CHAPTER 1

Paradigms of Iranian Nationalism:
History, Theory, and Historiography

AFSHIN MARASHI

The history of nationalism has increasingly come to occupy a central place in the study of modern Iran. Since at least the mid-1990s, the growing number of conference papers, articles, and monographs examining various aspects of Iran's experience with the nation-form suggests that there has emerged a confluence of interest among specialists in examining Iran's national question.¹ This focus spans both the literary-cultural tradition of Iranian historiography and Iranian historiography's social scientific tradition. The result has been a productive body of recent scholarship whose emergence can only be explained by understanding changes within both the field of Iranian studies and in the wider domain of the humanities and social sciences.

It is perhaps a fortuitous coincidence that, at the precise moment during which the 1979 Iranian revolution had engendered a critical reassessment of Iran's modern history, new understandings of culture and society were simultaneously reshaping the entire analytical vocabulary of the humanities and social sciences. The 1980s and 1990s were a time when an older paradigm of "modernization theory" had already been eclipsed, and newer analytical frameworks rooted in literary theory and postcolonial studies were posing tantalizingly suggestive alternative methods for investigating the processes that constitute knowledge, culture, and the nation.² Likewise, within the social sciences, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the concern over the uncertain future of the former Soviet republics also brought renewed focus to neglected strands of the "historical sociological" school of comparative nationalisms and the writings of Karl Deutsch, Miroslav Hroch, Ernest Gellner, and Jürgen Habermas, as well as new works in this tradition by Eric Hobsbawm, John Breuilly, Benedict Anderson, and many others.³ It is within this intellectual climate of a radical rethinking of the traditional disciplinary paradigms of the humanities and social sciences, and a coterminous reassess-
ment of Iran's modern history, that the beginnings of a new historiography of Iranian nationalism can be situated. By the mid-1990s, the intellectual cross-fertilization between Iranian studies and new paradigms of nationalism studies were yielding historiographical results.

And yet, while certain currents in Iranian historiography have followed these larger meta--changes in the disciplines, there has at the same time been surprisingly little self--conscious discussion of these theoretical and disciplinary shifts within the field of Iranian studies. In part, the dearth of reflexive discussion may result from the organic utilization of the assumptions and categories of cultural theory and comparative nationalism studies without much self--conscious reflection of the analytics of that appropriation. Conversely, the dearth of discussion may also result from a well-heeled self--confidence in classical frameworks of knowledge, be they orientalist hermeneutics, positivist social science, or unconstructed Marxism; or it may perhaps be the result of a defensive retrenchment into these selfsame conceptual and analytical paradigms. Whatever the reason, the result of this partial engagement with new theorizing has been an uneven transformation and a still--emerging critical reflexivity within Iranian historiography.

The time for an initial assessment of Iranian historiography's encounter with the shifting boundaries of the humanities and social sciences is, therefore, perhaps overdue. Conducting this kind of assessment requires a careful review of the broad outline of developments in the field of nationalism studies, and analytically assessing how Iran's modern history adds to, or complicates, the still tentative conclusions of this theorizing. This approach can potentially not only add to the empirical body of knowledge on which theories of nationalism have been based but can also complicate those theories. A reflexive engagement with theories of nationalism can likewise suggest new questions and methods of reasoning inspired by the experience of nationalism elsewhere, which, in turn, may lead to new insights into Iran's modern history. The enrichment of both our theorizing and our knowledge of Iran's modern history can, in short, best be pursued by a self--conscious and reflexive analysis of the relationship between nationalism theory and Iranian historiography.

Historical Sociology and Iranian Nationalism

The tradition of scholarship in nationalism studies that poses the broadest implications for understanding the history of nationalism and the nation-state in Iranian history is the tradition that is generally referred to as "historical sociology." At the most basic level, the literature on the historical sociology of the nation-state represents the first move away from an older, primordialist understanding of nationalism and toward a view which emphasizes the social, economic, and historical origins of the nation as a global phenomenon tied to changes engendered in the modern era. Further, the historical-sociologist school of nationalism studies is, by design, focused principally on the macro-level historical changes that define the transition from agrarian societies with lower levels of political, social, and economic centralization, to the emergence of large-scale urban-industrial societies with high degrees of social and political consolidation and interconnection with the global economy. According to this tradition of scholarship, the nation-state—and its accompanying forms of nationalist politics—is one of the principal historical by-products of this large-scale transition to modernity. Analyzing the specific and varied historical experiences of different societies and regions of the world as they made this macro-historical transition is the principal preoccupation of the comparative historical sociology of nationalism.

