

Iran, Islam, and the Last Great Revolution

Fall 2018

WILLIAMS COLLEGE
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We are not against the process of getting raw materials from [the west]. It should not be assumed that we reject the products of western culture and its scientific advance that are sometimes miraculous. Such dogmatism is not in line with Islamic views at all and we never follow this trend. We should design the building and it is not important where the raw, needed materials are procured. *However, these materials should fit the design.*

President Ali Khamanei, December 25, 1985

The instructor held up an unfurled green condom as she lectured a dozen brides-to-be on details of family planning. But birth control was only one aspect of the class, provided by the government and mandatory for all couples before marriage. The other was about sex, and the message from the state was that women should enjoy themselves as much as men and that men needed to be patient, because women need more time to become aroused. This is not the picture of Iran that filters out across the world, amid images of women draped in the forbidding black chador, or of clerics in turbans...

Michael Slackman, *The New York Times*, "Molding the Ideal Islamic Citizen"

The title and inspiration for this course comes from Robin Wright's book *The Last Great Revolution*. Wright argues that the 1979 Revolution in Iran completes the promise of the Modern Era, "launched in the West" but "adopted by or adapted to all other parts of the world." The overthrow of 2500 years of monarchy "paved the way for using Islam to push for empowerment." It is this empowerment, of nations and of ordinary individuals, that stands as the signal quality of modernity.

Wright's book reformulates for a popular audience what the historian Monica Ringer has described as the "modernization dilemma," the attempt, starting in the 19th Century, of late developing countries such as Turkey, Iran, and Japan to use European institutions as models for modernization, to adopt European technology and know-how, while at the same time guarding against a loss of cultural agency and authenticity. It is an approach that strives to reach a shared destination, the promised land of the future and of progress, as it were, by paths multiple and different paths. Assessing the possibilities, successes, and failures of the experience of "multiple modernities" in Iran and elsewhere will constitute a significant part of the course.

We will also look critically at the value of the destination itself, whether modernity is a benign and righteous force or a temptation to produce havoc. The promise that modernity will lead to the empowerment of autonomous, self-willing, self-conscious, and self-defining individuals is premised on an acceptance of universal equality, of individuals having, in effect, limits on their will and agency, typically enforced by a transformative state. Empowerment and universal equality, the twin "pillars of modernity" as Farzin Vahdat labels them, stand as possible contradictions, concepts in tension with one another. Critically assessing whether they can be reconciled will be one of our major tasks this term.

This term will also see us exploring the balance between the normative and the empirical, between “feelings and facts.” What is the role of virtue, what No. 402 memorably describes as “decency” in *Darkness at Noon*, in a world in which “all that is solid” seems to “melt into air?”

Finally, there is a normative axe that the course seeks to grind, if only to sharpen the blade a little bit. The notion that postrevolutionary Iran offers an alternative path to modernity is hardly conventional wisdom in the United States or Europe, where images of men draped in religious passion and women in forbidding black *chadors* are as common as the belief that the 1979 Revolution set Iran spinning back thirteen centuries in time. If westerners do not view Iran as entirely anti-modern, then at best they see it as a country filled with “paradoxes” and “puzzles,” one in which indie rock bands play underground, figuratively and literally beneath the feet of retrograde religious fanatics, or unveiled women attend all-night parties only to slip back into proper *hejab* the next morning. The class will ask you to consider why these assumptions exist, whether they are the symptoms of a western civilization “clashing” with the east, and if they are exclusive to the United States or Europe. Does there also exist an “orientalism in reverse,” a negative gaze of Iranians towards the west and towards their fellow, “backwards” citizens?

Requirements:

Short Essay, 5-7 pages (15%)

Précis, 5-7 pages (15%)

Research Paper, 12-15 pages (30%)

Participation, including blogs and presentation (40%)

The best way to produce good words is to slog through the bad ones, to seek out routine that will generate inspiration. In this vein, we will be writing—a lot. We’ll be writing for improvement as well as for assessment. The work will include blog entries (approximately 250 words or one single-spaced page of text) assigned regularly as a directed reading and in reaction to a particular film, reading, or discussion.

My aim with the blogging is to improve your analytical writing and to serve as an alternative site of discussion and debate. For the more utilitarian-minded among you, there is a bottom-line payoff: Students who come to every class **on time**, complete the readings, and complete all blog and response postings **as scheduled** are ensured at least an A- for their participation grade.

That’s the (mostly) good news. The bad news is as follows: If you miss class without an excuse, if you don’t do the blogs, or it becomes apparent that you’re not working your way through the readings, your final grade will not be higher than a B+, regardless of how well you score on your essays.

Blog responses will be due **at noon on Wednesday**, followed by a very brief “response-to-a-response” to a classmate’s posting (you can pick whomever you want). Response postings are expected to be respectful of the dignity and efforts of other students, and to provide constructive criticism or praise on the structure, style, and content of the essay. These will be due **at noon on Thursday**.

