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To cite this article: Nina Farnia (2023) The Iranian-American Intelligentsia in U.S. Foreign Affairs: Ahistoricism, Anti-Structuralism, and the Production of Idealism, Middle East Critique, 32:2, 243-258, DOI: [10.1080/19436149.2023.2182053](https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2023.2182053)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2023.2182053>



Published online: 25 Feb 2023.



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The Iranian-American Intelligentsia in U.S. Foreign Affairs: Ahistoricism, Anti-Structuralism, and the Production of Idealism

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ABSTRACT *This article challenges the anti-structural and ahistorical turn in recent histories of the Iranian Revolution. Tracing the genealogy of this anti-structural turn to the publication of Foucault's writings on Iran, the author argues that the continued decline of US-Iran relations, coupled with hostility toward anti-imperialist scholarship in US academia, has created the conditions for an ahistoricism in US-based scholarship on Iran. This turn is further exacerbated by the lack of accessible archives to enable rigorous analyses of the Revolution. The article concludes by distinguishing between an intellectual, one who challenges the status quo to create a more just world, and a functionary, whose scholarly contributions are guided by the precepts of foundation funding and the State Department. Ultimately the article calls for a transformation in Iranian Studies toward radical intellectualism.*

KEY WORDS: *Anti-imperialism; anti-structuralism; archive; idealism; imperialism; intellectual; Iran; Iranian-Americans; Iranian Revolution*

The year 2019 marked the fortieth anniversary of the Iranian Revolution, an occasion that came to be surprisingly momentous for an emerging generation of Iranian-American academics, who created an opportunity out of the anniversary to advance new directions in Iranian Studies scholarship.¹ Two distinct areas of academic interest emerged in the years immediately prior to and following the anniversary. The first area of interest is the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, a body of scholarship marked by intellectual superficiality, since access to the IRGC is quite limited for US academics.² More concerning, however, is

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¹ I distinguish academics from intellectuals. Academics are those who most resemble careful functionaries that reproduce the liberal status quo. By contrast, intellectuals are characterized “by boldness, vulnerability, commitment, and risk.” For the intellectual, writing is not a vocation, but rather a means through which to change the world. See Edward Said (1994) *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Vintage Books), pp. 12–13.

² Narges Bajoghli's recent publication is the most significant example, see Bajoghli (2019) *Iran Reframed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press). *Iran Reframed* is a short cultural analysis of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard's media arm and argues that IRGC members and the Iranian public are not as committed to the principles of the Iranian Revolution as the Islamic Republic would argue. In effect, Bajoghli creates a fantasy of an unstable Islamic Republic for a western audience to consume. I call such texts a “memo to the state,” documents read by US intelligence officials to aid them in undermining Iranian sovereignty.

its alleged utility, because the most obvious audience for such a scholarship would be the US State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the broader US national security state. The second area of scholarship, which I interrogate here, involves studies of the Iranian Revolution and the social movements that organized and drove the Revolution. This work is certainly more interesting and rigorous than the former, building upon a long history of scholarship on the Revolution, but it largely misses the mark vis-à-vis the world historical significance of the Revolution. Specifically, much of this scholarship lacks an analysis of the international power relations that led to the Revolution and continue to determine the fate of Iran and Iranians, reflecting an anti-structuralist turn in Iranian Studies.

In this article, I expose the silencing of US-led imperialism in contemporary historiographies of Iran and the Iranian Revolution, resulting in an ahistorical and anti-structural turn in emerging Iranian studies scholarship. While anti-imperialism was one of the great unifying features guiding the organizations and political parties involved in the Revolution, and US-led imperialism continues to be the greatest threat to the lives and livelihoods of Iranians, recent US-based histories of Iran and the Revolution avoid the matter of US-led imperialism altogether. Not surprisingly, those who refuse to mention imperialism live in its belly, where anti-imperialist intellectual activity often is punished or at best ignored. There is nothing to gain from being an anti-imperialist in an empire. Thus, Foucault and Foucauldian thinking have come to guide much of the burgeoning historiography on Iran, a trend that is neither accidental nor historical.³

First, I describe the rise of anti-structuralism in emerging Iranian-American historiography and its causes and effects. In the second section, I address the dangers of idealism in political and historiographical analysis. I conclude with a discussion of the unthinkability of Iran in Western academia and a call for radical intellectualism.

Anti-Structuralism as Ahistoricism

Much has been written about Michel Foucault's brief stay in Iran immediately prior to the Revolution.⁴ Foucault's observations were neither particularly interesting, well researched, nor entirely accurate. They were basic observations of a learned European influenced deeply by Orientalism. Had an unknown European intellectual written about the Revolution in a manner similar to Foucault, there would have been little attention given to what was said. Because of Foucault's fame, however, his comments have garnered a great deal of attention in Western academia.

Not surprisingly, the focus on Foucault and his reading of the Revolution has been followed by an anti-structural trend within the study of the Revolution itself. This trend has ahistorical tendencies in many respects, due to limited access to archives. In 1995, Charles Kurzman commented that the impressive output of scholarship on the Revolution 'does not reflect a similarly copious wealth of source materials. In fact, the

³ See generally Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson (2005) *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press). This was the first book to publish comprehensively Foucault's writings on the Revolution and situate him as an interlocutor within the historiography of Iran.