The proliferation of new works in this tradition during the 1980s and 1990s played an important role in spurring a rethinking of Iran's transition to the nation-state form. Perhaps most influentially—in Southeast Asian studies—the specter of unexpected "national wars" among self-described Marxist states led Benedict Anderson to reevaluate the "national question" as something more complex than either the simple atomism of "primordial" identities or, conversely, as a dismissive expression of "false consciousness." Anderson's work, and the work of numerous others during this period, was part of a critical tradition of historical sociology that produced a new comparatively oriented and theoretically aware analysis of the modern world system of nation-states that grew out of—but also challenged—the established assumptions of both Marxist and Weberian social science. From the point of view of critically minded younger scholars in the field of Iranian historiography, the surprise of the Iranian revolution seemed analogous to the unexpected national wars in Indochina in revealing the limits of conventional historical and sociological theories, and in a similar manner spurred a basic rethinking of long-held assumptions in the field. As the new conceptual and comparative literature in the newly christened field of "nationalism studies" came to proliferate during the 1980s, it produced a veritable toolbox of new analytical methods and categories, which very quickly made an impression on those engaged in rethinking Iran's modern history.

Among the most ubiquitous analytical approaches in the comparative nationalism literature is the approach that seeks to highlight the specific social origins of popular nationalist movements in societies making the transition to modernity. According to this approach—most authoritatively represented by
shape as a political consciousness on the part of those who found themselves disadvantaged by the pace and sequence of modernity's unevenness. This political sensitivity usually manifests itself not as crude class-consciousness, but along ethnolinguisitic fault-lines separating those city-dwellers who benefit from industrial modernity's forward march and those town and village dwellers on the temporal and spatial margins of this process who do not.

Finally, the social origins of nationalism theorizing pay particular attention to the role of the intellectual vanguard of these national-popular movements. This vanguard class is analyzed less for its particular ideological or "discursive" character than for the key social-cultural role that it played in the process of popular mobilization. As the interconnected processes of uneven development, state-formation, and educational expansion spread across the regions of east-central Europe during the nineteenth century, more and more strata of society entered into the domain of formal politics. Among these newly educated social actors entering into the social-cultural domain of modern-urban politics were those described by Deutsch, Hroch, Elia Kazanov, and others, as "the marginal men"—newly educated and underemployed town dwellers who, because of their contact with the modern-urban sector, understood the instruments of formal politics and modern communication and were able to make use of them in order to give voice to the social frustrations of those coalitions of groups and classes who were losing out during the epochal transition to industrial modernity. The position of these "marginal men" as social-cultural intermediaries and interlocutors between the newly crystallizing domain of modern-urban politics and the rapidly disintegrating world of agrarian-traditional life made them ideal as political vanguards able to use an ethnolinguistic language to mobilize their marginalized social-national compatriots—consisting of the newly urbanized underclass, the socially insecure town dwellers, and an increasingly frustrated peasantry—into popular movements challenging the ascendant urban bourgeoisie-aristocratic industrial elites.

In considering the relevance of this "social origins of nationalism" paradigm for understanding the modern history of Iranian nationalism, a number of conceptual problems immediately present themselves. If, as the east-central European paradigm suggests, the emergence of national-popular social movements is a political outcome produced by the social-economic dislocations of the early stages of industrialization, we would expect to observe that the use of the national form of politics in Iran followed the early history of Iran's industrialization. On the contrary, the exact opposite appears to be the case. Iran's industrialization was notoriously late, coming only well into the twentieth century, at least two generations after the early use of nationalist lan-
guage and popular mobilization in Iranian politics. Further, in contrast to east-central Europe, the language of ethnolinguistic nationalism was not used as the basis of social-popular movements targeting emerging economic and industrial elites in Iran during the early history of industrialization. Instead, the language of nationalist politics was first used by state elites and modernizing literati with access to transnational intellectual discourses. Rather than for popular mobilization, the early use of the language of nationalism by these literary and intellectual elites was generally for social-cultural reform projects.