Above all, this course asks that you come to class not only to take notes and to listen but to challenge and debate your classmates *and* your professor. Attendance is more than mandatory: it is vital. A course such as this can only collapse under the weight of apathy, boredom, or the sin of not doing the reading. Seriously: **Please talk and engage, in class and online.**

Take to heart John Stuart Mill's notion that most opinions, even false ones, contain some portion of the truth, "and since the general or prevailing opinion on any subject is rarely or never the whole truth, it is only by the collision of adverse opinions, that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied." No idea or concept is certain or worthwhile---what Mill describes as "a living truth"---unless it is fearlessly challenged.

Final Project

The course ends with our own version of an academic conference (#nerdfest). This is an opportunity to workshop your final research project as well as to practice providing critical feedback and analysis to your fellow classmates.

Here's how it works: Three weeks prior to our final class session you'll circulate a précis of your final paper to the entire class, a first-cut brief of no more than five pages. The précis should include a clear thesis statement and paragraph, followed by a page or two outlining the existing literature on your topic (if any exists) and how your research fits into that body of evidence. You'll then lay out a rudimentary plan of action as well as any questions or challenges facing your project. Try to point to the broader implications of your research, the proverbial "so what?" question (we'll talk more about this piece in class).

The final project is open-ended but must be cleared with me. Keep in mind that the précis and presentations are expected to be works in progress. The work should be raw but legible, filled with the promise of good and original research!

I can't emphasize enough the excellence of the Writing Workshop at Williams. Here's the link explaining how to schedule an appointment as well as drop-in hours:

<https://writing-programs.williams.edu/writing-workshop/>

Get to know Hale Polebaum-Freeman, the reference librarian for political science at Sawyer. Williams has an outstanding array of resources—Christine is one of them, among its best. Seriously. *Get to know Hale.*

Readings:

The following texts are available for purchase at the bookstore and will be on reserve at Sawyer. All other readings will be on Glow or distributed in class.

- Ryszard Kapuściński, *Shah of Shabs*
- Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*
- Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*
- Afshin Marashi, *Nationalizing Iran: Culture, Power, and the State, 1870-1940*
- Laura Secor, *Children of Paradise: The Struggle for the Soul of Iran*

- James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*
- Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men Without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*
- Adam Seligman, *Modernity's Wager: Authority, the Self, and Transcendence*
- Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*
- Sadegh Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*
- Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar, *Religious Statecraft: The Politics of Islam in Iran*
- Kevan Harris, *A Social Revolution: Politics and the Welfare State in Iran*

Films:

Available by streaming and on reserve at Sawyer.

- Dariush Mehrjui, *Gaav (The Cow)*
- Abbas Kiarostomi, *Nema-ye Nazdik (Close Up)*
- Ashgar Farhadi, *Jodai-e Nadar az Simin (A Separation)*
- Kamal Tabrizi, *Marmulak (The Lizard)*

Week One Sept. 10 The Return to Dignity

- Ryszard Kapuściński, *Shah of Shabs*
- Daniel Lerner, "The Grocer and the Chief: A Parable"

First blog assignment

Week Two Sept. 17 We Moderns

- Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*
- Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*

Second blog assignment

Week Three Sept. 24 Negotiating Modernity in Iran

- Monica Ringer, Introduction, in *Education, Religion, and the Discourse of Cultural Reform in Qajar Iran*, pp. 1-13
- Ringer, "The Quest for the Secret of Strength in Iranian Nineteenth-Century Travel Literature: Rethinking Tradition in the *Safarnameh*"
- Ali Ansari, *The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran*, pp. 1-4
- Ali Mirsepassi, *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran*, pp. 1-53
- Farzin Vahdat, *God and Juggernaut: Iran's Intellectual Encounter with Modernity*, pp. xi-xviii, 27-36 on Malkum Khan, 42-49 on Akhundzadeh, 54-61 on Afghani

- Laura Secor, *Children of Paradise*, pp. xi-21

Paper topic assigned. Due **October 4**.

Week Four October 1 Nationalism and the Endless Project of Authenticity

- Afshin Marashi, *Nationalizing Iran: Culture, Power, and the State, 1870-1940*
- Ali Ansari, *The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran*, pp. 1-35
- Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, Introduction, in *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism: Race and the Politics of Dislocation*
- Partha Chatterjee, “Whose Imagined Community,” in *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*
- Kamran Scot Aghaie, “Islamic-Iranian Nationalism and Its Implications for the Study of Political Islam and Religious Nationalism,” in *Rethinking Iranian Nationalism and Modernity*
- Rasmus Christian Elling, “Matters of Authenticity: Nationalism, Islam, and Ethnic Diversity in Iran,” in *Iran: From Theocracy to the Green Movement*
- Secor, pp. 22-50

Recommended:

- Michael P. Zirinsky, “A Panacea for the Ills of the Country: American Presbyterian Education in Inter-War Iran”
- Shervin Malekzadeh, “What Trump Doesn’t Get About Ideology in Iran. It’s About Nationalism, not Theocracy”