⁴ Ibid. See also Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi (2018) *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution after the Enlightenment* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press); Ali Mirsepassi (2017) *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought: The Life and Thought of Ahmad Fardid* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

study of the Iranian revolutionary movement is largely, one might argue, sound and fury, a lot of grand theorizing lacking a solid empirical basis'.⁵

Over twenty years have passed since Kurzman made this observation, and yet little has changed. Access to revolutionary archives in Iran is limited, and little to nothing has been declassified in the United States and Europe, both of which played key roles in the events leading up to the Revolution and its aftermath. In fact, several years ago I went to the State Department archives in Maryland to conduct research on US activities in Iran before the Revolution and after. Many of the documents that were available were highly redacted, and those that were available without redactions were too few to lend themselves to a rigorous historical analysis. In the absence of archives or data, most discerning scholars would decide to stop, to turn to other interesting topics with available archives and data. Yet, this has not been the case with many Iranian-American academics who study the Revolution. They have kept on, writing and rewriting about the same topic, critiquing what has been previously said, and devolving ever deeper into anti-structural, ahistorical, discursive analyses that rehash the same arguments and debates about the Revolution.

Take, for example, Naghmeh Sohrabi's 2018 article on the historiography of the Iranian Revolution, wherein she seeks to highlight the often marginalized, ignored, or still unwritten aspects of the history.⁶ Hers is a noble cause, and with the right access to archives, it would certainly be an interesting one as well. She contrasts the Iranian historiography with the Euro-American historiography, and contends that the Euro-American historians continue to be occupied by the same questions—the extent to which the Revolution was hijacked, whether it was a failed Revolution, and who were the major forces that organized it. The positionality of other academics who wrote on the Revolution is a topic to which she gives considerable attention, since most earlier analyses of the Revolution were written by individuals who actually participated in or were deeply impacted by its unfolding. Many well-respected Iranian scholars in the US were members of the left or liberal nationalist formations, or otherwise supported the Revolution and enthusiastically participated in demonstrations and other events. As Sohrabi argues, some of these scholars remained in the United States because of the Iran-Iraq War or post-revolutionary purges of opposition groups. Their relationship to the Revolution is thus historically contingent—at first deeply intimate and proximate, then mediated by an enforced distance from post-revolutionary Iran.

Ultimately, Sohrabi concludes that a writing of the Revolution's history 'from a non-normative, non-positivist, non-teleological perspective' could reposition it as one of 'the last great successful revolutions of the post-colonial world and in its post-revolutionary shape, as one of the first to answer the questions and anxieties of its global south ethos in an Islamic form'.⁷ This is a conclusion with which I agree and applaud, but without adequate archival access what more can be said beyond the obvious? Her critique of the proximity of earlier scholars is especially troubling in this respect, since at least those individuals had personal experiences and observations about which to

⁵ Charles Kurzman (1995) *Historiography of the Iranian Revolutionary Movement, 1977-79*, *Iranian Studies*, 28(1-2), p. 25.

⁶ Naghmeh Sohrabi (2018) 'The "Problem Space" of the Historiography of the 1979 Iranian Revolution', *History Compass* 16(11), pp. 6-8.

⁷ *Ibid.*

write, from which to decipher patterns and ruptures.⁸ In many respects, Sohrabi's call mirrors earlier calls by white Eurocentric historians for objectivity in history, but does so without sufficient access to archives.⁹ In this way, Sohrabi weaponizes objectivity against oral history specifically.

Global 1979: Geographies and Histories of the Iranian Revolution, edited by Arang Keshavarzian and Ali Mirsepassi is another revealing example, and similarly begins with the matter of positionality. 'The men and women that made the 1979 Iranian Revolution were of their time and place As researchers, we face a similar predicament of spatial and temporal specificity. Yet, neither time nor space are isolated; they become meaningful analytical categories when 'made' in relation to larger social processes interconnecting times and places'.¹⁰ This discussion of positionality would be irrelevant if there were copious archives and data to exhume. But in the absence of archives, the specter of positionality and proximity shapes much of the 'emergent' scholarship on the Revolution in what feels both redundant and superficial. In other words, because there are few archives to access, the discussion of the Revolution has now evolved into the question of authority, a debate over who has the authority to speak.

Of course, as an edited volume, *Global 1979* is much richer than the immediate concerns raised in the first few pages. Keshavarzian and Mirsepassi both write early chapters attempting to define the concept of 'the global', challenging the teleological frames of existing revolutionary history with a special focus on contingency. While the historical turn toward contingency is certainly welcome, it is sometimes accompanied by an inadequate analysis of power. For example, Mirsepassi critiques a short 1979 article written by Ervand Abrahamian, a preeminent Marxist Iranian-American historian who is known for his rigorous use of the archive, stating that Abrahamian's earlier arguments are too broad to explain actual events in Iran. Instead, Mirsepassi calls for an examination of 'the multiple contingent facets of lifeworlds'.¹¹ This, he says, is the emergent approach to understanding the Iranian Revolution, an approach reflected by the contributions in the volume. The concept of lifeworlds is one which evokes multiple scales of living and being, but lacks either an implicit or explicit inquiry into international power relations that shape those lifeworlds. In this sense, it is both anti-structural and ahistorical.