Further, the paradigmatic “marginal men” using an ethnolinguistic national language to voice the social-economic frustrations of town dwellers and peasantry simply did not materialize during the early history of Iranian nationalism. The political-intellectual vanguard of Iranian nationalism was indeed “marginal,” but its marginality was expressed in terms of its culturally liminal position between Iran’s literary-philosophical tradition and the new transnational discourses of modernity and the Enlightenment. Iran’s nationalist vanguard could best be described as marginal elites who were political-intellectual elites within Iran while also being socially and discursively situated as marginal or peripheral with respect to Euro-modern cultural forms. Very rarely during the early history of Iranian nationalism did members of this nationalist vanguard find themselves as the organic spokespersons of town dwellers and peasantry decrying the social-cultural status of Iran’s bourgeois-industrial elites. The record of popular-social mobilization in nineteenth and early twentieth century Iran—such as the movement challenging the 1871 Rooter Concession, the 1891-1892 Tobacco Protest, and other such early social-popular movements—were instead proto-Islamist movements that used a religious language and were led by what may be termed a “clerical vanguard.” The 1905-1911 constitutional movement, by contrast, may be described as representing a broader coalition of social strata and ideological languages, including those espousing an overtly nationalist language; but the popular-social constituency of the constitutional coalition was likewise grounded in proto-Islamist language, and led by “marginal men” in the form of popular preachers and newly politicized segments of the formal clergy.

These conceptual problems do not suggest that the paradigm of cast-central European popular nationalism is without use in thinking about modern Iranian history. On the contrary, when adjusted for the differences attributable to local circumstances, some of the parallels are in fact illuminating. While Iranian industrialization did not in itself operate as a key variable in Iran’s political development until comparatively late, the social-economic effects of integration into the world economy did begin to shape the course of Iran’s social history already in the nineteenth century. The penetration of foreign commercial goods into certain regions of Iran, and the concomitant process of commercialization of agriculture, did produce social dislocations analogous to those observed in the cast-central European paradigm of nationalism studies. The key distinction to be made, however, is that the social dislocations were felt to be caused not by local bourgeois-aristocratic proto-industrial elites of the city who spoke a different regional language or dialect than the town dwellers or peasantry—as was the case in the paradigm of cast-central Europe—but rather, by global-imperial economic penetration into Iran. The nature of this particular form of social-economic dislocation produced, in turn, a particular form of social-popular protest. Within this distinctively Iranian paradigm of popular mobilization, it can be argued that Islamic language played the role of a surrogate proto-nationalism, and it was the politicized segments of the clergy who played the role of a surrogate nationalist vanguard.

The cast-central European paradigm of nationalism studies can, therefore, be useful in illuminating certain aspects of Iran’s modern history. Taking into account the disparities of context and the distinctions of time and space, this literature does highlight some important comparative parallels. Other elements of Iran’s history of nationalism, however, remain unanalyzed and unexplored. While helping to explain the social and economic context of popular mobilization at certain moments of Iran’s modern history, this literature does not begin to explain the cultural history of national identification in Iran’s nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The articulation of these forms of national identification represent another basic dimension of Iran’s experience with the nation-form in the modern period and requires the exploration of other categories of analysis.

