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Is Iran real? Reza Zia-Ebrahimi contributes to a thread of critique in Iranian Studies of Iranian intellectuals whose answer to that question was racial. Mehrzad Boroujerdi (1993) named that tendency among Iranian intellectuals “nativism”. In his analysis, nativism was a discourse. So far as it was a discourse, it was produced. Responding to a trend in Iranian Studies that saw Iran as an “imagined community”, Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet (1999) observed that Iranian spokespersons modified their accounts of the history and culture of Iran in response to territorial gains and losses. Kashani-Sabet suggested that there was a physical object – the earth – that shaped the contours of Iranian “frontier fictions”. Kashani-Sabet insisted on land. Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi (2001) insisted on language. “History with borders” had produced “homeless texts” that “Persianate” scholars in India had written; *dasatiri* texts were foundational to the movement that “envisaged” the pre-Islamic golden age. Ali M. Ansari (2011) voiced a strong normative response to nationalist thought by recalling the reception of the Enlightenment in Iran during the 1906 Constitutional Revolution. If Iran were to fulfill the promise of that Revolution, it would construct a “civic nationalism” that would resurrect the idea of an Iran for all Iranians.

Zia-Ebrahimi echoes Ansari in the conclusion of his monograph of the racist origins of Iranian nationalism, suggesting that the Constitutional Revolution might serve as a “useful guide” towards the creation of “a form of civic nationalism based on the voluntarist submission to a set of laws and institutions considered to be just by all the residents of Iran” (220). Civic nationalism is Zia-Ebrahimi’s response to “dislocative nationalism” whereby the Iranian nation is dislodged from its empirical reality as a majority-Muslim society – broadly – in the East” (5). Dislocative nationalism was a response to Iran’s traumatic discovery of the European “other” in the mid-nineteenth century when the Qajar State desired to become like the West.

Zia-Ebrahimi identifies “pragmatic modernism” and “dislocative nationalism” as two responses to the “dilemmas of modernity” that arose from Iran’s encounter with the West (40). “Dislocative nationalism” was drawn from “Iranocentric” histories innovated in Europe, notably by John Malcolm in *History of Persia* (1815) yet more decisively by Pedro Texeira in *Kings of Persia* (1610). Zia-Ebrahimi identifies Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi’s claim that Iran is where it is because of an “accident of geography” as paradigmatic of dislocative nationalism (7). The premise that Iran is where it is by accident is in a relation of non-correspondence
with “empirical reality” – that reality is not that Iran is a majority Aryan society but majority Muslim.

In chapter 2, Zia-Ebrahimi names Fath’ali Akhundzadeh and Mirza Aga Khan Kermani as the two foundational thinkers of dislocative nationalism, identifying their implicit and explicit biases towards Arabs as cause for Iran’s decline. After demonstrating their “racist prejudice”, he takes Fereydun Adamiyat to task as an apologist for their racialized accounts of Iran since he accepts in toto the Aryanist and anti-Arab racial prejudices foregrounding their histories. The issue Zia-Ebrahimi takes with Akhundzadeh and Kermani is that they are untruthful, that they are aware that they are, and that they intended to propagate their lies to create an ideology.

In chapter 3, Zia-Ebrahimi examines archaism, the first of three key components of dislocative nationalism. This insight is a variation on Boroujerdi’s account of “nativism” as what Sadik Jalal al-‘Azm (2000) saw as “Orientalism-in-reverse”, the weaponization of Orientalism by its object of the study. Akhundzadeh and Kermani were the first nostalgists for pre-Islamic Iran, its “golden age”. As Zia-Ebrahimi argues, the two thinkers drew on Iranocentric European histories to command authority while dressing their romantic nationalism in legibly indigenous garb. They did so to persuade Iranians that they were still supreme relative to a racial other: the Arab.

In chapter 4, Zia-Ebrahimi disabuses readers of the apparent historical evidence for “Arab-hatred”, the second of the three key components of dislocative nationalism. Dislocative nationalists attribute Iran’s decline to the “Arab invasion” and the advent of Islam. The feeling of “decline” was elicited by “the traumatic discovery of the European ‘other’”. Dislocative nationalists sublimated the reality of the geopolitical supremacy of Europe over Iran into the fantasy of the racial supremacy of Iranians over Arabs. Zia-Ebrahimi identifies Akhundzadeh and Kermani’s wish that that Iran were not impotent. The hatred of Arabs was not “rooted in a concrete reality of physical threat” but rather “takes place in the realm of the imagination” (100).