Third blog assignment

Reading Period October 8-9

- Please read Secor, pp. 51-103 and watch the classic film, *Gaav (The Cow)*

Fourth blog assignment

Week Five October 15 First World Problems

- James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, pp. 1-8, 53-179
- Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, pp. 5-36, 219-248, 312-348
- Secor, pp. 107-162

Screening, October 16 *Close Up*

Week Six October 22 Negotiating the Gender Binary

- Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men Without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*
- Jasamin Rostam-Kolayi, “From Evangelizing to Modernizing Iranians: The American Presbyterian Mission and its Iranian Students”
- Secor, pp. 361-404, the story of Asieh

Recommended:

- Narges Bajoghli, “How Women, the Green Movement and an App Shaped Iran’s Elections”

Fifth blog assignment

Week Seven October 29 The *Mashruteh* Movement: The Turning Point

- Ali Ansari, *The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran*, pp. 179-230
- Farzin Vahdat, *God and Juggernaut: Iran’s Intellectual Encounter with Modernity*, pp. 61-72
- Nader Sohrabi, “Revolution and State Culture: The Circle of Justice and Constitutionalism in 1906 Iran”
- Farzin Vejdani, “The Place of Islam in Interwar Iranian Nationalist Historiography,” in *Rethinking Iranian Nationalism and Modernity*

Sixth blog assignment

Week Eight November 5 Modernity’s Wager, Lost?

- Adam Seligman, *Modernity’s Wager: Authority, the Self, and Transcendence*, pp. ix-14, 24-26, 34-40, 49-52, 72-77, 124-141
- Darius M. Rejali, *Torture and Modernity: Self, Society, and State in Modern Iran*, pp. 1-17, 33-81, 135-144
- Alexis de Tocqueville, “Concerning the Philosophical Approach of the Americans” and “Concerning the Principal Source of Beliefs Among Democratic Peoples,” in *Democracy in America*
- Secor, pp. 165-211, on state violence in the post-Khomeini era

Please meet with me this week regarding your final project!

Seventh blog assignment

Week Nine November 12 Our Modernity, Our Malaise

- Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*
- Sadeq Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*

Week Ten November 19

Religious Intellectuals and the Formation of Islamic Government

- Ruhollah Khomeini, “Islamic Government” and “Capitulations,” in *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini (1941-1980)*
- Sami Zubaida, “The Ideological Preconditions for Khomeini’s Doctrine of Government,” *Islam, the People, and the State: Political Ideas and Movements in the Middle East*
- Ali Mirsepassi, *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran*, 96-128
- Farzin Vahdat, *God and Juggernaut: Iran’s Intellectual Encounter with Modernity*, 113-181, 198-217
- Kamran Aghaie, “Islam and Nationalist Historiography: Competing Historical Narratives of the Iranian Nation in the Pahlavi Period”

Highly Recommended:

- Perhaps the best book on domestic politics in Iran is Mehdi Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran*
- For a blow-by-blow account of the 1953 coup and its relationship to the current political situation in Iran, see Mark J. Gasiorowski and Malcolm Malcolm Byrne, editors, *Mohammad Mossadeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran*
- Mehrzad Boroujerdi, “Gharbzadegi_The Dominant and Intellectual Discourse of Pre- and Post-Revolutionary Iran”

Screening of *The Lizard*, November 20

Precis due November 22 (no exceptions!)

Week Eleven November 26

Beyond the Guarded Domains: Iran in the World

- Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar, *Religious Statecraft: The Politics of Islam in Iran*
- Farideh Farhi, “The Antinomies of Iran’s War Generation,” in *Iran, Iraq, and the Legacies of War*
- Narges Bajoghli, “Iranian Vets Also Push for Nuclear Deal”
- Mehrzad Boroujerdi and Kouros Rahimkhani, “The Office of the Supreme Leader: Epicenter of a Theocracy,” in Daniel Brumberg and Farideh Farhi, editors, *Power and Change: Politics of Contention and Conciliation*
- Shervin Malekzadeh, “How Elections Are Secularizing Iranian Politics”
- Malekzadeh, “Where Iran’s Hard-Liners Diverge from the Moderates”

Highly Recommended:

- Dina Esfandiary and Ariane Tabatabai, *Triple Axis: Iran’s Relations with Russia and China*
- Esfandiary and Tabatabai, “Moscow and Beijing Have Tehran’s Back”

Please watch *A Separation* over Thanksgiving with your family

Week Twelve December 3

**A Country Like Any Other: Iran as a Developmentalist
and Welfare State**

- Kevan Harris, *A Social Revolution: Politics and the Welfare State in Iran*
- Shervin Malekzadeh, "Education as Public Good or Private Resource: Accommodation and Demobilization in Iran's University System," in Daniel Brumberg and Farideh Farhi, editors, *Power and Change: Politics of Contention and Conciliation*
- Shervin Malekzadeh, "The New Business of Education in Iran"

Highly Recommended:

- Malekzadeh, "On-going Protests in Iran Are an Extension of the Islamic Republic's Founding Ethos"
- Malekzadeh, "Why Do Iranians Bother Voting?"

Final blog

December 8 Presentations

Final paper due on **Sunday, December 15**