**Nationalizing States and the Practice of “Cultural Representation”**

The study of nationalism also underwent a considerable shift in the 1980s, coinciding with the larger cultural and linguistic turn in the humanities. As these meta-changes took place, new understandings of the processes by which “the nation” came to be conceived as a cultural category also emerged. Looking beyond the social and economic origins of popular mobilization, this new culturalist approach to the history of nationalism looked more closely at the disciplinary processes that worked to normalize certain understandings of the nation. How exactly were notions of “national identity” constructed and articulated? How did these new narratives and understandings circulate within a given polity? What were the techniques involved in these processes of construction, circulation, and normalization?
In asking these questions, the scholars in the cultural history of the nationalist tradition assumed—along with their historical-sociologist colleagues—that nationalism was something more than an inert and ahistorical quantum of force to be activated and deactivated depending on particular circumstances. The cultural theorists of the nation shared with the historical sociologists a deep skepticism of nationalism’s self-declared primordialist credentials. And yet, unlike the historical sociologists—who understood the cultural language of nationalist movements as primarily instrumental—the cultural theorists argued that the “the nation” did have a cultural history worthy of study. From the point of view of the cultural historians of nationalism “the nation” was understood as a highly flexible, dynamic, and amorphous symbolic system that could be made and remade to signify a wide array of cultural meanings and symbolic associations. The great emphasis in this tradition of theorizing is in highlighting the distinctively modern processes that work to make, shape, or construct a particular constellation of symbolic associations comprising a national identity. These processes of cultural construction consist of the analysis of nationalism’s narrative forms, the work of intellectuals in shaping these new narratives, and the analysis of the institutional practices—schools, commemorations, ceremonies, etc.—through which a novel scenario of national identity becomes normalized within a given polity. The role of the cultural historian of nationalism is, therefore, to document these practices of cultural construction, and to explain how certain representations of the nation achieve dominance at particular historical moments.

Perhaps the most prolific body of literature that has grown out of this culturalist tradition—which in turn may be potentially useful for understanding Iran’s history—is the writing that has analyzed the experience of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European monarchies as they made the transition from premodern dynastic orders reigning over loosely organized territorial realms to modern national states within a global system of nation-states. This history of monarchical nationalism, spanning roughly from the late eighteenth century to the eve of the First World War, is generally analyzed as a politically conservative effort on the part of dynastic elites who were seeking to articulate a new ideology of “the nation” for the purpose of retaining monarchical legitimacy during a period of political threat to the authority of the old elites engendered by newly emerging popular movements. In practice, these nationalization efforts produced new understandings of sovereignty on the part of these struggling monarchical states that invoked notions of “a people” with a shared history and culture, while also projecting the image of the monarch as central to “the national polity.” In order to retain the loyalty of the masses, the conceptual price that was paid by these monarchies was to code to the idea of national sovereignty an implicit understanding that the source of the monarch’s authority no longer resided “outside” or “above” the realm, but that instead the new national monarch was an organic part of the national community. This ideological concession to “the people” made the theoretical basis of the monarch’s sovereignty now inherently much more fragile, as it implied that the monarch’s status as the organic embodiment of the nation could be rejected through a demonstration of popular-national will. Nevertheless, the cultural and institutional labor that went into producing this new notion of monarchical nationalism has been the focus of cultural historians who have studied the history of European monarchies during the turbulent period of the transition from traditional understanding of sovereignty to a new understanding embodied in the modern politics of the nation-state.

To what extent is this literature useful for understanding Iran’s history of nationalization? In a number of key ways, Iran’s cultural and political structures seem remarkably analogous to those of early modern Europe during the critical moment on the eve of nationalization. Despite a tendency on the part of Iranian nationalists and sympathetic historians to exaggerate the continuity of Iran’s monarchy, it is nevertheless true that the monarchical institution had deep—if discontinuous—roots in Iran’s history. Further, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, after a long period of political decentralization following the collapse of the Safavid order (1501–1722), Iran did emerge with the newly established Qajar dynasty (1796–1925) heading the now-restored monarchical state. In addition, despite the tenuous and diminishing quality of its control over territory—not least because of the territorial losses incurred during the early nineteenth century to an ascendant Russia—the Qajar dynasty could nevertheless claim some degree of sovereignty over a loosely demarcated territorial zone that included the core region of the Iranian plateau. The preponderance of Shi’ism as the almost universal religious affiliation within the core region provided another key element of religio-cultural continuity that likewise made Qajar Iran analogous to some of the nationalizing monarchies of early modern and nineteenth century Europe. Given these factors, we can conclude that, at the eve of modernity, Iran did have some institutional preconditions analogous to those of the paradigmatic European politics at their comparable initial stages of nationalization.

And yet, these apparently analogous preconditions can also be misleading. Most importantly, while the principle of monarchy—now in its Qajar form—was an established principle in Iran’s history, the existence of the monarchical institution should not be casually conflated with the institutional structure and conceptual presence of a modern state. In the case of the analogous European monarchies, the transition from premodern forms of monar-
historical evolution can we expect in a polity that acquires a modern cultural understanding of national monarchy, but which has yet to actualize the conceptual presence of a national state? The answer to that question might rest in understanding Iran’s modern history.

