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THE IRANIAN CONSTITUTIONAL REVOLUTION 1906-1911: GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY, SOCIAL DEMOCRACY AND THE ORIGINS OF FEMINISM. By JANET AFARY. New York, Columbia University Press, 1996. 448 pp, illustrations. £32.00 (hb), £14.00 (pb).

This is an exceptionally interesting account of the constitutional revolution in Iran which works well on two levels. It is, firstly, a very useful general account of the period and the history of constitutionalism in Iran. Its accessibility and clarity make it an essential addition to any undergraduate reading list on the modern Middle East. The inclusion of a summary at the end of each chapter is particularly helpful in this respect. Secondly, however, it offers an original and challenging theoretical interpretation of the character and significance of the multi-faceted and diverse episodes which together comprised the revolution.

At the heart of Afary's work is a challenge to the conventional historiography of the constitutional revolution. She argues that under the secular but autocratic Pahlavi regime an historical narrative was constructed in which the multi-cultural and multi-ideological aspects of the revolution, in addition to its more radical dimensions, were edited out (p. 341). Even more disastrously, in the 1960s and 1970s popular discourses downplayed the secular and leftist elements of the revolution, ignored the clash between secular and religious laws, and even celebrated the obstructionist role of clerics such as Shaikh Fazlullah Nuri, thus serving to disarm radicals and liberals during the revolution of 1979.

Insisting upon the centrality of analyses of the constitutional revolution to contemporary Iranian politics, Afary begins her account by describing the condemnation of Shaikh Fazlullah Nuri as *mufsid fi arz* (a corrupt element on earth) and his execution by a revolutionary tribunal in 1909, after the victory of constitutionalist forces. She immediately points out how Ayatullah Khomeini, upon coming to power in 1979, declared Nuri the ideological father of the Islamic republic and made every effort to rehabilitate

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him. This attempt to monopolize, even hijack, the meaning of the constitutional period, however, was opposed by the radical secular opposition to the Islamic republic, which continued to look for inspiration to the democratic example and the political reforms of the years 1906–11. It is an examination of this dimension of the constitutional revolution which gives shape to Afary's narrative.

The 1979 revolution undoubtedly released Iranian history from the stranglehold exercised on it by the Pahlavi regime and its Western apologists. Yet the character of the forces which ultimately triumphed in the internal struggle following the revolution also had profound consequences for the historiography of modern Iran, unleashing a torrent of scholarship in the West on a topic, the political role of the ulama, hitherto almost completely ignored. (The works of Nikki Keddie and Hamid Algar are obvious exceptions to the then prevailing indifference.) The inclination among Western academics to gravitate towards power led, after 1979, to the magnification of the role of the Islamic element in the history of the constitutional period and the corresponding eclipse and continued neglect of the secular radicals. This is fortunately now being rectified and recently a number of books have appeared, the work usually of Iranian leftist intellectuals outside Iran, which seek to give to the Iranian revolutionaries of the early twentieth century a place in historiography equal to that which they actually occupied in history.

Afary's book is clearly a work of engagement. Her descriptions of the changing battlegrounds of the revolutionary years are always vivid, and sometimes moving. Her account of the ten-month siege of Tabriz, for example, discusses not only the high politics and ideology of the episode, but also, in showing how the civil war between constitutionalists and royalists rapidly radicalized into a class struggle illustrates something of the day-to-day experience of ordinary Iranians, many of whom, by the end of the siege, were eating grass and dying of starvation and disease.

Although clearly adopting a secular radical perspective, Afary presents a fully rounded picture of the constitutional period, including its wider historical context. She looks in depth at matters such as the complex consequences of increased contact with the West, the impact of the 1905 Russian revolution and the formation of the Iranian secret societies, the accomplishments of the First Majlis, the debates concerning the ratification of the Supplementary Constitutional Laws of the spring of 1907, which began to clarify the differences between the secularists and the clerics led by Shaikh Fazlullah Nuri, the popular culture of the revolutionary years, the attitude of the constitutionalists to land reform and the role of the village councils, the part played by women, the events of the counter-revolutionary period of 1908–9, the multi-ethnic and international dimensions of the continuing resistance to the Shah, the Second Majlis and the role of the Democrat Party. She concludes her narrative with an account of the tragic events surrounding the Shuster mission, the Russian ultimatum and the closure of the Majlis in 1911. Throughout her account she emphasizes that the constitutional revolution was not just a political revolution but also a social and cultural revolution with significant grassroots dimensions and insists that ethnic, class and gender issues were at the heart of the revolution, defining its scope, its limitations, and its political direction.

Afary's account ends with what appears to be the victory of unmitigated reaction, the Majlis suppressed, the Russians in occupation of northern Iran, the leading constitutionalists executed or in exile. In common with other historians of the period, Afary sees 1911 as constituting a fundamental watershed. Yet none the less, certain of the achievements of the constitutional revolution survived and continued to exert an influence on the succeeding historical period. Nor were the state-building efforts of the Democrat-dominated government of 1910–11 quite so futile as she suggests. The

establishment of the Iranian gendarmerie, by this very government, had profound consequences for the military and political history of Iran well into the 1920s and beyond. Elections were again held in 1914 and the Third Majlis played an important role in the nationalist struggles of the years of World War I. It is perhaps possible that the imposition of a slightly different periodization might suggest a more adequate explanation of the history of the first third of the twentieth century as a whole by allowing the discernment of the nature of the relationship between the constitutional and early Pahlavi eras. Hitherto, the period between 1911 and the eruption of Riza Khan into power in 1921 has usually been treated as an interregnum, a period of chaos and disruption, and has attracted little attention from historians. This results in the appearance of Riza Khan often resembling that of a *deus ex machina*. Yet, as may be deduced from Afary's work, Riza Khan's centralizing and state-building policies owed much to the example of the second constitutional period, while the conflict within Iranian nationalism between a centralizing tendency and more radical independent forms of political activity was evident from a very early stage.

Afary's book, placing the Iranian revolutionaries firmly in the context of the international radical and socialist movement of the early twentieth century, is an important addition to the literature on Middle Eastern constitutionalism. It is further to be hoped that accounts such as this lead to a greater integration of the Iranian experience into historical studies of a wider character, and to an increased awareness on the part of students of European radicalism of the interest and relevance of Iran's struggle.

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