

## BOOK REVIEW

CRONIN, STEPHANIE. *Social Histories of Iran. Modernism and Marginality in the Middle East.* [Social Histories of Iran.] Cambridge University Press, Cambridge [etc.] 2021. vi, 309 pp. £82.99. (Paper: £24.99; E-book: \$33.99.)

In *Social Histories of Iran*, Stephanie Cronin explores a wide range of social groups, events, and processes, including the urban poor, rural criminals, bandits, smugglers, pirates, enslaved workers, the repression of female bodies, and revolutionary protests. The six case studies in this collection, five of which draw on previous publications, reaffirm the acuity of social history when charged by new insights and methods accrued during the crises, turns, and returns the field has experienced since the 1970s. After the cultural and linguistic turns of the 1980s and 1990s, social history approaches returned reinvigorated in the early twenty-first century as cultural and linguistic perspectives were integrated into socio-historical research, as this volume's attention to culture, and to secular and religious discourses on social justice, illustrates. Moreover, while the turn to subaltern history sometimes led to disregard for state and politics in general, Cronin's social histories avoid this pitfall. Finally, socio-historical writings of the last three decades have been increasingly shaped by global, transnational, and comparative methods that Cronin skillfully employs in this volume.

Cronin's case studies do not simply reflect these historiographic trends, they have played a crucial role in pushing forward the frontiers of research on modern Iran, challenging its domination by "the twin narratives of top-down, elite driven and state-centred modernization, and methodological nationalism" (p. 1). Cronin not only provides fascinating insights into Iran's modern history, she also connects and compares that history to regional and global developments, making this collection valuable to historians of Iran, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and global history.

The first chapter, previously unpublished, recasts the Iranian Revolution of 1979 through a global lens to explain both its driving forces and its paradoxical outcome. This approach demystifies the perceived religious (Shi'ism) exceptionalism of Iran (p. 26), and provides a thought-provoking account of the revolution. Cronin aptly demonstrates how the leftist-oriented political, social, and discursive forces driving the revolution were incubated within the global context and connections of the 1960s and 1970s, shaped by decolonization/anti-imperialism and the "educational revolution" that swelled the ranks of students. The Iranian Revolution was thus part of a global radical tide marked by Third Worldist discourses, the appeal of guerrilla struggles, and the participation of an increasingly educated, discontented, and frustrated, but also transnationally connected and optimistic youth. Cronin employs the same global perspective to explain why the "revolutionary movement of the 1970s apparently steeped in the ideology of the Left" produced the Islamic Republic

(p. 21). While the former was the product of a global radical tide, she argues, the latter was the product of the neoliberal upsurge in the 1980s. She thereby explains the paradox of the revolution by situating it at “the cusp of a tectonic shift in the global balance of forces between Left and Right” (p. 21), which manifested in the Middle East as a shift “from the hegemonies of the Left and secular nationalism to that of Islamic politics” (p. 25).

By recasting the Iranian Revolution through the lens of global history, Cronin enriches our understanding of both, but her account also raises several questions that reveal the challenges of global history approaches. One is the question of how analytical scales are employed and connected. When discussing Ali Shariati’s ideas that inspired many religiously oriented participants in the revolution, Cronin suggests they were influenced by Latin American Catholic liberation theology of the 1960s. Though this might have been a tangential source of influence, Shariati’s liberation theology built on a range of critiques of colonialism, liberalism, and Marxism developed by Iranian thinkers such as Jamal al-Din Al-Afghani (1837–1897), Mohammad Nakhshab (1923–1970), Ahmad Fardid (1909–1994), and Jalal al-e Ahmad (1923–1969). Due attention to the history and growth of religious culture, discourse, and activism in Iran and the Middle East during the 1960s and 1970s could help us to understand Islamic and Catholic liberation theology not only in terms of influence, but also in terms of their connections to deeper global transformations. It would also correct an overestimation of the Left’s “hegemony” that Cronin assumes existed on the eve of the 1979 revolution.

A related question is how causal inferences can be made within a global history approach. Cronin attributes the paradoxical outcome of the Iranian Revolution to the neoliberal shift of power from the Left to liberal and conservative forces in the 1980s, but she does not elaborate on the specific causal mechanisms or the underlying global transformations connecting the two events. A reference to, for instance, the global crisis of the Left that also “affected the Iranian guerrilla groups” (p. 46) invites a deeper examination of how the concrete organizations, strategies, leaderships, and discourses enabled or obstructed their competition with Islamist groups. This move from the macro to the micro level should also include the role of the messy and contingent process of local mobilizations and their interactions with both the Islamic and Leftist groups. Though daunting, this approach would open the way to exploring the causal connections between global, and national/local structures, processes, and events, and how the former became constitutive to the latter through migration and the emergence of hybrid cultures and subjectivities that resonated with Islamic oppositional discourses.

Chapter Two draws on primary sources and E.P. Thompson’s notion of the “moral economy” to open a window into the life worlds of Iran’s lower classes by exploring bread riots from roughly 1890 to 1905, and comparing them to those in eighteenth-century England. Cronin corrects an elite-driven interpretation of the 1906–1909 Constitutional Revolution by exploring the lower classes’ moral indignance at the weakening of “market supervision and regulation” with the arrival of capitalist modernity. Chapter Three continues to explore the impact of modernity on subaltern groups in Qajar Iran by using Michel Foucault’s notion of marginality. Focusing on the “dangerous classes” of “prostitutes”, “beggars”,

“criminals”, and “serial killers”, Cronin shows how the transformation of cities, medicalization, state-building, and other modernizing processes were used by the state and middle-class elites to contrast themselves with members of the lower classes as threats to the bourgeois social and moral order.

In the last three chapters, Cronin moves beyond Iran to explore banditry, slavery, and anti-veiling campaigns in MENA. Noting the relative absence of banditry in the historiography of MENA, Chapter Four critically applies Eric Hobsbawm’s notion of “social banditry” to explore how certain nomadic practices in the region transformed into “banditry” as a consequence of and in resistance to modernization. In Chapter Five, Cronin addresses another relatively understudied and often misrepresented topic, slavery in MENA. Comparing slavery in Islamic societies to that of medieval and early modern Europe, Cronin points out significant similarities, such as religious justification and regulation (pp. 207–208). But, she argues, differences emerged due to European colonization of the Americas, where plantation economies were based on the use of enslaved workers. In contrast, in MENA, “slavery was largely domestic, urban and temporary”, and the enslaved populations were “only ever a small, sometimes tiny, proportion of the total population” (p. 207). Other distinctions include the rarity of abolitionist movements and mass rebellions in MENA, and the possibility of social mobility, for example in the case of the Ottoman *dervishme* system.

The final chapter focuses on anti-veiling campaigns in MENA in the first half of the twentieth century and argues that the gender politics underpinning them were a form of “sartorial social engineering” (p. 253) in the context of state-building by authoritarian, modernizing elites, rather than a form of women’s liberation. Cronin’s comparative method reveals strong discursive similarities between the anti-veiling campaigns in Kemalist Turkey and Pahlavi Iran, while both diverged from the Soviet experience in which violence played a significant role.

To conclude, Cronin has combined empirical detail and conceptual rigor in each of the case studies of this collection to produce insights that demonstrate the advantage of integrating Iran and the Middle East in global history. While scholars of history will find the discussion of these topics extremely stimulating, the book’s case-study approach also makes it ideal for inclusion in course syllabi.

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