Habermas and the Iranian Public Sphere?

In addition to the problem of the state, there is another problematic point of comparison in using the culturist tradition of nationalism studies for understanding the history of Iranian nationalism. In explaining the origins of nationalism within a given polity, the theorists of nationalism have generally assumed the presence of a broader cultural universe that has already been shaped by pre-Reformation and post-Enlightenment cultural systems. Nationalism, according to the cultural theorists, is a form of political consciousness that is naturally connected to the secular ontology of Enlightenment modernity, and is necessarily a historical phenomenon that has emerged after, in Benedict Anderson’s words, “the dusk of religious modes of thought.” The history of nationalism in those polities still defined by a premodern ontology is an issue on which the cultural theorists of nationalism remain silent. The reason for this theoretical silence is, once again, that our more generalized assumptions about the history of nationalism are based on a limited range of empirical cases drawn largely from the historical experience of early modern and modern Europe. This, by itself, does not invalidate this tradition of theorizing for understanding Iran’s history of nationalism. To the contrary, by carefully evaluating the comparative similarities—and differences—between the assumptions of the European paradigm and the Iranian case, we can expand our understanding of both.

Drawing largely upon the work of Jürgen Habermas, the cultural theorists of nationalism have argued that the historical privilege to “the nation” is the formation of the so-called public sphere—defined as an autonomous social and cultural communicative space situated beneath the authority of government and above the social space occupied by the general populace. This autonomous domain—represented physically through institutions such as the coffee house, the tavern, civic clubs, the theatre, the press, and libraries, among other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century examples of an emerging European urban culture—became the arena for debate and discussion, as well as the location where we can begin to identify the formation of a socially consensual public opinion. It is in this social space, according to the cultural theorists of the nation, that proto-nationalist intelligentsia came to experiment
with new cultural constructions of community, and in the process redefined the oral tradition of rural life as national folklore, redefined traditional storytelling as national literature, and redefined the amorphous heritage of the past as national history. The formation of the public sphere in the Europe of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, therefore, produced an arena where the protonationalist intelligentsia could emerge to culturally and discursively define the nation and claim to speak in its name. As Benedict Anderson has noted, building upon the work of Habermas, the boundary of a given public sphere was "inherently limited" by the geographic parameter of a given vernacular language and the marketplace of "print-capitalism" that accompanied this linguistically defined public. Specific linguistically demarcated cultural-national communities thus came to be imagined, once they were socially enabled by the crystallization of their respective public spheres.

Significantly, however, this version of the early history of nationalism assumes a universe of culture where the philosophical assumptions of the post-Reformation and post–Enlightenment tradition had already been established. In Habermas's—and Anderson's—highly idealized and historicist version of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the formation of the public sphere expanded the arena of communication and cultural discourse, thus making possible new configurations of identity and community. What the public sphere also did, however, was to institutionalize a limited range of discursive possibilities that extended only within the philosophical range of assumptions tied to post-Reformation and post–Enlightenment ontology. Coming after the eclipse of religious modes of thought, the social crystallization of the public sphere in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries thus ensured that the consensually determined culture to emerge from the debates within this nascent domain would by its nature lead to a culture that shared the assumptions of the Reformation, Enlightenment, and a secular political modernity.

For the history of nationalism in Iran, this rendering of the historical sequence in the evolution of the public sphere and "the nation" again proves problematic. As with the problems of sequencing relating to the patterns of industrialization and popular mobilization discussed above, and as with the problematic sequencing relating to new notions of sovereignty and the administrative formalization of the modern state, the crystallization of the public sphere also creates sequencing problems for thinking about Iran's history. A public sphere analogous to that described by Habermas and Anderson did also take shape in the Iran of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The new circulation of newspapers, the proliferation of a novel print–culture made possible by emerging print technologies, and the energetic quality of the literary-political discourse of the years surrounding the constitutional revolution, all testify to the formation of an Iranian public sphere that was capable of giving form to a generalized opinion claiming to speak for the national community.

