

**City of Knowledge in Twentieth Century Iran:
Shiraz, History, and Poetry**

Setrag Manoukian

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Setrag Manoukian's *City of Knowledge in Twentieth Century Iran: Shiraz, History, and Poetry* combines the application of Michel Foucault's conceptualization of the relationship between "knowledge" and "power" with a "historical and ethnographic investigation" into the sociocultural and political life of twentieth-century Shiraz in order to portray a history of Iran and Iranians that differs from the usual accounts focusing on Tehran.

The book is intended for both Iranian studies scholars and the general public interested in the history of Iran. Avoiding an exclusivist approach that

offers either “a national perspective from the capital Tehran” or “a purely local view from a self-contained city,” the book provides, in the author’s words, “the viewpoint of Shiraz as a ‘province’ to highlight how local, national and global dimensions are mutually constituted.” It discusses the “question of knowledge” from the viewpoint of Shiraz because most of the research on contemporary Iran concentrates on the capital as representative of the whole country. In his view, “the after-effect of this concentration on Tehran is an analytical posture that posits either the state and/or the nation as the starting points of the analysis, obliterating the multiplicity of convergences and divergences from which both these constituencies emerge” (p. 3).

The author examines three “intertwined processes” in twentieth-century Shiraz that have been definitive to the history of “the city of knowledge” by means of (1) discussing the production and distribution of “forms of knowledge, notably history and poetry” in Shiraz; (2) demonstrating “how these forms of knowledge intertwine with a diverse set of social practices in and around Shiraz” and examining “how historical and literary writings relate to the process of urban transformation”; and (3) analyzing “ways in which normative ideas about how one should be in relation to oneself and to others are implemented and contested, and how in the course of the twentieth century both history and poetry have become relatively autonomous ethical fields that sanction the propriety of certain behaviors and thoughts” (p. 5).

The book consists of six chapters. In the first one, “The Territory of Shiraz,” Manoukian traces Shiraz’s genealogy as a city of knowledge by analyzing a collection of works on its culture, history, and geography written during the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He discusses how a reinterpretation of Iran’s ancient past, as well as novel cultural initiatives advocated by the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-79), provided a new space for “an autonomous subject” to practice reason and led to the transformation of knowledge. In chapter 2, “Time, space and culture,” he demonstrates how the Islamic Revolution of 1979 influenced the city’s “spatio-temporal reconfiguration.” He holds that by inciting “turns in the order of things,” which he calls “acts of reversal,” the revolution reversed the monarchic order in terms of space, time, and culture through its techniques of power (p. 6).

In chapter 3, “Editing culture,” Manoukian contemplates the “production of knowledge” in contemporary Shiraz by focusing on “editing.” He defines the term as “a set of diverse practices that characterize the production of public knowledge” and “rework words, images and objects from the past to make them conform to what is acceptable in the Islamic Republic” through a process of superimposition (p. 7). Furthermore, by focusing on the activities of public and private institutions that promote Shiraz as “a city of knowledge,” the chap-

ter offers in-depth analyses of “the arts of government” in Iran via the perspective of “the production of knowledge” (p. 63).

In this chapter, Manoukian also proposes that the cultural initiatives taken by President Mohammad Khatami’s (1997-2005) government were (1) discarded by internal critics as “anti-revolutionary,” “inauthentic,” and Eurocentric “cosmetic operations” and (2) often highlighted in the foreign media with a mixture of “mockery and denunciation” (pp. 80-81). However, he does not explain what kinds of internal critics held such views: reformists, conservatives, liberals, nationalists, or Islamists? He also does not discuss what kinds of foreign media manifested such attitudes: American, British, Russian, or Arab? In addition, he argues that “[t]he structuring of a bifurcation between underneath and surface is at the core of the dominant discursive formation on Iran” and that the “media and scholarly publications double this bifurcation by using it to define contemporary Iran as a country split between public and private, overt and secret, outside and inside, surface lie and underlying truth” (p. 103). Yet this claim can be applied to most countries and thus is hardly exclusive to Iran. This chapter would benefit from further discussions of these propositions.

Manoukian opens chapter 4, “Writing the history of Shiraz,” by relating his discussions with a retired Shirazi high school teacher who was born and raised in the city and has been “an active participant” in its political events since the 1950s – and whom in Manoukian’s words “embodies the idea of Shiraz as a city of knowledge” – to select the city’s “conceptual and material cartography” (p. 7). Following the teacher’s advice, Manoukian selects a collection of local neighborhoods as representative of Shiraz’s social and cultural life in order to draw “connections” and assemble “piece by piece the territory of knowledge” (p. 108). He calls this selection “abduction,” a term he borrows from Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), which means “a movement of guessing large configurations without necessarily knowing all constitutive components beforehand, while at the same time using these larger configurations to travel back to particular instances and weave them into the process” (p. 126). In chapter 5, “Tensions in the city of knowledge,” he analyzes the life and legacy of three Muslim scholars (ulama) – whom the teacher suggests and identifies as “exemplary representatives of the culture of Shiraz” – to offer another piece to its evolution as a city of knowledge (p. 8).

The teacher’s selection of the nucleus of Shiraz as his hometown, as well as his inclusion of important locations that carry with them the city’s contemporary history, are integral to Manoukian’s micro-history, which seeks to represent its macro-history in chapter four. The teacher knows and has frequented the various places that he advises Manoukian to study, and thus can be considered reliable. However, his choice of three representative ulama and subjective

views on them orient chapter 5 toward a personal account of what the teacher thinks about them. As this person does not have sufficient research credentials and is not a historian, his selection of the representative ulama on which this chapter's analyses are based cannot be viewed as completely credible. Although chapter 5 raises interesting points regarding the role of influential individuals in Shiraz's sociocultural, political, and religious history, it would benefit from further reference to the city's other noteworthy figures.

Chapter 6, "History and poetry," traces the circulation of the discourses of poetry and history in the streets of Shiraz in order to explicate how "different forms of knowledge" are "constitutive of an existential ground of recognition" and "the hegemonic formation of Shiraz as a city of knowledge" (p. 8). In this chapter, Manoukian elaborates "the specific and different ways in which people relate to history and poetry as modes of apprehension and representation of events." By focusing on the re-evaluation of the events of 1950s in the late 1990s, he analyzes "the modalities of history and poetry" and how local Shirazis identify them "as the outcome of historical events, not abstract genres" (p. 170).

In this chapter he has chosen only four poems – three by Asghar Arab, a contemporary minor poet, and one by Firaydon Tavallali (1919-85), a well-recognized Shirazi author – as representatives of poetry as a sociocultural discourse completing the city's history in the 1950s. This selection does not represent a comprehensive trajectory of this period, however, because they are samples with less-than-enough contextualization and do not fully reflect Shiraz's multicultural nature. Choosing and analyzing poems – works of literature widely circulated and read – as complementing the city's official history is a significant approach; however, focusing on a very limited number of poems reduces the strength of this chapter's arguments. In order to achieve his proposed objective, Manoukian needs to analyze more poems by more authors and in more detail.

In conclusion, the book is an outstanding application of critical theory to ethnographic investigation and offers a fresh perspective on Iran's sociocultural and political history from the viewpoint of Shiraz. Manoukian has conducted an innovative research and set a remarkable example for the direction that ethnographic studies of other cities in Iran should take.

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