

migrated in the late '70s on the cusp of 1979 Iranian Revolution, but for their children, the next generation of Iranian-Americans? One contributor takes up this challenge frontally. Farhang Erfani, a specialist on Ricœur who teaches Philosophy at American University, provides an extended meditation that he titles, tongue in cheek: "Cosmopolitanism: Neither for, Nor Against, to the Contrary." It is a brilliant satire on the conceits and dead ends of contemporary philosophy, but it also conveys a heavy dose of self-criticism, even and especially leveled at the title of the volume "Iranian *Identity* and Cosmopolitanism." There is no single, monolithic *iraniyyat* (notion of Iranianness) either at home or abroad. While "the younger generation is thrilled by anyone advocating for Iranian-Americans," seeing the hyphen as "a cultural passport to being an official minority," Erfani locates himself "at the bottom edge of the previous disintegrated generation that is suspicious of the dash and considers it a cultural surrender. Not at home [in the US], this older generation has no hyphens, no center, and is suspicious of all messages"(156).

And that suspicion extends beyond labels to the agency of those who claim to be Iranian exponents of cosmopolitanism. Far from being confident critics of Western triumphalism, neo-colonialism, and unbridled capitalist hegemony, Iranians in North America are compromised by their location. Their energy and efforts pale next to those of Iranians at home, those staying and resisting in the Islamic Republic of Iran. "We cosmopolitans, the Iranian community abroad—our situation is nothing in comparison to the courage of our fellow protesters." Efrani argues, "The Green Movement and the Arab Spring are better 'Events' than anything Badiou fathomed and are more democratic than any neocon imagined. They are however fragile given our impoverished vocabulary. They have made it clear they do not seek to emulate the West and for the most part do not want fundamentalism. Yet, past that, there is little to no vocabulary to address their concerns" (153).

Most of the other essays in this volume, however, try to provide connections, even while searching for adequate key terms. The crucial importance of the Green Movement is accented by the Iranian-Canadian political philosopher, Ramin Jahanbegloo, when he notes that the Islamic Republic of Iran was largely anti-cosmopolitan, so that "Iranian intellectuals had to wait for the 1990s to start a new wave of cosmopolitanism, which culminated with the Green Movement in 2009" (29-30). Yet the dilemma of place persists. Successive authors acknowledge the locational distance between themselves, Iranians abroad, and their "fellow protestors," Iranians at home. The former have the freedom to express, but no vocabulary, the latter have the experience of dissent, but no channel to voice it.

This difficulty is best framed in the tension between belonging and longing. All who identify as Iranian claim a past that embraces nearly three millennia. It was Persians who challenged Greeks, conquered most of the Mediterranean world, endured the Arab conquest, and then created an Iranian epic, the *Shahnameh*, as well as Iranian Shi'ism. They forged a series of empires that endured until the modern period of first European, then American global hegemony. Traces of that past shape the linguistic, ethnic, and religious diversities that inform several essays. The trope of "Persian as sugar" in Stone's evocative introduction, the postmetaphysical thinking of Soroush as the key to a postnational political identity in Alireza Shomali and Ebrahim Sultani's essay, the globally conversant critical discourses of Kadivar and Dabashi dissolving the dichotomy of "republic" and "Islamic," as Reza Afshari demonstrates, and also the dilemma of immigrant/nativist, older/younger generational attitudes, already mentioned in Erfani's article—all these point to the flexibility and subtlety of Iranian engagement with multiple registers of belonging (to some vision of the past) and longing (for some process of moral-political inclusiveness). Belonging and longing must

converge, reinforcing one another, if cosmopolis is not to become, as Erfani warns, a "fantasy of integration," allowing Capital and metropolitan, not ethical and cosmopolitan interests to prevail (157).

There are three further essays—Chapters 4, 5, and 6—that provide the core of the counter thesis to counterfeit cosmopolitanism in *Iranian Identity and Cosmopolitanism*. Each seems to point beyond the dilemmas of identity and definition that are finely etched yet never resolved in the essays mentioned above. Each holds up a notion of cosmopolitan longing: the negative or feminine cosmopolitan in Shahla Talebi's essay, the tragic poet as renovated cosmopolitan in Jason Mohaghegh's chapter, and the obstinate Armenian as the underside of cosmopolitan Iran in Nasrin Rahimieh's meditation. All three authors provide literary tropes that harness analytical insight to performative power. Talebi begins with a joke that becomes serious: Iran has to change its name after 9/11 because it wants to resist being contaminated by so-called negative or feminine cosmopolitanism. Iran becomes "Nariman," not because of what happened in America but because of what did not happen in Iran: the election of a reform minded president (1997-2001), and then his reelection (2001-2005). Women sought but were denied a greater role in public life under Khatami. Nariman becomes a mark of female anxieties, since "the name Nariman, which connotes both manhood and religiosity, is meant in jest to allay these anxieties" (93). Though brutally repressed and severely defeated after 2009, "lady Iran" remains "pregnant with new forms of resistance, whose eventual birth is haunting the state…as it retreats even further to a masculine rhetoric" (103).