However, in contrast to the idealized paradigm described by Habermas and Anderson, the public sphere that took shape in Iran did not crystallize in an Iranian social and cultural universe already defined by the philosophical ontology of the Reformation and the Enlightenment. At the moment of its crystallization, Iran's public sphere was, by contrast, a philosophically mixed communicative space in which a secularized Iranian modernist discourse shared the same public sphere with the Shi'a religio-political tradition. In contrast to the historical sequencing described by Habermas and Anderson, the Iranian public sphere did not crystallize after the philosophical and ontological victory of a still nascent and fragile Iranian Enlightenment—such a discursive hegemony, in fact, never took place. The formation of an Iranian public sphere, therefore, did not predetermine the emergence of a "secular-national" cultural-ontological consensus in the new discursive arena. On the contrary, the formation of a public sphere within Iran's historical sequence enabled a much larger array of cultural possibilities and narrative forms to circulate and contest for hegemony. Iran's experience with the public sphere, therefore, had the effect of expanding the definition of the political into forms that did not follow the classical historicist assumption of Habermas and others who follow this line of argumentation.

As the above discussion suggests, this tradition of theorizing—like the theorizing of the social origins of the nation, and the theorizing of the nationalizing state—cannot be mechanically applied to the Iranian case. However, when the comparisons are critically engaged, with an emphasis on highlighting the points not only of similarity but also of contrast, then the resulting theorizing yields analytical possibilities that can contribute to larger comparative-theoretical debates.

Postcolonial Theory and the Historiography of Iranian Nationalism

The theories of nationalism posed thus far represent theoretical paradigms of the nation-form rooted in the historical experience of European nationalism. As already noted, this European-centeredness of nationalism theory poses conceptual problems for thinking about Iran's experience of national formation. While Iran's history shares broad similarities with some of the classical cases of Western European nationalization, in other respects Iran's history of
nationalism must be understood as emerging out of the specific context of Iran's position as a semicolonial Asian state in the world system of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Any sophisticated analysis of Iran's history of nationalization must, therefore, also take into account the specifically extra-European circumstances that shaped the history of Iranian nationalization, and consider this question: Does the Iranian case approximate the classical paradigms of European nationalization, or should Iran's experience of nationalization be situated within a comparative typology alongside the history of nationalism in the colonial context of Asia and Africa?

The historiography of South Asia—specifically, the traditions of subaltern studies and postcolonial theory—has made the most valuable contributions in theorizing the specifically extra-European contexts that have shaped the history of nationalism outside of Europe. This tradition of theorizing has produced a number of key ideas that can be useful for purposes of comparison with the history of Iran.

Perhaps the most important idea to emerge from the subaltern studies group is that critique the traditional historiography of the independence movement in colonial India. As Ranajit Guha has argued in one of the seminal essays of the subaltern-studies group, the conventional historiography of India's nationalist movement was for a long time dominated by what he calls an "elitism" that reflected the perspective of the British colonial class and the bourgeois-nationalist Indian elite. As Guha has argued, this elitist cultural, political—and ultimately historiographical—perspective "originated as the ideological product of British rule in India." Among the historiographical assumptions that were implied by this perspective were that the masses of India's subaltern classes were docile participants in the nationalist movement, that the consciousness of Indian nationalism was principally shaped by the Indian modernist-nationalist elite, and that ultimately it was this Indian nationalist elite that led the masses "from subjugation to freedom." The intention of Guha and the subaltern-studies theorists is highlighting the "elitist" assumptions of the traditional historiography of the Indian nationalist movement is grounded in something more than the impulse of the social historian to include the histories of those who have traditionally been marginalized in conventional accounts of the past. Instead, the intention of the subaltern-studies group is rooted in a Marxian dialectical impulse intended to analyze the revolutionary tactics and social dynamics that enabled the Indian modernist-nationalist elite to successfully forge a political alliance with the subaltern masses and achieve political goal of independence. How was it possible for an elite nationalist class, whose philosophical and ontological worldview shared so much more with the British colonial elite than with the "mytho-religious" consciousness of the Indian subaltern masses, to make a plausible claim of speaking for the nation and mobilize a broad-based movement of independence? This question—or what Guha refers to as the problem of the "structural dichotomy" of elite and subaltern in India—serves as a point of departure for the subaltern-studies group; the answer lies at the center of the similarities and differences marking the national histories of India and Iran.

As Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, and others have argued for the Indian case, following the ideas of Antonio Gramsci, the Indian nationalist elite's great tactical success was in its ability to temporarily claim the right to speak for the masses. The transitory visibility of this claim was only achieved within the highly volatile context of a movement that had as a common objective the removal of the external presence of the colonial state. The common political and discursive opponent shared by the subaltern masses and the nationalist elite allowed for a Gramscian "passive revolution" and "war of position," in which the bourgeois-nationalist elite was able to articulate a language of opposition to the Raj which simultaneously reflected the political aspirations of the nationalist elite and the "mythic" consciousness of the subaltern. This moment of political and discursive correspondence between elite and subaltern was viable only in the presence of—and in opposition to—the colonial state. It was, for this same reason, a highly fleeting moment that assured the nationalist elite would have great difficulty maintaining its hegemony once the external presence of the colonial state had disappeared in the post-independence period. At the moment of the revolution, however, the correspondence between the bourgeois-nationalist elite and the subaltern masses was enabled by the stark presence of the colonial state. As Guha states, "such effort when linked to struggles which had more or less clearly defined anti-imperialist objectives... produced some splendid results." When this history is compared with the experience of Iran, a number of key points of comparison present themselves. In the broadest sense, Iran's historical transformation in the modern era is distinguished by the lack of a "passive revolution" as described by Guha and Chatterjee. What we might term the missing passive revolution and the accompanying failure of the bourgeois-nationalist elite in modern Iranian politics to achieve hegemony can be explained in large part by the fundamentally different political terrain in Iran in comparison to the national movements emerging in societies that had had the long presence of a colonial state. Iran's historic experience, as one of the few regions in Asia and Africa that never experienced a direct colonial presence, produced a set of fundamentally different political, ideological, and social alignments, which in turn would come to profoundly shape the material
nature of its politics in the modern era. Iran’s lack of an external presence in the form of a colonial state made the task of forging a historic bloc of bourgeois-nationalists and Iranian subalterns immeasurably more difficult. Iran’s nationalist elite, like that of India, shared more of its ontological and philosophical assumptions with European post-Enlightenment modernist rationality than it did with a mytho-religious ontology of the Iranian subaltern. In contrast to India, however, there was no external colonial presence that could help forge a transitory correspondence between elite and subaltern in the name of a social movement seeking national liberation. The missing colonial state made the discursive and political divide separating the nationalist elite and the Iranian subaltern much more challenging to overcome.

What made the possibility of temporary correspondence between elite and subaltern even more difficult to forge in the Iranian case was not only the absence of a colonial state but also the descriptive character of the Pahlavi state itself. The Pahlavi monarchical state had monopolized the discourse of modernity and nationalism in the decades preceding the 1979 revolution, and had in effect become the political hegemon on the terrain of Iranian politics, with a self-described modernization program that took the form of a civilizing mission that borrowed heavily from the discourses of nineteenth-century positivism and colonial science. Within the terrain of an Iranian politics that lacked a colonial history analogous to the Indian case, the Pahlavi state thus came to play the role of a surrogate colonial state, and in turn came to take on the political character of an external presence against which discursive and political forces came to position themselves. On such a political terrain, the bourgeois-nationalist stratum was subsumed within the class and cultural configurations of Pahlavi modernist-rationality, and had very little opportunity to speak on behalf of the Iranian subaltern. When Iran’s social movement of liberation came, therefore, it did not take the form of the bourgeois-nationalist revolution that had enabled the Indian modernist class to rise to power in the post-independent period. Instead, the revolution overthrowing the Pahlavi state took a much more populist-subaltern form, invoking a mytho-religious consciousness in the form of Shi’ism and led, not by nationalist intellectuals, but rather by a vanguard of Iranian “ulama and religious ‘organic intellectuals.’”