In chapter 5, Zia-Ebrahimi suggests that the third component of dislocative nationalism is the veneration of Europe. In the fantasy of Iranian supremacy over Arabs, Akhundzadeh and Kermani enjoyed the fulfillment of a wish for parity with Europe. So too, they suggested that the inverted world of post-Islamic Iran was a Europeanized pre-Islamic Iran. Like philosopher-kings, Akhundzadeh and Kermani wanted all unpatriotic poetry banished from Iran (130). In their desire for that past, they intended to annihilate the elements that constituted post-Islamic Iran. They were not adherents of the Enlightenment, however, but the anti-Enlightenment (138).

Zia-Ebrahimi echoes Ali Mirsepassi’s (2011) diagnosis of the counter-Enlightenment as the source of exclusionary politics in Iran and Benedict Anderson’s (2006) placement of the Pahlavi State in the “willed merger of national and dynastic
empire” in “official nationalisms”. Akhundzadeh was influenced by Ernest Renan’s claim that Islam is not compatible with Iran’s “racial nature” (138) and learned of the need for “despotic modernization” from Russia (141).

Akhundzadeh and Kermani were enthused about the pre-Islamic “Aryan” past, disdainful of the post-Islamic “Arab” present and saw Europe as a mirror that reflected Iran’s golden age. Zia-Ebrahimi argues that these components paved the way for Aryanism in the twentieth century. In chapter 6, he surveys literature that debunks the racial science behind the Aryan myth, then tracks the appearance of components of that myth in Iran’s early twentieth century, namely by Hasan Taqizadeh, Sadeq Rezaazadeh Shafaq, Hasan Pirniya, and Vahid Dastgerdi. These intellectuals translated the ancient term *arya* into a racial grammar and idiom “to dislodge Iran from its Islamic and Eastern reality and artificially force it into a European one” (166).

Afshin Marashi (2008) has shown how the form and content of nationalist discourse was spread: sites of discursive production were the motor of Iran’s nationalization. In chapter 7, Zia-Ebrahimi intends to demonstrate how the “ideology” Kermani and Akhundzadeh “developed largely in their armchairs” was “tested in the political arena” (178). Trouble is afoot. Zia-Ebrahimi acknowledges he may be succumbing to a “mythology of doctrines”, yet forges ahead (169). The first edition of Akhundzadeh’s *Maktubat* was published in 1979 and the first printed editions of Kermani’s *Seh Maktub* and *Sad Maktub* in 2005 and 2007 in Frankfurt and LA, respectively (170). He insists that their texts were disseminated but with no hard evidence, instead identifying moments when authors said or did things that resembled Akhundzadeh and Kermani’s words and deeds: in 1907 it was “highly likely that the editors [of the newspaper *Tamaddon*] had read the *Maktubat*” (171); Ali-Naqi Vaziri’s efforts to write a national anthem “echoes” Kermani’s desire for national poetry (182); Bozorg Alavi “directly borrowed” their ideas, despite his not citing or alluding to Akhunzadeh or Kermani (184); and these ideas appear “between the lines” of Sadeq Hedayat’s *Aniran* and his corpus more generally (187).

In chapter 8, Zia-Ebrahimi intends to show how Akhundzadeh and Kermani’s dislocative nationalism “triumphed”. Here again, he is not standing on firm ground. He asserts without evidence that “the most decisive of early Pahlavi policies were directly informed by the dislocative nationalism of Akhundzadeh and Kermani” (203). Muhammad Reza Shah continued Reza Shah’s project. His “preoccupation with history and narratives” was sign of “the influence of dislocative nationalism . . . typical of the thought of Akhundzadeh and Kermani” (207). Zia-Ebrahimi argues that in the 1960s and 1970s, Europe’s spell over Iran was broken, exemplified by Jalal Al-e Ahmad’s *Westoxification* [*Gharbzadegi*]. The 1979 Islamic Revolution “marked the pinnacle of dissatisfaction with dislocation
nationalism” (211). By the 1990s, the “opposition to the Islamic Republic” voiced ideas that echoed Akhundzadeh and Kermani’s “ideology,” especially in their caricature of “the dictatorship of the Mullahs” (212).