Keshavarzian argues that 'globalizing the Iranian Revolution is an enterprise to recover the histories of the revolution non-teleologically'.¹² Citing Michel-Rolph Trouillot on the unthinkability of the Haitian Revolution in academic discourse, Keshavarzian says that the chapters in the volume coalesce around arguments about how the Iranian Revolution was in fact thinkable and planned.¹³ This is undoubtedly

⁸ Ibid, pp. 2-3.

⁹ Richard Evans (2000) *In Defense of History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company).

¹⁰ Arang Keshavarzian and Ali Mirsepassi (2021) Introduction, in Arang Keshavarzian and Ali Mirsepassi, eds., *Global 1979: Geographies and Histories of the Iranian Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 3.

¹¹ Ali Mirsepassi (2021) A Quiet Revolution: In the Shadow of the Cold War, in Arang Keshavarzian and Ali Mirsepassi, eds., *Global 1979: Geographies and Histories of the Iranian Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 27-28.

¹² Arang Keshavarzian (2021) Globalizing the Iranian Revolution: A Multiscalar History, in Arang Keshavarzian and Ali Mirsepassi, eds., *Global 1979: Geographies and Histories of the Iranian Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 38.

¹³ Ibid, p. 39.

true, yet it also reflects a misreading of Trouillot, who argues that power precedes the narrative through the making of the archive.¹⁴ That is, the presences or absences in the archive ‘are neither neutral nor natural. They are created’.¹⁵ Silence is an active process that entails both erasure and occlusion. What renders the Haitian Revolution unthinkable is its silencing through the Eurocentric archive, which is precisely the same problem facing studies of the Iranian Revolution. The Iranian Revolution was organized and planned, and its participants are alive, they can speak of it with eloquence and authority, and they have done so, but to the degree that it is absent from the historical archive through secrecy, redaction, and classification, it is indeed unthinkable. Thus, as archives recede from historical view, and the accounts of scholars proximate to the Revolution are dismissed as biased or subjective, what remains are immaterial analyses that are largely discursive. Such analyses may be interesting, but lack a sufficient engagement with both power and history.

Global history necessarily requires an analysis of global systems of power, but Keshavarzian dismisses such an analysis ‘as a ready-made stage’ composed of concepts like ‘imperialism, global hegemony, the world capitalist system, or dependent development’.¹⁶ Reading Keshavarzian, one might think that the age of imperialism is over, that Iran exists on some sort of symbolic island untouched by global systems of power. The irony is that the opposite could not be truer. Iran is suffering because it is subject to one of the most sweeping and brutal international sanctions regimes in modern history.¹⁷ With over one-third of the world, the majority of which is in the Global South, subject to economic sanctions, international power relations may now be as acute as they were during the era of formal colonialism.¹⁸ However, the editors of *Global 1979* argue that such systems of power are not as encompassing as the global economy suggests. Their argument emerges out of a refusal to contend with structures of power beyond those exerted by the Islamic Republic, perhaps the greatest problem of this volume, which really should be called ‘How 1979 Produced the Islamic Republic’. Thus, there is very little that is actually global about the contributions to the volume, either in circuitry or analysis.

One chapter, by Maryam Alemzadeh, discusses the guerilla training that members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC) participated in with leftists throughout the world, and traces the transformation of the IRGC into ‘a state-sponsored entity’.¹⁹

¹⁴ Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2005) *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press), pp. 1-30.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 48. Ali Mirsepassi (2021) A Quiet Revolution: In the Shadow of the Cold War, in Arang Keshavarzian and Ali Mirsepassi, eds., *Global 1979: Geographies and Histories of the Iranian Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 27-28.

Arang Keshavarzian (2021) Globalizing the Iranian Revolution: A Multiscalar History, in Arang Keshavarzian and Ali Mirsepassi, eds., *Global 1979: Geographies and Histories of the Iranian Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 38.

Ibid, p. 39.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2005) *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press), pp. 1-30.

¹⁶ Keshavarzian, “Globalizing the Iranian Revolution,” p. 44.

¹⁷ For a comprehensive review of the sanctions imposed on Iran, see US Department of Treasury, *Iran Sanctions*, <https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/financial-sanctions/sanctions-programs-and-country-information/iran-sanctions>. Accessed on March 15, 2022.

¹⁸ Eva Nanopoulos (2020) *The Juridification of Individual Sanctions and the Politics of EU Law* (London: Hart Publishing).

¹⁹ Maryam Alemzadeh (2021) Revolutionaries for Life: The IRGC and the Global Guerilla Movement, in Arang Keshavarzian and Ali Mirsepassi, eds., *Global 1979: Geographies and Histories of the Iranian Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 178-209.

Another chapter by Golnar Nikpour calls the Islamic Republic of Iran one of the most heavily carceral states in the world.²⁰ In a chapter written by Arash Davari and Naghmeh Sohrabi, the authors reconstruct the death of the famous Iranian wrestler Gholamreza Takhti as Iran's participation in the 1968 moment, a moment that was exceedingly European, and that was *inspired by* rebellions and revolutions in the Third World, not the reverse as Davari and Sohrabi suggest. Rather than situate the response to the death of Takhti within the long anti-colonial lineage of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, something that Abrahamian has done with the protests leading up to the election of Prime Minister Mossadegh, Davari and Sohrabi look to Europe as their primary interlocutor.

