

Eternal Iran: too general and biased

Eternal Iran: una lectura demasiado general y parcial

Book review: Clawson, Patrick and Michael Rubin, *Eternal Iran. Continuity and Chaos*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, 224 pp.

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Eternal Iran is an ambitious, yet limited book. Though it claims to cover the last 2,500 years of Iranian history, most of the book is devoted to the decades following the Islamic Revolution. Its authors, policy advisors in several American lobbies, have a strong ideological bias. Their book is written from the point of view of policy-makers, not historians. Subsequently, they use History as a justification for their argument, omitting primary source material, misreading the secondary sources and not incorporating the latest academic developments. They mainly rely on secondary sources from Western academia, with no reference to Iranian authors unless some examples on post-revolutionary violence. Almost every chapter of *Eternal Iran* finishes with a reference to the strong nationalism prevailing in Iran and the widespread suspicion of foreigners, which seems to be the main argument of the book. The secondary argument is a model for modern Iranian history: strong rulers tend to modernize the country, which improves communications and allow the emergence of an opposition movement. The opposition revolts. They weaken or overthrow the regime, and a period of chaos begins. Weak governments lead to a perceived threat to the “territorial integrity” of the country, thus favoring the appearance of a strong charismatic leader who will modernize the country and defend it from foreign influence, and so on. This model applies to the Tobacco Boycott of 1896, The Constitutional Revolution of 1906, Reza Shah’s coup in 1923, Musaddiq’s interregnum until 1953 and the Revolution of 1979. This cyclical approach explains the book’s subtitle, “continuity and chaos”.

In the first chapter, the authors describe the geography of Iran and point out that external isolation has favored the development of a distinct Iranian civilization. The second

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chapter, six pages long, attempts to synthesize 2,400 years of Iranian history. For centuries, foreign cultures and innovations have passed through Iran and influenced the peoples of Iran, although they always “remained true to their intellectual canon”¹. Chapter three is focused on the Qajar dynasty (1786-1921). The Qajars are credited as the initiators of modernization, though the success and extent of that modernization is not assessed. Modernization, however, increased opposition and facilitated its activities. The Constitutional Revolution undermined Iranian economy, promoted chaos and facilitated the division of the country in spheres of influence and succeeding invasion during the First World War. Chapter four covers Reza Khan’s regime and the Constitutional interlude between 1941 and 1953. Both Reza Shah and Musaddiq ruled with authoritarian tools and strategies. The 1953 coup was an “inside job” of the military, scared of reforms and the dictatorial measures of the nationalist president. The fifth chapter narrates Muhammad Shah Pahlavi’s reign. Economic modernization was highly successful, but this was not accompanied by political modernization. The Shah’s megalomaniac measures during the seventies increased popular discontent and paved the way to revolution. The sixth chapter deals with the Islamic Revolution. The authors claim here that most of the opposition did not want revolutionary change but reform. Alas, some unfortunate coincidences and its intelligent exploitation by Khomeini accelerated the events. The clerics allied with the nationalist liberals and later betrayed them and established themselves as the only rulers of the country. The seventh chapter studies the “Second Islamic Republic”, this is, the cabinets and governments after Khomeini’s death and the end of the war against Iraq. The clerical elites have not been able to address the different challenges, and Iran is in need of reform. The last chapter summarizes Khatami’s international policy. Finally, the authors make predictions for the future of Iran: the internal contradictions and centers of power of the Islamic Republic may debilitate its strength and lead to a popular uprising against the regime.

There are relevant points of the book that deserve to be discussed. First, Clawson and Rubin claim that Iran has been a continuous cultural entity from the last three millennia. Islam is just one of the layers of a deeper Iranian identity, which dates back to the Achaemenid Empire. A strong nationalist spirit naturally characterizes Iranians, who have always been fearful of foreign intervention. This is a strong statement which is not satisfactorily argued. History is usually very complex and continuities are difficult to assess; the fact that in the twentieth century the modernizing regimes of Reza Shah and his son tried to trace their legitimacy to pre-Islamic History does not necessarily imply that a sense of “Iranness” prevailed in the plateau for centuries. If so, it would be interesting to assess who supported those proto-nationalist claims during the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth century and why. Iranian nationalism did not fully emerge until the twentieth century in an urban context. The authors rightly highlight the existence of repressed minorities, but they fail to contextualize the reasons for the repression

¹ Clawson, Patrick and Michael Rubin, *Eternal Iran. Continuity and Chaos*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 30.

and the relationship between these minorities and the State, and how do they fit in this theory of an uninterrupted identity.