No less defiant of the status quo, and the state that enforces it, are poets like Shamlu who confront violence with violence. Motivated by "impenetrable rapture in the will to demolition," the contemporary Iranian poet becomes "the last unequivocal administrator of urban violence (heralding extinction itself)" (116). It is to be sure, according to Mohaghegh, an apocalyptic calling, one that seeks through destruction to "purge the mania of several centuries" (118). The pushback against this necrophilic longing is the daily intensity of wrestling with memories and histories that both converge and collide from a shared Armenian/Iranian background of two literary figures, one, Rahimieh, an Iranian-American professor of literature, the other, Zoya Pirzad, an Armenian-Iranian writer of fiction. Instead of Shamlu's cataclysmic end, this is more a tale of sutures, trying to make sense of Armenian minority identity over five centuries, with special accent on the heightened level of suspicion directed to Iranian-American scholars, artists, and intellectuals since the June 2009 uprising (the so-called Velvet or Green Revolution), which preceded the December 2010 (Jasmine Revolution) in Tunisia and its sequels elsewhere in the Arab world, and arguably also in Turkey (Taksim Square in June 2013).

In sum, there is no coherence about the meaning of cosmopolitanism as a project or an identity within the essays of *Iranian Identity and Cosmopolitanism*, but its several contributors do raise similar issues: who defines cosmopolitanism, what are its prospects, as well as its limits? The sources cited span the range of Iranian authors and Euro-American critical thinkers. Cosmopolitanism seems to have some analytical purchase for each contributor, though the appendix to *Iranian Identity and Cosmopolitanism* is too formulaic to be convincing: its author tries to weave together a typology of variant cosmopolitanisms, singling out moral and political forms as the most salient, and then sociological research as the instrument that confirms or modifies their salience. Notably absent from this model is the very element that makes the preceding essays at once so contradictory and so vibrant: the hyphen or the dash that signals how no single political form or physical location can preempt the tension that Iranians feel both at home and abroad.

It is precisely the absence of the hyphen or dash in the second volume, *Islam, Democracy, and Cosmopolitanism*, which makes it so much less compelling as a contribution to cosmopolitanism studies than *Iranian Identity and Cosmopolitanism*. Even though Mirsepassi is an Iranian-American sociologist teaching at NYU, *Islam, Democracy, and Cosmopolitanism* seldom mentions Iran. It would be the height of neo-Orientalist essentialist logic to suggest that every Iranian intellectual must write about his own country. I am not making that claim. There are, after all, more Iranian doctors and engineers than there are intellectuals in Western Europe and North America, and most of them do not address their national or cultural legacy in their professional labor. But Mirsepassi is not just an Iranian-American sociologist who deals with Iran; his most recent monograph, prior to *Islam, Democracy, and Cosmopolitanism*, was titled: *Democracy in Iran: Islam, Culture, and Political Change*.[1] The name "Iran" drops out of the present volume, but the key concepts of Islam and democracy are both retained, and so one would expect some link, if only tangential, to Iranian evidence and actors, events and issues in *Islam, Democracy, and Cosmopolitanism*. They are hardly visible, and certainly not central, to the book.

Nevertheless, we are introduced to "the beleaguered Iranian Green Movement" and to "the many formative thinkers of the Green Movement [who] are veterans of the intellectual and political disaster of 1979" (6). And why are they important? It is not until mid-way in the book, almost as an aside, that we are told: "it is precisely the Green Movement that is pushing Iranian politics along a democratic road today" (111). But who is doing the pushing? What are the issues? The challenges? The options? The dead ends? None of these questions are raised, none of these issues explored. We hear nothing more about contemporary Iranian politics or religion.

"Islam" itself appears as an empty signifier, a notion without substance, in Mirsepassi's approach. His is a meta-theoretical endeavor to chart what he claims will be a methodological breakthrough in Islamic studies: to "comparatively juxtapose three prevailing theoretical discourses that have profoundly affected contemporary concepts of tradition, cosmopolitanism, and democracy in Islamic countries today" (6).

