

**Intellectuals and the State in Iran: Politics,
Discourse, and the Dilemma of Authenticity**

Negin Nabavi

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Negin Nabavi's *Intellectuals and the State in Iran* comes at a time when a process of soul-searching by some Iranian intellectuals that started immedi-

ately after the triumph of Islamic revolution has now faded away, without yielding any satisfactory results. This process was inspired by the question: What role did the (secular left-leaning) intellectuals play in the revolution's triumph, which culminated in an Islamic state inherently opposed to the activities of these same intellectuals? This important topic, of course, gives rise to the familiar question of "What is meant by an intellectual?" which Nabavi addresses in the book's first part. Having given a historical perspective on the development and evolution of intellectualism in Iran, she concludes that a distinguishing character of the Iranian intellectual was "the intellectual's task to take a stance and engage with issues in society" (p. 3); where "dissent" was "a necessary component in the career of any Iranian intellectual" (p. 18).

In part two, Nabavi discusses the processes that led to the "radicalization of the Iranian intellectual." Here she explores the emergence of what she calls "the Third-Worldist intellectual" and the cooptation of a great number of intellectuals by the Pahlavi regime. According to her, during this period (1963-70) "the notions of the 'native' and the 'authentic' became so pervasive that even the establishment could not remain impervious to them" (p. 106). The epilogue briefly touches upon the relationships between intellectuals and the revolution, where the author concludes that the intellectuals "lost out in the year that followed the revolution" (p. 149).

The book's relevance and strength lie in the way it sheds light on the twin notions of "cultural authenticity" and the need to "return to one's indigenous culture." However, Nabavi's approach is, at times, both simplistic and overly reductionist. This may be due, in part, to the limited number of sources and materials that she examines. As she points out in her acknowledgement, "it was my late father's collection of periodicals that originally gave me the idea of examining intellectual discourse on the basis of Persian periodical literature" (p. x). It is this collection of periodicals that forms the basis of her analyses. As a result, such intellectuals as Samad Behrangi are not even discussed. Moreover, the views of those intellectuals who are discussed are mainly limited to the constraints of essays and columns published in periodicals, although occasional references are made to other sources. Thus, the author is not able to distinguish among various contradictory stances that her chosen intellectuals are known to have on the concepts of identity, indigenous culture(s), and indigenous languages in an Iranian context. Nor does she offer a comprehensive analysis regarding such terms as *indigeneity/indigenoussness*, *authenticity*, and *authentic culture*.

Nabavi also uses Persian and Iranian interchangeably throughout the book. Terms like *Persian culture*, *Persian language*, and *Persian identity* abound in the text; through which the author means to refer to Iran's diverse cultures, identities, and languages – not just those of the Persian minority. Her inability to distinguish between *Iranian* and *Persian* leads to further fallacies. For instance, she thinks that a sense of nativism emerged on the part of both the intellectuals and the establishment in the 1960s, when the latter attempted “to remove the idea of ‘authenticity’ from the exclusive domain of the disenchanting intellectuals” (p. 106).

Quite the contrary. In Iran's modern history, glorification of the pre-Islamic “Persian culture” has been a common practice among the nationalist segment of “Persian” intellectuals. For example, the late sixteenth-century Azarian movement of the disciples of Azar Keyvan, a Zoroastrian philosopher, is known for its significant political, cultural, and literary activities to restore aspects of the pre-Islamic “Persian culture.” Likewise, during the 1906 Constitutional Revolution there was a growing nationalist demand to revive the supposedly “superior” pre-Islamic culture of Iran.

And most significantly, beginning with the Reza Shah era (1925-41), the demonization of Arabic/Islamic culture and the romanticization of the pre-Islamic past became a state-sponsored preoccupation. Unlike Nabavi's assertion, it was not a reaction to the “Third-Worldist intellectuals” that the Shah's regime started to advocate “authentic Persian values.” This doctrine had already been in full swing when the allied forces deposed Reza Shah and put his young son Mohammad Reza in power on September 16, 1941.

Another fallacy emerges when she discusses the history of the Shah's White Revolution. In tracing the history of land reform in that so-called “revolution,” she fails to mention that long before the Shah's land reform in 1963, Azerbaijan's autonomous government had introduced and implemented a far more progressive land reform project in the northern part of the country. The same applies to women's rights and universal suffrage. Contrary to her assumption, Iranian women did not win the right to vote for the first time in 1963; rather, universal suffrage was first introduced in certain parts of the country in 1945 under the autonomous governments of Azerbaijan and Kurdistan. Unfortunately, Nabavi is unable to explore these issues beyond the limitations of a nationalist Persian historiography.

In addition to the book's insensitivity to Iran's ethnic, linguistic, and cultural plurality, it is also disturbingly gender-insensitive. Nabavi has herself done most of the translation from Farsi into English, in which she has used a masculinist, male-centered language. Thus, such gender-neutral

terms as *insan* and *adam/adami* have been translated as “man,” whereas the correct rendition should be “person, human being, or individual.” The Persian *u* has been translated as “he,” whereas the correct rendition should be “he/she”; *khod* (self, herself/himself) is rendered as “himself” (e.g., p. 103); *Rawshanfekr-Adami* (intellectual-being or person-intellectual) is translated as “man-intellectual” (p. 78). In fact, throughout the book “intellectual” is rendered as a “man/he,” notwithstanding that among Nabavi’s chosen intellectuals at least one of them, Simin Daneshvar, is female. Considering the fact that the author is also female, this kind of omission becomes very difficult to understand.

Overall, *Intellectuals and the State in Iran* provides fresh insight into the intellectual life in periods before and during the Islamic revolution in Iran. Students of modern Iranian history, politics, and culture(s) will find this work an invaluable source of knowledge and information.

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