There is a way in which claims to globalism and contingency in *Global 1979* function to disguise methodological nationalism, reflecting and reinforcing 'the identification that many scholars maintain with their own nation-states'.²¹ In this context, a dualistic methodological nationalism aligns the authors with US interests and challenges to the Islamic Republic, while reflecting the authors status as Iranian exiles located in the west, with a nationalist hermeneutic that objectifies the Islamic Republic. Although Sohrabi, Keshavarzian, and Mirsepassi claim to be asking new questions and offering new answers, this emergent scholarship reifies merely the enduring controversies about the Revolution and the age-old debate about the origins and content of the Islamic Republic, questions which occupy Iranian dinner tables and scholarly discussions alike. The reason answers to these questions remain elusive is not because scholars lack sufficient objectivity, sensitivity to nuance and contingency, or have an inaccurate understanding of the global. The reason is the archive. The archive is especially fraught when it involves nations that have challenged western imperialism or colonialism, nations like Haiti or Iran. In such contexts, archival silence is an intentional process that governs its production so as to narrow the contours of knowledge production on revolutionary anti-imperialist and anti-colonial activities, particularly when the revolutionary oppressed and the subordinated win against the West. Knowledge has a political economy unto itself, an economy I explore in the next section.

The Production of Idealism

In 'Representations of the Intellectual', Edward Said presents a political economy of knowledge production in the West. According to Said, academic institutions:

²⁰ Golnar Nikpour (2021) The Criminal is the Patient, the Prison Will Be the Cure: Building the Carceral Imagination in Pahlavi Iran, in Arang Keshavarzian and Ali Mirsepassi, eds., *Global 1979: Geographies and Histories of the Iranian Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 292-327.

²¹ For discussions of methodological nationalism, see Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller (2003) 'Methodological Nationalism, the Social Sciences, and the Study of Migration,' in *International Migration Review* 37(3), pp. 576-610. The term was coined by Herminio Martins (1974) Time and Theory in Sociology, in John Rex, ed., *Approaches to Sociology: An Introduction to Major Trends in British Sociology* (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul.), pp. 246-294. See also Anthony D. Smith (1983) Nationalism and Social Theory, *British Journal of Sociology* 34(1), pp. 19-38; and Matteo Capasso (2020) The war and the economy: the gradual destruction of Libya, *Review of African Political Economy* 47(166), pp. 545-567.

[A]ll employ academic experts to carry out research and study programs that further commercial as well as political agendas. This of course is part of what is considered normal behavior in a free market system, and occurs throughout Europe and the Far East as well. There are grants and fellowships to be had from think tanks, plus sabbatical leaves and publishing subventions, as well as professional advancement and recognition.²²

Today, many of the university-based initiatives advancing the study of Iran, are tied to these funding sources in one way or another. There are indeed some progressive funding sources that are supporting critical and innovative work on Iranian history or the Iranian diaspora, but that is not the norm. Much of the current academic work produced on Iran is, what I call, a memo for the State Department. New books and articles appear every month that provide troves of information on Iranian culture, society, and politics, information that is generally uninteresting to a US academic audience, unless one is a CIA analyst seeking to manufacture intelligence out of the most banal aspects of life and living. We can be certain that the State Department is reading these books and articles closely and using that information to produce intelligence, even if that is not the stated goal or intended audience of the author.

Unfortunately, as the Biden Administration advances aggressively its pressure campaign against Iran, members of the Iranian-American intelligentsia have remained largely silent. Like their Cuban-American counterparts, they often serve as local informants and the first line of internal defense against critical thinking or even mildly progressive action confronting imperialist hegemony. They do not condemn the policies of US imperialism, which are quite literally starving the people of Iran, depriving them of vital medications and basic food staples, and threatening their very existence. These individuals have reserved their attacks for what they call the 'vulgar left'.²³ In short, they assert themselves only when the left attempts to organize and write against US-led imperialism in Iran and West Asia more broadly. We know this playbook well. The same dynamic continues with Venezuela. The informants find it offensive to advocate for the sovereignty of Iran, but not as offensive to perpetuate the policy of regime change targeting any country in the Global South that exits the US sphere of influence.

In their attacks, members of the intelligentsia make three primary arguments. They often begin by arguing that the people in Iran want regime change. There are several problems with this argument. First, it is impossible to ascertain from the United States whether the people of Iran actually want 'regime change'. If we were to play the numbers game, notwithstanding its limitations, even the most recent protests over the last few years in Iran were limited at most to hundreds of thousands, if that, whereas the funeral procession for slain general Qassem Soleimani included millions of people in each city where it occurred—Ahvaz, Mashhad, Kerman and Tehran. This

²² Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, p. 81.

²³ Peter Kenyon (2020) US Sanctions Against Iran Play A Role In Scarcity of Medication. *National Public Radio* (December 1). Available online at: <https://www.npr.org/2020/12/01/940418725/u-s-sanctions-against-iran-play-a-role-in-scarcity-of-medication>, accessed March 15, 2022. Jonathan Saul, Ana, Mano, Joori Roh (2020) Iran Struggles to Buy Food in a World Wary of Touching its Money. *Reuters* (July 29). Available online at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-food-imports-insight/iran-struggles-to-buy-food-in-a-world-wary-of-touching-its-money-idUSKCN24V0NO>, accessed March 15, 2022.

means that many people are willing to march in the streets in support of a government official. But playing the protest numbers game has many problems, as protests are not always and necessarily an accurate reflection of the public as a whole. Neither are the slogans raised at protests.

