

AFSHIN MATIN-ASGARI, *Both Eastern and Western: An Intellectual History of Iranian Modernity* Series Title (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). Pp. 370. \$32.99 paper. ISBN: 9781108449977

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“Neither Eastern/Neither Western/Islamic Republic” is one of the most recognized slogans from Iran’s 1979 revolution. In later years, this slogan (or the first two lines) was put to many uses, including as the rhetorical basis of Iran’s foreign policy and numerous titles of books that dealt with Iran. In his latest book *Both Eastern and Western: An Intellectual History of Iranian Modernity*, Afshin Matin-Asgari flips the Boolean operators of this phrase from the exclusionary to the inclusionary (from the “not” to the “and”) to tell a chronological narrative of “the intellectual construction of Iranian modernity during the 20th century, up to the end of the 1970s” (p. 1). The “end of the 1970s” for anyone even remotely aware of the 20th century is marked by of course the 1979 Iranian Revolution “whose intellectual and ideological continuity with the Pahlavi-era modernity” is one of the core arguments of *Both Eastern and Western* (p. 241).

To make an argument for modernity’s continuity, Matin-Asgari takes us through a clearly articulated history of Iranian political thought that covers some well-trodden territories such as discussions of Ahmad Kasravi, Jalal al-i Ahmad, Ruhollah Khomeini, and Ali Shariati, and some lesser-analyzed ones such as the “Berlin Circle” of the 1920s as reflected in the pages of *Iranshahr* and *Kaveh* (which Matin-Asgari, quoting Afshin Marashi’s scholarship, notes as the beginning of Iranian nationalism) and the Corbin-Nasr circle of the latter part of the 20th century. In emphasizing both “the Eastern and the Western” in his narrative, Matin-Asgari also hopes to create “new paths for revisionist historiography” by adding the influence of Ottoman, Turkish, Russian, and German thought to that of the “West” in his discussions of Iranian nationalism (primarily the first half of his book) and by emphasizing the importance of socialism, “particularly its ‘Eastern’ or Soviet form,” to the development of Iranian modernity (primarily in the second half of his book). This inclusion is at the heart of what he alternatively calls global, world, and comparative history.

Continuity vs. rupture and national vs. global are topics that have or are gaining more and more traction in studies of 20th century Iran in general and the decades around the revolution in particular. Matin-Asgari uses continuity to argue that it was the Shah’s attempts to neutralize discontent by blending together several intellectual strands of the period—authenticity, “radical revolution,” and Shi’ism to name a few he discusses throughout the book—that both made the 1979 revolution possible and formed the basis of the “new political authority” of the state it gave birth to (p. 242). The book’s conceptualization of “global” shifts throughout the book, though a common thread of its use seems to be interactions with “both East and West,” with the scale tipping from East to West and back again in various decades (and chapters).

Matin-Asgari begins his book by defining what he means by intellectual history and a lament for its demotion “to the margins of historiography”: “Intellectual history can be ‘the social history of ideas’ by locating intellectual discourses and movements within

broader social, political, and cultural contexts” (p. 1). There has been a steady tradition of intellectual history in Iranian Studies as the history of “individual thinkers” (exclusively men) and Matin-Asgari places himself in conversation with the works of, most notably, Ervand Abrahamian, Hamid Dabashi, Mehrzad Boroujerdi, Negin Nabavi, Mohammad Tavakoli-Taraghi, and Ali Mirsepassi. His book adds to previous canonization of texts and personalities that constitute 20th century Iran’s “intellectual history” through his welcome inclusion of “smaller texts” such as Bijan Jazani’s *Islamic Marxism or Marxist Islam* and his citation of scholars such as Dariush Ashuri and Mashallah Ajoudani who have written about Iranian modernity in Persian but may not be familiar to some readers as much as the former group of scholars.

Both Eastern and Western’s passionate call for the “return” of intellectual history left me wondering though whether this type of historical work has actually receded to the margins, as Matin-Asgari claims and if so, whether the marginalization of “great men’s” history would not be a necessary correction to its dominance in Iranian historiography until quite recently. Does the study of modern Iran need more disquisitions on the likes of Shariati and Khomeini? Did Jazani’s ideas on secularism and Shi’ism (as opposed to his superb persistence and charisma) warrant the place he is given in the historiography of the 1979 revolution? Would not our knowledge of modern Iran, from its grapplings with authenticity to its arranged *and* love “marriage” of Shi’ism and Marxism not benefit also (or more?) from the development of histories of non-great men and perhaps a smattering of great and not-so great women?

These questions arise precisely because Matin-Asgari’s approach to intellectual history while at times reinforcing the tried and true canon of previous scholarship, contains a surprising and welcome move in the last two chapters (6 and 7). There he brings in the Pahlavi state as an intellectual actor, highlighting “the regime’s active participation in anti-Western authenticity politics” (p. 190). The reader is thus treated to a narrative of the two decades before the revolution that weaves together a wide range of institutions and people such as the High Council of Culture and Arts, the Queen-initiated Center for the Intellectual Cultivation of Children and Adolescents, the Shah as “intellectual commander-in-chief,” in addition to the familiar figures of Ahmad Fardid and Ali Shariati with their philosophical musings on authenticity of the Iranian self.

In doing so, his book becomes more than the latest volume in a line of books that analyze and re-analyze a set number of texts. In its articulation of intellectual history as social history of ideas, it opens up multiple pathways for future scholarship to expand the canvas of what intellectual history can and should be in our understandings of modern Iran. Much like the ways in which Pahlavi state institutions, the monarch, and the court in this narrative are aptly analyzed as important elements in the formation of modern ideas, so perhaps future intellectual histories can investigate the ways in which Mihan Jazani, Huma Natiq, and Marziyeh Dabbagh, all of whom are women who played active roles in the intellectual circles discussed by Matin-Asgari, also came to shape the contours of 20th century thought in Iran. In other words, Matin-Asgari has shown that we can revive older (and dare one say less vibrant) topics if only we would expand our notions of what constitute “ideas” and whose ideas are worth seeking and writing about.