Further, Shi’ism’s ideological function in this context should not be understood only in terms of the theological-political evolution of classical Shi’ism, as is usually done in explaining the Iranian revolution; rather, the role of Shi’ism can also be interpreted within the political configuration of what might be termed Iran’s semi-postcolonial position. When modernist nationalism became the official ideology of the Pahlavi state during the middle part of the twentieth century, it came to monopolize the public discourse of Iranian society. As Chatterjee argues with respect to India, it was the culture that was preserved within the “private domain” of domestic space that became the culture of resistance used to confront the external presence of the state at the moment of the revolutionary struggle. In the case of India, the external presence was the British colonial state and the so-called ideology of the Raj; in turn, the “spiritual principle” retained within the private sphere of Indian life came to be an Indian national culture. It was this inner domain of national culture preserved within domestic space that became mobilized as the culture of national difference in opposition to the Raj. In the case of Iran, the public space was dominated by the modernizing-positive culture of Pahlavi nationalism for much of the twentieth century. The domination of the public domain by Pahlavi nationalism in turn led to a political configuration where the “culture of difference” took the form of the culture of Shi’ism preserved within the private-spiritual domain of the Iranian subaltern. As Pahlavi nationalism came to dominate the state-dominated public domain, this inner spiritual domain of religion—and its accompanying class and political alignments—came to play the role of “national” culture when the moment of the revolution came.

These basic structural configurations of Iran’s political terrain—and the similarities and differences shared with the experience of South Asia—worked, in part, to produce the outcomes of Iran’s modern historical experience. The missing external presence of a colonial state, and its substitution by a Pahlavi state espousing nationalism and scientific modernity in the public domain, came to configure the basic social and discursive alignments of Iran’s modern political development. These alignments, in turn, enabled the use of Shi’ism as a surrogate ideology of difference, and precluded the nationalist-modernist elite from forging a social-discursive alliance with the Iranian subaltern. As with the comparisons with other traditions of theorizing, thinking about Iran’s modern experience through the conceptual lens of subaltern studies and postcolonial theory reveals key differences that can be illuminating in thinking analytically about Iran’s national question.

Conclusion

As the foregoing might suggest, engagement with the comparative study of nationalism and the broader currents of theorizing in the humanities and social sciences is by its nature a tenuous and tentative enterprise. The simple appropriation of the language of theorizing, or the mechanical application of categories and vocabulary from paradigmatic models derived elsewhere, can
each by itself work to obscure more than it reveals. And yet, the impulse to steer clear of these dangers and pitfalls can also work to restrict the conceptual range of historiography in a field. The changes in the humanities and social sciences over the past three decades—in particular, the changes that have reshaped our understanding of the global history of nationalism—have clearly posed new possibilities for Iranian historiography. Despite the dangers and pitfalls, a careful and critical engagement with new theorizing has already produced positive results for both Iranian historiography and comparative nationalism studies.

While the above survey of the different paradigms of nationalism studies does not claim to be comprehensive—in fact, the range and proliferation of scholarship in the related fields surveyed here shows no sign of abating—what even this limited survey does suggest is that a critical engagement with comparative nationalism studies may be fruitful in suggesting new avenues of investigation. At the very least, even this limited survey of the possible questions that these traditions of theorizing may yield for Iranian studies suggests that Iran's history of nationalism does not fit neatly within the established typologies. Conforming to neither the classical European paradigms of nationalization and national politics, nor to the historical terrain of other extra-European contexts of national politics, Iran's history seems to reveal to theories of nationalism the limits of the established paradigms of nationalism. At the same time, however, these established paradigms of nationalism yield remarkable echoes in Iran's modern history, and therefore demand our engagement with this tradition of theorizing. Recognizing these conceptual limits and theoretical echoes is the result of a critically engaged approach to Iranian historiography. This critical engagement can in turn help us to ask new questions, form new analytical perspectives, and pose new understandings of both theory and Iran's modern history.

Notes


2. In addition to the debates surrounding Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and the increasing availability of Foucault's works in English translation, the influence of Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (London: Blackwell, 1983) can also be taken as a popular measure of a decisive shift in the humanities during this period.


11. On the literary-intellectual articulation of Iranian nationalism in the nine-


19. Anderson, Imagined Communities, 70–78.


24. Ibid., 42.


29. The most comprehensive religio-theological interpretation of Shi’ism and Ira-