The second claim is that the Islamic Republic is authoritarian.²⁴ The people of Iran, like virtually every other society in the world, have vibrant political debates that play out in the halls of academia, newspapers and magazines, the Parliament, the cafes and restaurants, and sometimes spill out into the streets.²⁵ This is how organic and inorganic politics are practiced in most societies throughout the world, not unlike the political practices we see in the United States.²⁶ One thing that virtually all nation-states share in common, irrespective of ideology or form of governance, is that they alone define the terms of legitimate protest and seek to undermine what they define as illegitimate protest. Recall the ‘time-place-manner restrictions’ set by the Supreme Court for US protests, the murders of Black Panther Party leaders, the continued imprisonment of indigenous, Black and Latinx activists, the recent prosecutions of Black Lives Matter protesters following the 2020 uprisings.²⁷ This list is by no means exhaustive, and while it reflects the varying degrees of political repression in the United States, these practices are not limited to the US, nor to Iran for that matter. So

²⁴ For a discussion of how terms like authoritarianism are deployed to obscure US-led imperialism, a process Matteo Capasso calls a conceptual sub-text that repackages anti-imperialist nations in regime-type categories, see Matteo Capasso (2021) *IR, Imperialism, and the Global South: From Libya to Venezuela*, *Politics*, pp. 1-16.

²⁵ Iran has dozens of daily newspapers and magazines. Shahram Rafizadeh and Mahsa Alimardani (2013) *The Political Affiliations of Iranian Newspapers*. *Iran Media Program* (May). Available online at: <https://repository.upenn.edu/iranmediaprogram/5>, accessed on March 15, 2022. It also has a vibrant café culture. Siavash Saadlou (2018) *The Cult of Coffee Shops in Iran: Inside a Parallel Universe*. *Medium* (November 5). Available online at: <https://medium.com/@siavash.saadlou/the-cult-of-coffee-shops-in-iran-life-inside-a-parallel-universe-c4fd43567ccf>, last visited March 15, 2022.

²⁶ Justin Hansford (2018) *The First Amendment Freedom of Assembly as a Racial Project*, *Yale Law Journal Forum* 127, pp. 685-697. Mary L. Dudziak (2000) *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press). Theodore Kornweible, Jr. (1998) *“Seeing Red”: Federal Campaigns Against Black Militancy, 1919-1925* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press). Sunaina Maira (2012) *Gender, terror, and counter-terrorism: Muslim American Youth Activism and Disappeared Rights* *Gender, National Security, and Counter-Terrorism: Human Rights Perspectives*, edited by Margaret L. Satterthwaite and Jayne C. Huckerby (London and New York: Routledge), pp. 60-81. Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz (2014) *An Indigenous People’s History of the United States* (New York City: Beacon Press). Moon Ho Jung (2022) *Menace to Empire: Anticolonial Solidarities and the Transpacific Origins of the US Security State* (Oakland: University of California Press). Rios, V. M., & Rodriguez, C. (2013). *Incarcerable Subjects: Working-Class Black and Latino Male Youth in Two California Cities*. In V. Amed & N. Dyck (Eds.) *Young Men in Uncertain Times* (New York: Berghahn Books), pp. 241-263.

²⁷ For a review of time-place-manner restrictions, see Geoffrey R. Stone (Winter 1983) *Content Regulation and the First Amendment*, *William and Mary Law Review* 25(2), pp. 189-252. For the treatment of Black, indigenous, and Latinx leaders, see Joshua Bloom and Waldo Martin (2016) *Black Against Empire* (Oakland: UC Press). Leonard Peltier (1999) *Prison Writings: My Life is My Sundance* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin). Aaron Miguel Cantu (2020) *Federal Prosecutors Engaged in Unprecedented Push to Jail Protesters Before Trial*. *The Intercept* (October 20). Available online at: <https://theintercept.com/2020/10/30/federal-prosecutors-protests-pretrial-detention/>, last visited on March 15, 2022. See, <https://www.nlg.org/tell-the-biden-administration-dropthecharges-against-blm-protesters/>. See also, National Lawyers Guild (2020) *Tell the Biden Administration to Drop the Charges Against BLM Protesters*. National Lawyers Guild (April 6). Available online at: <https://www.nlg.org/tell-the-biden-administration-dropthecharges-against-blm-protesters/>, last visited on March 15, 2022. The Biden Administration did not respond to the petition and did not drop any charges.

why is the US called a liberal democracy, whereas Iran is called authoritarian? The answer has more to do with ideology than with rights.²⁸

The third claim, arguably the most frustrating one, is that any critique of US-led imperialism must be accompanied by a condemnation of the Islamic Republic. Practically speaking, this claim is very problematic, almost ridiculous. How can one organize a protest or write a petition challenging the policies of both nations? While the US is the greatest purveyor of violence in the modern world, Iran is one of its greatest victims. This elision of the power relations between the two nations, and endemic to imperialism, reflects the ahistorical and anti-structural tendencies reflected in the scholarship. To condemn the Islamic Republic from inside the belly of the beast, or worse, to call for regime change, reflects complicity with the beast itself, US-led imperialism.²⁹ It does so by creating the conditions for interest convergence between one's own opportunistic calls and the desires of the US policy apparatus, leading inevitably to cooptation by the powers of the latter.