Before delving into what he means by "tradition, cosmopolitanism, and democracy," note that the stress is on Islamic countries, not on Muslims in multiple countries outside Africa and Asia where they reside as immigrants seeking asylum, labor, and, above all, citizenship. Mirsepassi tries to repair this major gap by devoting a long section of Chapter 1, "Ways of Being in the World: Religion and Secularism," to Maghrebi immigrants to Paris. Titled "Muslims and the Public Sphere in France" (44-65), it mostly reviews theoretical approaches to the public sphere with almost no mention of actual Maghrebis in France. Even more slipshod is a sequel section titled "Stories of Migration" about Kurds migrating from Eastern Turkey to Istanbul (71-81). Here we do hear live voices but without any frame; the conversations are told as if in a trance, no recorder, no reference, no context. There is a summary for each of the chapters in *Islam, Democracy, and Cosmopolitanism* (36-43), but the summary for Chapter 1 is dedicated entirely to theorists; even the subtitle, "Stories of Migration," is omitted.

When we are at last told what Islam is, it is through the translation into English from the introduction to a French dictionary on the Qur'an. In what amounts to reductionist malfeasance, we are given the following as though it is shockingly new information: "The fact that only 15% of the world's Muslims are Arab, … that half of the world's Muslim

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[1] Ali Mirsepassi, *Democracy in Modern Iran: Islam, Culture, and Political Change* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

population is in the Indian subcontinent… that none of these countries are familiar with the Arab language [sic] or culture. The immense majority of the world's faithful are illiterate, with even the literate minority not necessarily understanding Qur'anic Arabic… Islam is in reality the many and contradictory worlds that Muslims experience through a linguistic and cultural multiverse in the course of living their Islam" (88).

The above boilerplate redaction of ground level obstacles to Muslim cosmopolitanism comes only after we have already been told what is the solution to the problems of the Muslim world. They reside in the genius and the labor of one immigrant scholar. He is the Algerian-French linguistic philosopher and Islamic theorist, Mohammed Arkoun. Mirsepassi introduces Arkoun as "the late Algerian thinker" who "followed the pluralistic line of thought opened up by Tagore" (31). Because Arkoun was "a decidedly cosmopolitan thinker," with "a passionate issue [sic] of responsibility in everyday speech," it is he who provides the model "to open a critical space grounded in commitment to democratic practices, flexibly anchored within the ethics of the everyday, and linked to immanent problems of cosmopolitanism and justice, without being framed in terms of absolute priorities" (33).

Arkoun is entirely misidentified here as "the late Algerian thinker." Arkoun was as much French as Algerian, as is made clear by the foremost scholar of Arkoun, Carool Kersten. Kersten's pioneering work, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics*,[2] despite its own neglect of Iranian actors and resources, heralds Arkoun as a product of two societies. "An ethnic Berber from Algeria's Kabylia region, Mohammed Arkoun…moved to France for his postgraduate work at the Sorbonne… [making him] a 'border crosser' who in spite of this displacement is equally at home in Muslim and European culture" (177). What becomes evident to any one studying Arkoun is his participation in the project of neo-Mu'tazilites, or new Mu'tazilites, heirs to a tradition of rationalist philosophy in Islamic thought. In this sense, the most interesting comparison of chapters in *Iranian Identity and Cosmopolitanism* and *Islam, Democracy, and Cosmopolitanism* would be between the treatment of Abdulkarim Soroush in the former (37-47) with Mohammed Arkoun in the latter, especially since they jointly accent human understanding and "emergent reason" as products of historical, contextually defined activities that are crucial for defining religion.

But Mirsepassi rules out both the hyphens in Arkoun as well as the Iranian parallel of his labor in the person of another new Mu'tazili scholar, Soroush. Instead, we are told, that despite the geopolitical, educational, and social hurdles confronting actual Muslim societies, the leadership of Arkoun can herald a new day for all high-minded Muslim scholars and activists, wherever they live, whatever their local challenges. If one places society before the state and emphasizes "the creative powers of the everyday lifeworld" (31), one can perceive how Arkoun charts an emergent paradigm, first "articulated by Dewey and Sen and practiced by Gandhi" (35). It marries moral virtue with the everyday, the indispensable building blocks "to form the basis for *any* popular democratic movement in contemporary societies" (35, emphasis mine).