Zia-Ebrahimi suggests Akhundzadeh and Kermani acted as if they were philosopher-kings who crafted a noble lie with the intention of cultivating racial subjects; in Plato’s Republic, the philosopher-kings spun a tale about the relationship of land to life, convincing the children of the ideal city that their place in the world and value relative to others was an accident of geography. The philosopher-kings were authorized to rule because they understood the formal arrangement of the ideal city. In a contemporary reflection on that theme, Edward Said (1983) named Orientalism an “imaginative geography”, a land that is “theirs” that is not “ours”. Said spoke to the “synchronic essentialism” of Orientalist imperial agents. T. E. Lawrence was representative of this turn: the “white expert” who assumed the role of their organic intellectual; as “Oriental prophets”, imperial agents instrumentalized Orientalism as a source of authority. Zia-Ebrahimi argues that Akhundzadeh and Kermani took the standpoint of “Oriental prophets”. These thinkers transformed the art of the “noble lie” into a science of “mass ideology” and so doing, constituted the bedrock of “race and the politics of dislocation” in modern Iran. Zia-Ebrahimi then provides “close and impartial” research so to reveal that these two censors were “distorting” empirical reality by translating “ethnic stereotyping” into “racist tropes” (106).

But Akhundzadeh and Kermani did not engineer Iran’s racial landscape, nor was it instituted by an ideological state apparatus. That racial landscape does not exclusively reside in the psychological fantasies of intellectuals as “biases” and “prejudices”. Zia-Ebrahimi conceptualizes “racism” as psychogenic. But it is arguably sociogenic. Intellectual history is suited to shed light on psychogenesis. But it falls short of shedding light on the sociogenetic life of race – and of Iran. We see the former in intellectuals like Ahmad Kasravi and Taqi Arani registering “ethnic” difference in the 1946 Azarbaijan Crisis and managing it with their thoughts; the latter speaks to the crisis in practice when Azeris worked to break from Iran. Likewise, while Zia-Ebrahimi maintains that the Pahlavi State’s policy to forcibly settle “nomadic populations” in the 1920s “entirely followed from ideology”, he leaves unquestioned their relationship to Iran (194). That is to say, the Pahlavi State was responding to a social, not a natural, phenomenon. To that end, this book carves out a space for further research questions: What is the history of the concept of nezhad [race] in Iran? How have “races” emerged in Iran and how are they valued in relation to each other? Is Iran a “racial state?” Does Iran have a history of “racial capitalism?”

The method of ideology critique of this book presupposes that the method and its end, “empirical reality,” are apolitical. There are two issues here. First, Zia-Ebrahimi suggests that the issue with racism is that it is not empirical. Were Iran
majority Aryan or if “history as it really happened” attested to an “Arab invasion” would Akhundzadeh and Kermani be vindicated? Is the issue that they are lying or is it they are bad storytellers? Second, he yields to “empirical reality” as if it reveals that Iranians have “deep connections with neighboring peoples” (221).

Zia-Ebrahimi claims that these two thinkers took flight from “empirical reality”, but it is unclear why he maintains that taking flight from “empirical reality” – that is to say, dislocation – is undesirable. Dislocation was a conceptually prior moment to histories that centered Iran, but it is also a conceptually prior moment to the universal citizenship at the heart of “civic nationalism” that Zia-Ebrahimi sees potential for in the 1906 Constitutional Revolution. It is arguably dislocative to be taught that you are constituted as a juridical subject and citizen. So, Zia-Ebrahimi is not calling for a return to empirical reality; he is advancing what he sees as a more ethical noble lie. In that regard, the problem with Akhundzadeh and Kermani is not dislocation but location – it is in how we locate ourselves that we come to recognize who our neighbors are, and it is our capacity to negate reality that gives us occasion to return to a fictive sense of self and so a more capacious account of who our neighbors are independent of land and language. Zia-Ebrahimi suggests that the 1979 Revolution was a revolt against dislocative nationalism. Perhaps it was otherwise: the 1979 Revolution took dislocation to its ultimate end.

In all, Zia-Ebrahimi has written an impressively well-researched corrective to enduring presuppositions that foreground scholarly inquiry in Iranian Studies. Students of Iranian Studies at all stages of their education will benefit from and be provoked by this challenging book. Likewise, Zia-Ebrahimi presents a novel contribution to postcolonial studies. How might scholars of Critical Muslim Studies and decoloniality more broadly “provincialize Europe” without presuming the reality of a world – like Iran or Islam? Zia-Ebrahimi provincializes Iran and places it in the “Muslim-majority” world. Yet revolutions transform the world. In 1979, Iranians said no to the world. They deprovincialized Iran and provincialized it otherwise. To that end, future scholars might consider the unfolding dialectic between the provincialization of the world and its negative, the dislocative or deprovincializing act of ending a world to start anew.

Works Cited