Such illogical claims reflect a crisis within the Iranian-American intelligentsia, at once political, intellectual, and moral, for while the Iranian economy, and hence its people, are suffering under the weight of US-led imperialism, a certain sector of the intelligentsia, both Iranians and otherwise, condemn its failures and opportunistically call for its destruction. Notably, there does not seem to be consensus among the Iranian people regarding the Islamic Republic or relations with the US.³⁰ Even after the US assassinated a high ranking Iranian government official, contravening both US constitutional law and international law, there were members of the Iranian American intelligentsia who claimed that the Islamic Republic was engulfed by a crisis of legitimacy.³¹ When Iran was seemingly most vulnerable, members of the intelligentsia did not call for its sovereignty, but rather sought to undermine the Islamic Republic even further.

In this regard, quite illustrative is *Jadaliyya's* Iran page, which covered the January 2020 funeral procession of Major-General Qassem Soleimani, in which millions marched through Ahvaz, Kerman, Tehran and other cities to mourn him and to protest his assassination by a US drone strike while he was on an official visit to Iraq. Several months later, following the natural death of Mohammad Reza Shajarian, a popular composer and singer of traditional Iranian music, *Jadaliyya* published (November 22, 2020) an article by Peyman Eshaghi entitled 'Mourners in Common: Qassem Soleimani, Mohammad Reza Shajarian, and the 'Pattern' of Iranian Culture'.³² The editors of the page were attacked for publishing an article that was allegedly pro-

²⁸ Capasso, IR, Imperialism, and the Global South, pp. 3-6.

²⁹ In this regard, please refer to the opening article of this Special Issue, Matteo Capasso and Ali Kadri (2023) The Imperialist Question in the Middle East and North Africa: Towards a Sociological Approach, *Middle East Critique* 32(3).

³⁰ For comprehensive surveys of the Iranian public on matters such as US relations, see Nancy Gallagher, Ebrahim Mohseni, Clay Ramsay (2017) Iranian Attitudes on Iranian-US Relations in the Trump Era. *Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland* (January 25). Available online at: <https://cissm.umd.edu/research-impact/publications/iranian-attitudes-iranian-us-relations-trump-era>, Accessed March 15, 2022.

³¹ Nick Schiffrin (2020) What Killing of Top Iranian General Means for Nuclear Deal and the US in the Middle East: Interview with Narges Bajoghli and Ryan Crocker. *PBS Newshour* (January 6). Available online at: <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/what-killing-of-top-iranian-general-means-for-nuclear-deal-and-the-u-s-in-middle-east>. Accessed March 15, 2022.

³² *Jadaliyya Iran Page* Editors (2020) A Note from the Iran Page Editors Concerning "Mourners in Common." *Jadaliyya Iran Page* (November 24). Available online at: <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/42072>. Accessed January 5, 2022.

regime, and took it down promptly. They not only censored the author, but also themselves and their own previous decision. Senior editors of *Jadaliyya* claimed that the article never should have been published and deployed intellectual rigor, or lack thereof, in defense of their decision. However, the attacks on the Iran page were all over Twitter, available for anyone to see, so *Jadaliyya*'s audience quickly realized that these retrospective claims of academic rigor obscured the magazine's anti-Islamic secularism and anti-Iranian sectarianism.

Members of the Iranian opposition have made the secularist, sectarian, regime-change argument for decades, namely the royalists and the Mujaheddin. However, these are right wing forces whose intentions are quite clear. When members of the intelligentsia make the same calls as the far right, but shroud their calls with fantastical claims of freedom from all forms of power, including both imperialism and state repression, they exhibit a dissociative reflex that is endemic to exiled academics, a rejection of reality as it is, replaced by a view of the world as they want to see it or as it once was. Marx called this idealism, and he considered it one of the most dangerous forces in history:

The main defect of all hitherto-existing materialism—that of Feuerbach included—is that the Object, actuality, sensuousness, are conceived only in the form of the object, or of contemplation, but not as human sensuous activity, practice, not subjectively. Hence it happened that the active side, in opposition to materialism, was developed by idealism — but only abstractly, since, of course, idealism does not know real, sensuous activity as such.³³

Idealism is characterized by a failure to grasp the material, to view it as historically meaningful or politically forceful. In his lecture on 'Revolution in the Third World', Eqbal Ahmad said '[t]he function of good intellectual work is to apprehend reality in order to change it'. He was of course paraphrasing Marx, who said that 'the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways. The point is to change it'.³⁴ But the world is impossible to change if we fail to grasp it for what it is—the destruction US-led imperialism has wrought, the ways in which peoples' and nations' respond to it. Idealism among the Iranian-American intelligentsia reflects a dissociative rejection of reality stemming in part from nostalgia, as scholars have called it.³⁵ However, this is a generous view that does not account for the dangers endemic to idealism and nostalgia when they are deployed as either political or historical force or epistemologies.