Second, the authors read History following traditional, non innovative patterns: they focus on individual figures, "great men" of History; they subscribe the nineteenth-century rhetoric of Iranian "decline" (similar to the depiction of the Ottoman Empire as the "sick man of Europe")². This approach overlooks more subtle interpretations of Iranian past³ and, at the same time, shows the authors' ignorance of basic elements of Iranian pre-modern History: The Safavids and the Qajars were not the leaders of a centralized state, but rather unifying figures of a large number of constituencies, or interest groups. Through mediation and "divide and rule" strategies they were able to negotiate their hegemony in Iran, but they never exercised absolute power. The Shiism of the Safavids has not been successfully discussed. If they imported clerics from Lebanon⁴ it was not because of the lack of Shia priests in Iran, but because of the need of the Safavid shahs to find loyal religious figures to legitimize their rule⁵, which emerged from Sufi order and not the traditional clergy. The strong Turkish element during the Safavid and Qajar periods is omitted. While the authors concentrate on minorities in the latter half of the book, they do not explain how and why these minorities were established in Iran and how did the country become "persianized".

Third, the authors judge Iranian Modern History from a state-building perspective, considering accelerated modernization as a necessary and positive step. They fail to assess the impact of the modernization process on Iranian population. A strong sense of cultural alienation was prominent in the educated middle classes of Iran. Clawson and Rubin depict it as "anti-Western" feeling, but it had more to do with the effects of state-directed modernization on Iranian society than with Western interference⁶. The authors depict the modernization process (the so-called white revolution) under Muhammad Shah Pahlavi as a success. They rely on reports of the IMF which highlight the economic growth of Iran between 1953 and 1978, but they do not investigate how this growth impacted the population, how wealth was distributed under the Pahlavis, and how did the Shah spend the revenues. The opposition to the Shah during the seventies, they argue, was not motivated by hatred of the Shah and modernity but by the "desire for thoroughgoing reform"⁷. They seem to forget that the Shah illegalized political

² See name of chapter three, "Qajar Iran: decline and tumult" or statements like "from a historical perspective, Iran is but a shadow of its former self". Clawson, Patrick and Michael Rubin, *Eternal Iran... op. cit.*, p.67.

³ Bausani, Alessandro, "The Qajar period: an epoch of decadence?", in Edmond Bosworth and Carole Hillenbrand (coord.), *Qajar Iran. Political, Social and Cultural change, 1800-1925*, Costa Mesa, Mazda Publishers, 1992, pp. 255-260.

⁴ Clawson, Patrick and Michael Rubin, *Eternal Iran... op. cit.*, p. 23.

⁵ Newman, Andrew, "The Myth of the Clerical Migration to Safawid Iran: Arab Shiite Opposition to 'Alī al-Karakī and Safawid Shiism", in *Welt des Islams*, vol. 33, 1 (1993), pp. 66-112. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1571204>

⁶ Jalal Al-e Ahmad's *Gharbzadegi* (Westoxication), which the authors cite as a prime example of anti-Western literature, is a critical essay about the failures of Iranian society and its permeability to the West due its incapacity to present an alternative.

⁷ Clawson, Patrick and Michael Rubin, *Eternal Iran... op. cit.*, p. 93.

parties and imposed a single totalitarian party⁸. On the March 1979 referendum, the authors seem to imply that Bazargan was an advocate of a Republic while Khomeini wanted an Islamic Republic⁹. Actually, Bazargan pursued an Islamic Democratic Republic and Khomeini just an Islamic Republic¹⁰.

Even though the book can be useful for policy-makers or general audiences, as it presents a comprehensive synthesis of modern Iranian History, *Eternal Iran* is a disappointing book. First, it follows an old-fashioned historicist approach and embraces the theory of “great man in History”. Second, it mainly relies on the partisan lecture of secondary sources produced by Western Academia, ignoring some of the latter developments in Safavid and Qajar History. Third, it fails to assess the impact of modernization in Iranian self-perception. Fourth, the account of the events is biased and strongly ideological, as Manochehr Dorraj has rightly pointed out¹¹.

⁸ Abrahamian, Ervand, *A History of Modern Iran*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 151 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511984402>. This book is a more balanced and accurate account of the modern History of Iran.

⁹ Clawson, Patrick and Michael Rubin, *Eternal Iran... op. cit.*, p. 94.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 162-169.

¹¹ Dorraj, Manochehr, “Eternal Iran: Continuity and Chaos by Patrick Clawson; Michael Rubin (book review)”, in *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 38, 4 (2006), 626-627. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0020743806462486>