

Revolution and Its Discontents: Political Thought and Reform in Iran. Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. 442. \$105.00 cloth. ISBN: 9781108426343

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Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi has written a must-read for anybody interested in the political and intellectual history of the Islamic Republic. *Revolution and Its Discontents* is beautifully written, theoretically solid, and offers a rich and engaging analysis of the intellectual reformist *milieu* in Iran between the early 1990s and the mid-2000s, through the protagonists' own voices and written production. This is a fundamental book to understand and appreciate the complexity and transnational dimension of Iran's intellectual history, well beyond the usual references to Shi'i Islam as the only or most powerful ideological framework of the Iranian revolutionary intelligentsia.

The author proposes a broader interpretation of Iran's intellectual encounter with post-Cold war political thought arguing that the emergence of a public discourse built on liberal theories during the 1990s—hailed as a positive opening and a progressive development by most of the international press and intellectual community—was instead a sign of profound philosophical and ontological pessimism. Skeptical of all instances of radical political change, Iranian reformists engaged in a politics of moderation and limitation, motivated by fundamental distrust in and pessimism towards political contention and liberation. They (ironically, perhaps) were the protagonists of the 1979 revolution, from which, Sadeghi-Boroujerdi shows, they learned an important lesson about what they considered to be the negative consequences of radical revolutionary politics: authoritarianism, violence, and the state's unaccountability to its own citizens. To capture this peculiar engagement with politics, the author relies on Judith N. Shklar's notion of "liberalism of fear" (p. 188), which has anti-utopianism at its core and which prioritizes avoiding state tyranny, instead of liberating the creative forces toward imagining a positive social model for inspirational (and, if necessary, radical) political action.

Revolution and Its Discontents is organized into seven chapters which engage the material conditions of intellectual production by the reformist political class. Sadeghi-Boroujerdi defines "political class" as the large agglomeration of politicians, clerics, intellectuals of various genres, journalists, and opinion-makers who operate in the country and have contributed to forge the public discourse of reform through their interventions; and "material conditions" as the shifts in the balances of power within such a class, which conditioned and still condition its political and discursive strategies as well as its positioning *vis-à-vis* state institutions and interfactional alliances.

Chapter 1 sets the theoretical background that the book builds upon. It guides the reader through two main issues: first, how to understand the written production of Iranian reformist intellectuals which, the author explains drawing from Quentin Skinner, are political acts and need therefore to be contextualized in the specific political and material circumstances that led to their creation, both long and short term; second, how to understand reform. Contrary to a common trend which sees reform as one stage in the Hegelian struggle of the Iranian people for freedom and democracy against an authoritarian central state, building on Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, and Antonio Gramsci, Sadeghi-Boroujerdi defines it as a paradigm of power with specific characteristics, or rationalities, articulating a program of public policies and a public discourse.

The second chapter delves into pre-revolutionary political interpretations of Shi'i Islam. Closely examining the thought of Navvab Safavi, Khomeini, and Shariati, who contributed fundamentally to the construction of Shi'ism as an idea with political traction, the author shows how the legacy of their ideas is still crucial to the intellectual production of reformists. In fact, reformists largely grapple with the same questions that engaged Khomeini and Shariati prior to the revolution, trying however to find a different answer to them. The chapter testifies to the author's commitment to do justice to the richness of the process of development of political Islam in Iran, which is far from being homogeneous and inherently Shi'i. References to Mawdudi and Qutb, Suharto and Tito, were crucial to Khomeini and Shariati to elaborate their revolutionary utopianism, providing the *élan* necessary to translate ideology into action.

Chapter 3 delves into the political genealogies of reform, analyzing how and why the intellectual trajectories considered in Chapter 2 combined in specific ways and eventually produced reformism. The book examines the historical dynamics at play in the early 1990s, when the electoral and political crisis of the Islamic left in Iran created the right conditions for its transformation into a reformist front. Sadeghi-Boroujerdi masterfully manages to illustrate the intricate genealogy of liberal-inspired reformist thought in Iran. Partly a reflection of transnational post-Cold war faith in liberalism and partly the result of the local crisis of revolutionary institutions after the Iran–Iraq war, Iranian reformism represented the indigenous response to the mounting challenges to revolutionary left-leaning ideology as forged by anti-imperialist movements in the so-called third world in the 1960s and the 1970s. In Iran, transnational and national dynamics joined to give legitimacy to reformist moderation which built upon the persuasion that technocratic governance and top-down reforms could redress the shortcomings of revolutionary ideological fervor.

Chapter 4 examines such a post-ideological turn of the reformist intellectuals more closely. Sadeghi-Boroujerdi explains how religious and reformist intellectuals wanted to distance themselves from ideology, which they understood as a negative form of obtuse political thought enshrining violence, but ended up adopting ideological rigidity in the effort of “de-ideologizing” politics. In line with the technocratic preferences of the governments in power during the 1990s, contemporary intellectuals worked to depoliticize the art of government, reducing it to a matter of procedures and technical knowledge, which should be led by experts. The chapter focuses on Abdolkarim Soroush, who played a fundamental role in introducing in Iran a negative interpretation of ideology along with the idea of procedural power, which is more concerned with how to enact procedures rather than dissecting the exercise of power and its consequences. Less well-known angles of Soroush’s thought are also considered, such as his understanding of gender and women’s rights. Chapter 5 expands on these issues offering a close analysis of Mohammad Mojtahed-Shabestari’s intellectual production, along with Soroush’s, and showing how their hostility towards ideology and the politicization of what they understood as technical and procedural governance resonated with the broader attempt to de-revolutionize and normalize the Islamic Republic during the 1990s.

Chapter 6 discusses how reformism emerged and coalesced into a consistent discourse and a more or less shared policy program after the election of Mohammad Khatami as president in 1997. The chapter shows how reformism had a common basis, which the author identifies in the concept of legality, but was heterogenous at the same time, presenting diverging ideas of what political reform and political development should entail. Consistently with the emphasis on heterogeneity, the seventh chapter focuses on the thought of Said Hajjarian, the political strategist of the reformist front. His ideas about political development, his take on ideology, and his more favorable approach to participation (as opposed to elite-led political change) are analyzed to offer evidence of the diversity within the reformist camp.

In conclusion, the book reassesses reform in Iran as an intellectual movement that aimed at normalizing the Islamic Republic by getting rid of its revolutionary fervor in favor of a cautious call for reform, resonating with other similar experiences in the so-called third world and in post-communist countries. Sadeghi-Boroujerdi’s majestic work examines the richness and depth of such a movement, which is the result of a stratified process of contention and disenchantment, insisting on the reformists’ politics as one of disillusion and fallibility. The author however acknowledges that reformism inspired hope and enthusiasm both among ordinary Iranians and lower-rank members of the reformist political class, and wrote that “Though in many respects an elite-led and carefully managed process, it [reformism] often harboured unpredictable results and reactions which the participants could hardly have foreseen,” adding that radical positions and ideas increasingly found themselves with a receptive audience (p. 377). While the analysis of such “unintended consequences” of reformism fall outside the parameters of this book, this remains an extremely relevant, accurate, and engaging work published on the intellectual history of Iran in the post-Cold war era, able to speak not only to scholars of modern Iran, but to all historians and social scientists interested in revolutionary and reformist movements.