To support the above claims, members of the Iranian-American intelligentsia use academic buzzwords like 'nuance' and 'specificity', words that the editors of *Jadaliyya* deployed against Eshaghi's article on the Soleimani and Shajarian mourners. The secularists usually call for nuance when discussing the Islamic Republic because it is not like Venezuela or Bolivia. There are others who deploy this term quite strategically as well. In fact, the term nuance is lobbed from so many different directions that it has come to be void of any real meaning. While there is nothing wrong with being nuanced in the true meaning of the term, having attention to historical and political contingencies, facts

³³ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1978) Theses on Feuerbach, in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *Marx-Engels Reader* (London: W.W. Norton), p. 143.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 146.

³⁵ Hamid Naficy (2011) The Poetics and Practice of Iranian Nostalgia in Exile, *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1(3), pp. 285-302.

are important. As a legal scholar, I support and believe in the importance of evidence. The issue here is the displacement of liberationist calls by calls for specificity and nuance. In essence, the call for nuance has a political economy of its own, operating as a euphemism for anti/anti-imperialism. The deployment of the term is often strategic, with an internal logic that belies its danger. According to Said, this strategy is not new.

The purpose of the intellectual's activity is to advance human freedom and knowledge. This is still true, I believe, despite the often-repeated charge that 'grand narratives of emancipation and enlightenment,' as the contemporary French philosopher Lyotard calls such heroic ambitions associated with the previous 'modern' age, are pronounced as no longer having any currency in the era of postmodernism. According to this view, grand narratives have been replaced by local situations and language games; postmodern intellectuals now prize competence, not universal values like truth or freedom. I've always thought that Lyotard and his followers are admitting their own lazy incapacities, perhaps even indifference, rather than giving a correct assessment of what remains for the intellectual a truly vast array of opportunities despite postmodernism.³⁶

The postmodern movement's strategic deployment of nuance and specificity has become so normalized in both the academy and activist circles that many do not even know that it was once hotly debated by Said and others. There is also great hypocrisy in the critique of anti-imperialism, for it is bereft of rigorous analysis or nuance, and reflects the laziness that Said described decades ago.

'The New God of Course is the West'³⁷

In *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot excavates the power silence holds over historical production.³⁸ As a Haitian scholar, his primary case study is the Haitian Revolution—the largest revolt of enslaved peoples in world history—and its treatment by Western historians. He argues that the silencing of the Revolution, its disappearance from the historical record, results from uneven power in the production of sources, archives, and narratives.³⁹ The Revolution was unthinkable as it happened because it was both victorious and Black—unthinkable in that moment of widespread colonial violence and enslavement, for it was a revolution that sought liberation against both systems of domination, and won.⁴⁰ Because the Haitian Revolution is unthinkable, it is silenced and disappeared in Western academic and knowledge production.⁴¹

³⁶ Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, pp. 17-18.

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³⁸ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, p. 26. "Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*); the moment of fact assembly (the making of *archives*); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of *history* in the final instance)."

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁴⁰ Nina Farnia (forthcoming 2023) Black Dissent, *Stanford Law Review* 85(2).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Such silences also reverberate through the historiography of modern Iran. The erasure of US-led imperialism plagues the historiographical work of Iranian-American scholars. They refuse to contend with imperialism as a significant factor that drove the Iranian Revolution and the ensuing Iran-Iraq War. Similarly, they fail to challenge the effects of ongoing US-led imperialism in the region—the impacts of sanctions and the devastation of US-backed regional wars (see other contributions in this Special Issue). Such erasures and elisions render both Iran and the Revolution unthinkable. If, as Trouillot said of the Haitian Revolution, the Iranian Revolution too is unthinkable, it is no longer because of white Euro-American thinkers who are blind to the world historical power of the Revolution. This takes place instead because Iranian-American academics have represented the Revolution through a liberal European hermeneutic that assumes the subordination of Iran to western capital and racial power, that is to say: imperialism.⁴²

In *Representations of the Intellectual*, Edward Said argues that the mission of the intellectual is to be embarrassing and unpleasant, ‘someone who visibly represents a standpoint of some kind, and someone who makes articulate representations to his or her public despite all sorts of barriers.’⁴³ The greatest threat to the intellectual is not the academy, according to Said, nor is it the commercialization of journalism and publishing houses, ‘but rather an attitude that I will call professionalism’.⁴⁴ He defines professional behavior as a refusal for rocking the boat, straying outside accepted paradigms or limits, but rather making oneself marketable and presentable, uncontroversial, unpolitical, and ‘objective’.⁴⁵ While the money and the gigs that come with intellectual activity are significant factors in arresting the intellectual’s power, ultimately the intellectual’s propensity toward acceptance—her own lack of agency as a thinker—undermines her output as a true intellectual, as Said defined it.

In this sense, the unthinkability of Iran and the Iranian Revolution is, in part, a phenomenon constructed by the failed intellectual, the intellectual who refuses to be an independent thinker. It is not an accident of history, it is instead a product of Eurocentrism as practiced by the intelligentsia. Both Iranian-American scholars and non-Iranian scholars are largely unable to view Iran outside of a classically western hermeneutic or ideology. Iran is rarely discussed as a functioning or even successful nation-state that has survived decades of imperial subjugation. One aspect of the unthinkability of Iran that often emerges in debates between anti-imperialists and imperial apologists is the so-called regional imperialism of Iran. Anyone who takes an anti-imperialist position on Iran is promptly attacked with the retort that Iran is imperialist too, disregarding the flow of value out of Iran as a central tenet of imperialism rendering it a peripheral nation. Accusations of Iranian imperialism reflect a broad attempt at equivocation between a country that is indigenous to the region and has been under colonial attacks since the nineteenth century, and that of a superpower thousands of miles away which aims blatantly to control the flow of commerce and

