

Ali Gheissari, *Iranian Intellectuals in the 20th Century* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998). Pp. xvi, 247.

Ali Gheissari's book is an astute and well written study of Iranian intellectual life during the twentieth century. Although he cautions the reader in his preface that this book is neither "a comprehensive history of Iranian intellectuals in the twentieth century" nor "a sociology of literature," Gheissari manages to provide a good deal of both. In the span of five condensed chapters – entitled Modern Intellectualism in Iran; Intellectuals in the Constitutional Period; Intellectuals and State Nationalism, 1921-1941; Politics and Literature, 1941-1953; Critique of Westernism and Debates over Modernity – and an epilogue, he elucidates the triumphs and travails of modern intellectuals in Iran from the nineteenth century to the post-revolutionary period. His 78 pages of notes and the 37-page bibliography, testify to the author's painstaking research and provide a valuable assortment of noteworthy anecdotes, insights, and sources for the study of contemporary Iranian intellectual milieu.

First and foremost, Gheissari contends that modern Iranian intellectuals' preoccupation with immediate and mundane politics has compelled them to defer philosophical engagement with the "substance and inner logic of ideas and thought." Reflecting on the epistemological and ontological consequences of such a delay, he maintains "that is why encounters with modern Western ideas in Iran, within the last 150 years or so, have remained intellectually and philosophically so haphazard" (p. 116). The reactive posture of Iranian intellectuals has hampered the institutionalization of a modernist political culture. The author's disdain for such a predicament is reflected in his closing paragraph, as he writes: "The odyssey of the Iranian intellectuals in the twentieth century began by searching for ways to remedy autocracy and to best incorporate

modernity; in the closing years of the century intellectuals seem to be confronting the same set of questions” (p. 119).

Gheissari considers the Constitutional Movement as the era during which "modern intellectuals began to develop into an independent group” (p. 16); when a major challenge to both despotic government and to the tradition of submission to authority emerged (p. 38); and when “intellectual discourse flourished” (p. 115). However, this esprit de corps soon dissipated as the harsh realities (i.e., suppression of opponents, censorship) of the autocratic reign of the Pahlavi monarchs percolated down Iranian society. According to the author, autocratic rule helped to reinforce such negative -- yet salient -- features of the Iranian intellectual community as aversion to philosophy; defective appropriation of modernity; inability to forsake the conceptual and normative constraints of religion, patriarchy, and traditionalism; obsession with agitation; and submission to rulers.

While the tone of this book is not altogether recriminating, Gheissari could have used sociological theory and political philosophy more extensively in his admonishment of Iranian intellectuals, especially because he aims to portray Iranian intellectuals “not simply as representatives of a particular class, ideology, or interest, but as social actors of an emerging type who constructed their distinctive discourse while sharing a cultural milieu with other social types”(p. 115). This passage begs such questions as: (a) Can the shortcomings of Iranian intellectual life therefore be merely attributed to the volition of the intellectuals? (b) Is an alternative path to modernity and democracy possible considering the cultural, historical, and social givens of the country?

These objections notwithstanding, *Iranian Intellectuals in the 20th Century* should be consulted by all those interested in the evolution of history of ideas in Iran.

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