

**Janet Afary, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution 1906-1911*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996. Pp. xxi + 448. \$40.00 cloth, \$17.50 paper.**

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Was the Iranian Constitutional Revolution a people's revolution? Janet Afary sees it as such, in this volume which emphasizes the role of the grass-roots in the Revolution, particularly that of women and peasants. She also, however, gives prominence to the influence of ideas, especially those of social democracy. She perceives three divergent concepts of democracy as shaping the Revolution: European-style parliamentary democracy, the social democratic tendencies inspired by those of Tsarist Russia, and multiple expressions of radical democracy, which manifested themselves in a variety of local councils. All three challenged the political visions of both the royalist government and the conservative ulama.

Afary also considers the Revolution in the light of current theories. In particular she is influenced by Barrington Moore's emphasis on the contributions of peasant cultures and communities to revolutionary social change and challenges Wallerstein's world systems theory as marginalising class, ethnic, and gender conflicts. She further expresses doubts about Skocpol's vision of intra-elite conflict, in which one group of elites replaces the other and thereby greatly increases the power of the state, as underestimating the role of ideas. Above all, however, she acknowledges Hill and Thompson's arguments that cultural, ideological, and political superstructures are not merely reflections of the economic and technological base, and that the past was made by the common people.

The problems of the application of these arguments to Afary's detailed and thoroughly researched work is that, firstly, it is difficult to see how they apply to all phases of the

revolution, and, secondly, that Iran at this time was such a weak state that it was, in effect, more than one economy and polity. Whilst the contribution of peasant culture and communities to the course of the revolution was considerable in certain areas, it is not proven that it shaped the subsequent development of the country as a whole. For similar reasons Afary is wise to eschew dependency theories. However, with regard to intra-elite conflict, it is difficult to see how the initial revolutionary movement would have succeeded without the financial crisis and the government's introduction of a new system of taxation. In response, the elites of Tehran mobilized the population of the capital but were themselves ultimately forced to share their victory with the elites of the provinces. As Afary herself says, efforts to bring in a more democratic and progressive political system ultimately foundered because successive assemblies became dominated by landowners and tribal leaders who had little interest in social and political reform. If Skocpol's argument would seem to hold good on this point, it fails on the issue of the increase in the power of the state, which indeed actually became weaker until the rise of a modern army. With regard to ideas, liberalism permitted the flowering of intellectual debate but did not penetrate further than a small elite, who were nevertheless able to guide the revolution and give it legitimacy for a while. Ironically, the intrinsic etatism of Russian social democracy enabled it to have the profoundest influence on the destiny of Iran through the policies of Reza Shah.

This is perhaps to dwell too much on the theoretical aspects of a book which is at its most innovative in charting the role of ordinary people and of women. Afary refutes the impression that Iranian women accepted subjugation and finds the roots of Iranian feminism in the revolution. She shows in particular how the introduction of new styles of organisation into Iran provided women with opportunities for liberation and empowerment that had not hitherto existed. Despite opposition from the conservative ulama, activist women created for themselves societies and educational institutions, so that between 1907-13 over sixty girls' schools were established. Their conviction that feminism enhanced nationalism led women to play an important role in the defence of the Majlis in 1911. Women moved out from the private sphere, and joining together with those from other sects, found new space in the streets and the newspapers. Perhaps because of a class element the Majlis did not disband women's organisations, as it did provincial councils, with the result that women's achievements maintained momentum after the closure of the Majlis.

The district and village anjumans, particularly in Gilan, were more radical than the urban ones. They were not simply anti-revolutionary, but were informed by social consciousness and action. Two issues, however, remain not entirely clear, the first being precisely how far these associations fit into the ancient patterns of peasant traditions of revolt against taxation and landlord rights; and the second being, given (as Afary notes) that the associations were established with the help of the Rasht anjuman, and indeed the strongest flourished under the intellectual leadership of journalists, artisans and preachers, how far they were initially a rural rather than urban phenomenon. In any event, she demonstrates the significant fact that peasant rebellion passed out of urban control to the point where neither the Majlis nor the Rasht anjuman supported the rebellious peasants. In fact their calls for reform were opposed, and the anjumans were closed. Whilst the abolition of tuyul

produced rent for governors and former holders, the Majlis failed to introduce land reform, and whereas the peasants wanted a reduction in the tax burden, the Majlis measures were designed to increase the tax revenues to the treasury.

Afary's examination of the ideology of the Social Democrats reveals it to be typical of other Third World movements of this century in creating a mixture of socialism and indigenous ideas. They went beyond the limited reforms of the Majlis, demanding a redistribution of land and the introduction of an eight-hour day. According to the writer they supported Shi'ite religious traditions, but it is not clear if their justification for political activism from religious precepts arose from expediency or from conviction. Outside the control of the urban elites in Tehran the Social Democrats were able to achieve an outstanding international and non-denominational character in Azerbaijan and Gilan. Contrary to some writers, Afary sees the differences arising within the movement as originating in deep political convictions rather than personal rivalry. However, she identifies an elitist trend in the ambition of the more educated leaders to harness the aspirations of the rank and file. A significant contribution came from the Armenian intellectuals, who introduced a new concept of nationalism, secular and anti-imperialistic.

In sum, this fine and stimulating book, written in a lucid and fresh style, greatly enhances our knowledge of the Constitutional Revolution, and does much to enliven the debate on its interpretation. Its greatest achievements, however, are to highlight the role of ordinary people, both in town and countryside, and the remarkable efflorescence of feminism.