⁴² Said’s argument is that “intellectuals are individuals with a vocation for the art of representing, whether that is talking, writing, teaching, appearing on television.” Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, pp. 12–13.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 74.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

resources. This argument reflects a poverty of analysis, for it assumes away the fundamentally economic and financial bases of imperialism.⁴⁶

In this argument, the racialization of Iran as a Third World or Global South nation is elided, and Iran is re-racialized in the regional or sectarian sense, thereby reifying the colonial sectarianism that continues to devastate the region. This erasure also omits the presence of anti-imperialist movements in the region, namely in Palestine, Lebanon, and Yemen, that are organic liberation struggles supported by Iran. In essence, race only matters regarding Iranian relations with reactionary Gulf monarchies or pro-US Arab forces in the region, not in the relationship between the US and Iran.⁴⁷

The imperialism argument has a companion reasoning that erases Iran's status as an economically subjugated nation—that the Islamic Republic should be defeated for being a capitalist state, another view that also reflects a poverty of analysis. Iran is not a core capitalist state, it is of the periphery. Since the 1979 Revolution, all efforts made to become economically independent from the capitalist metropolises of Europe and the US have been destroyed by continuing threats of US war and sanctions. Moreover, seeking the destruction of the Islamic Republic on the basis that it is a capitalist state is incredibly misguided. Considering the pressures of US-led imperialism and Zionism on Iran, whatever state apparatus that will replace the Islamic Republic will be far more capitalistic—and likely a rentier state—than the current government, which continues to operate as a welfare state.⁴⁸ If the Iranian-American intelligentsia wants secular liberal democracy by any means necessary, then the onus is on them to provide one historical example where an imperialist invasion and the overthrow of the indigenous order resulted in an overall increase in the standard of living, prosperity, and stability for the nation as a whole. Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya are evidence of the opposite.

Unsurprisingly, the members of the US academy who make these claims have absolutely no regard for their proximity to the capitalist core and imperialist metropole from which they benefit. If they were truly interested in defeating capitalism and imperialism, it would make the most strategic sense to focus on the greatest capitalist state in the modern world, the United States, especially if one is living *inside* it. However, those foundations and media outlets that are funding scholarship on Iran would not fund

⁴⁶ As Lenin asserted in the preface to *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, imperialism is the process by which capitalism becomes a world system of colonial oppression and of the financial strangulation of the overwhelming majority of the people of the world by a handful 'advanced' countries. And this 'booty' is shared between two or three powerful world marauders armed to the teeth, who involve the whole world in *their* war over the sharing of *their* booty." P. 6. He ends chapter 7 by asking a key question that is more a prescient reminder. "We ask, is there *under capitalism* any means of removing the disparity between the development of productive forces and the accumulation of capital on the one side, and the division of colonies and 'spheres of influence' for finance capital on the other side—other than by resorting to war?" p. 74. In essence, imperialism cannot be defined merely by the presence of military personnel or the provision of strategic support from one state to another. Vladimir Ilych Lenin (1963) *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, in *Lenin's Selected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers), Volume I. For a longer discussion on US-led imperialism, see Capasso and Kadri in this Special Issue.

⁴⁷ Of course, Iran does indeed have influence in other countries in the region. But mere influence does not translate into imperialism. In fact, Iran is in a permanent state of economic and military self-defense, not imperialism or sub-imperialism.

⁴⁸ Kevan Harris (2017) *A Social Revolution: Politics and the Welfare State in Iran* (Oakland: University of California Press).

scholarship or activism that threatens their own financial base. I assume this is one of the many reasons why the Iranian-American intelligentsia is by and large focused on Iran. Ultimately, to equivocate between the violence of modern US imperialism and that of the Iranian government is tantamount to a disavowal of one's own responsibilities as an individual residing in the US and benefitting from its wealth. This disavowal is quite convenient when it comes with fellowships, sabbaticals, and the fame which accompanies native informants, the likes of Fouad Ajami from Lebanon, and Ahmad Chalabi from Iraq. The intelligentsia's precision focus unleashed on the governments of Iran, Venezuela, and Bolivia at the precise moment at which they are under the guns of imperialism is nothing short of advocacy for US-led imperialism itself.

Conclusion

The answer to the myriad problems facing Iranian-American historians is radical intellectualism, a commitment to scholarship that promotes a more just and equitable world. Such an effort requires a clear program that would guide both the research and writing. First, a lucid view of global power relations is necessary. As US-led imperialism continues to decline and the wealth gap within the US increases, the state, and its attendant apparatuses, such as the university, will become more and more hostile to radical scholarship. A lucid view of power relations will foster principled analyses of the US role in the region and the world in the face of increasing repression of US-based scholars. The aim of this Special Issue is to foster this mission. Second, we urgently need a material analysis of the world that is based both in the archive and on oral histories. Otherwise, analyses of the Revolution and of Iran more broadly will continue to suffer from what Kurzman called sound and fury, a lot of grand theorizing lacking an empirical, and I may add, material, basis. Finally, radical intellectualism requires, as Edward Said once argued, courage to say what must be said to create the conditions for a just world.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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