How does this vision relate to the circumstances of today, the disparities and despairs of 2015? The image is there for all to see, announces Mirsepassi. It "has also been the most positive and revitalizing image to be spread to the entire world through its experience of the Jasmine Revolutions"(35). The Jasmine Revolutions? Otherwise known as the Arab Spring, the Jasmine Revolutions, like the Green Movement in Iran, pepper the general prescriptions

[2] Carool Kersten, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics: New Muslim Intellectuals and the Study of Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

offered in *Islam, Democracy, and Cosmopolitanism* but are never scrutinized. One must go elsewhere to find out about the stakeholders in those revolutions (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria), or the players or the timelines, but also the shifting outcomes. In short, while Mirsepassi calls for attention to the everyday, and to the everyday lifeworld of Muslim societies, he is long on Euro-American theoretical approaches and short on the local details and issues that inform each of these—and other—societies throughout Asia and Africa.

There are other flaws in *Islam, Democracy, and Cosmopolitanism* that would seem minor were they not so insistent and annoying. While Arkoun is lionized, there are several non-Iranian Muslim thinkers who are introduced but chiefly to contrast them with Arkoun. They occupy the lower rungs in a Rolodex of disciplines: history, anthropology, sociology, and law. In history Azim (sic: Aziz) Al-Azmeh is derided as "a militant cosmopolitan," while in anthropology both Talal Asad and Sabha Mahmoud (sic twice: her name is Saba Mahmood) are deemed to be "anti-cosmopolitan" (34, 135). And in the case of Abdullahi An-Na'im (law) and Fatima Mernissi (sociology), they are largely lauded as forerunners or fellow travelers who only understood part of the puzzle of everyday democratic cosmopolitan ethics that was fully expressed by Arkoun.

It borders on a travesty of serious scholarship when Mirepassi misspells the names of some of his major protagonists. In addition to Al-Azmeh and Mahmood, for instance, he introduces Abdullahi An-Na'im as simply "An-Na'im" throughout the chapter on him (156-177), and then in the Bibliography, he produces three items, each marked as "Abdullahi, An-Na'im." In other words, he reverses first and last names, as he does also a bit later for Ahmed Rashid, author of a major book on the Taliban, who is listed as "Ahmad [sic], Rashid" (209).

But the greatest disappointment of *Islam, Democracy, and Cosmopolitanism* is its conclusion. Even after lauding Arkoun, connecting him to Tagore as someone who privileged society over state (30), and trying to demonstrate how Arkoun's often unintelligible highbrow rhetoric can apply to the formulation of a cosmopolitan ethic of everyday speech throughout the Muslim world, Mirsepassi announces at the end that "this new cosmopolitanism is [nothing less than] an extension of specific elements of *nationalism*" (207). What is needed, we are told, is "to embrace the more discursive-practical ideals of home in a more positive form of nationalism," that is, to "imagine belonging as combining the virtue of citizenship and a wider global community, while extending democratic and nonviolent forms of ethical politics" (208).

The failure of Mirsepassi's work is both theoretical and practical. He leaves out all the native intellectuals on behalf of whom he is claiming to speak, and he provides a solution that reverts to state over society, even while claiming that everyday citizenship involves "extending democratic and nonviolent forms of ethical politics."

It is in the fractured elements of the often-clashing voices in *Iranian Identity and Cosmopolitanism* that we find an actual echo of the pragmatic problems of imagining, then living, then surviving in everyday life worlds. Among multiple others who have embraced a sociological approach to everyday cosmopolitanism is another Iranian-American sociologist, Asef Bayat. Bayat's collection of essays, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*,[3] was published before the Jasmine/Arab Spring Revolutions, and had gone to press just as the Green Movement was occurring in Iran; nevertheless, Bayat anticipated both

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[3] Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

movements. In Chapter 9—"Does Radical Islam Have an Urban Ecology?"—he examines the urban dispossessed and their problems in both Egypt and Iran, while in the next chapter, "Everyday Cosmopolitanism," Bayat shows how generous and persistent the everyday interaction between Christians and Muslims is in the Cairene district, Shubra. Neither the source nor the argument is to be found in *Islam, Democracy, and Cosmopolitanism*, yet its thoughtful mixture of observation and analysis echoes some of the same insider resistance to violence, the persistence mingled with hope, that characterizes the best essays of *Iranian Identity and Cosmopolitanism*. Cosmopolitanism remains an ideal rather than a reality, a process not a product, in contemporary global exchanges. Its Iranian accents are at once multiply displayed and openly fractious. They relate to North America as well as to Iran. The hyphen endures.

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