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Review: Torture, Television, and Iranian Culture

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Torture and Modernity: Self, Society and State in Modern Iran by Darius M. Rejali

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identity. The focus of, and vehicle for, this exploration is death—death as she experienced it personally, death as it is constructed in Greece, and death as the end to which we all inevitably must come. Beginning with an account of the death of her paternal grandfather, she weaves together deaths she has experienced in her circle of family and friends, deaths recounted to her by others, and accounts of close brushes with death (in the Asia Minor war, in the resistance, and in prison, where torture and mock executions were routine events).

Panourgia's narrative reveals the complexity of culturally structured practices and the ways in which their ongoing negotiation and their flexibility are as much a part of cultural reality as their enduring presence. Her discussion of her relatives' different views of appropriate mourning practices and the ways in which they are negotiated and commented upon, for example, is a welcome departure from most ethnographic accounts of prescriptive mourning rules. And in a scene in which several women, including the author, are sitting in a hospital waiting room, we witness Panourgia's movement from anxious relative to interested anthropologist, as she begins to respond to the discussion of what might have caused her uncle's cancer.

The aims of Panourgia's book are not always easy to discern, however. They are best stated at the very end of the book, where she says that her purpose has been to explore "how the praxis of anthropology and ethnography can be a matter of everyday life" (p. 218) and to reflect on "the possibility that the difficulty of

incorporating death itself (much like ethnography and anthropology) into everyday life might be the total and complete act of resistance to its finality" (p. 218). The style of the book is experimental, a combination of ethnography and autobiography, and Panourgia plays with a range of narrative forms in her account, seeking to blend the anthropological and the personal (and to try to deal with her own ambivalence regarding their relationship). In chapter 5, for example, she divides the pages into two parts, the upper half containing the narrative of deaths within her own circle, the lower half containing a commentary that includes comparative anthropological analysis.

As with any experiment, there is always a chance of failure, and Panourgia's efforts are not completely successful. The book stumbles somewhat at the beginning, and readers may have difficulty keeping track of all the family members whose stories the author recounts. The narrative picks up momentum in the final chapters, however. I became engrossed in the drama of the author and her family as the richness of the account became clearer. Moreover, the book raises important issues about the relationship between personal experience and anthropological analysis, between subjectivity and objectivity—issues that are approached here in an evocative and thoughtful way. In the process, Panourgia succeeds in problematizing the very concept of the "native ethnographer." In addition—and by no means incidentally—*Fragments of Death, Fables of Identity* offers us a fascinating portrait of middle-class Athenian life. ■

Torture, Television, and Iranian Culture

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The Making of Exile Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles. Hamid Naficy. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. 284 pp.

Torture and Modernity: Self, Society and State in Modern Iran. Darius M. Rejali. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993. 290 pp.

In the 1960s and 1970s, a small group of anthropologists and other social scientists from North American universities (and a few European ones), myself included, began carrying out research in Iran. Most of us underwent our first fieldwork there. This was the first true cohort of Western-trained researchers to ever work in that nation. The brief but productive period of work essentially ended in 1979 with the Iranian revolu-

tion. The glimpse many of these researchers obtained of Iranian civilization during this period was extraordinarily compelling, but in retrospect the time was far too limited to allow us to come fully to grips with Iran on its own terms. At that time there was also an inadequate appreciation of the special relationships between our own governments and the Pahlavi regime and how those relationships both enabled our research and shaped the cultural phenomena we were observing and analyzing.

In the 17 years since the revolution that brought the Islamic regime to power in Iran, social science has changed in the West. What we once recognized as standard research and analytical techniques have been called into question. Looking at Iran today with tools developed in an intellectual as well as a historical past produces a kind of theoretical vertigo. Since few of us

have been able to do fieldwork there again, we are of necessity involved in an odd mix of retrospective analysis and studies of "culture at a distance."

The task of making sense of Iran has not been rendered easier by these two recent books, which cover extraordinarily disparate themes: one deals with the culturally situated practice of institutionalized torture in Iran and the other analyzes the postrevolutionary Iranian exile television industry of Los Angeles. The two topics could hardly be more different. Neither of these books was written by an anthropologist. Darius M. Rejali is a political scientist, and Hamid Naficy is a specialist in media studies. Yet reading the books in tandem, I was struck by a communality of themes that not only provides additional insight into Iranian cultural dynamics but also speaks powerfully to current concerns in American anthropology.

Few societies are as invested in a search for their own identity as Iran. The historical, linguistic, religious, and ethnic diversity of the nation makes such a quest perhaps inevitable. This process is dynamic, of course, and Iranians are continually involved both with expansion and contraction of their cultural vision. This is a powerful theme that pervades both Rejali's study of torture and Naficy's investigation of television.

Darius M. Rejali makes it clear that torture in Iranian society is a deeply rooted cultural institution. The surprise for some Western readers will be how remarkably spiritual the practice is both for the tortured and for the torturers. The common bond between torturer and tortured is the intense desire for the maintenance of purity. In the case of the torturer of whatever historical period, the use of torture ensures the integrity of the ideological cast of society. This is equally true in the 19th-century, premodern Qajar regime, the modernist Pahlavi regime, and the postrevolutionary Islamic regime. For the tortured, the process often becomes a way to manifest spiritual integrity through suffering. In this regard, the process of "carceral rationality" (p. 176) plods forward to an inevitable, horrific result.

Rejali's account makes for grisly reading. It is not pleasant to hear of prisoners forced to chant, "This is not a prison, it is a university. We are happy to be here," as they watch others die, or to hear of prison guards marrying then raping and executing female prisoners in order not to be accused of killing virgins. However, these stories prove his point that the history of torture, like the history of sexuality, proceeds in a course independent from other social and political developments. Torture, like all other social institutions, exists in a cultural context, and the drive to impose a vision of purity on others in an Iranian setting is a

powerful rationalization for essentially inhumane treatment.

The Iranian exiles in Los Angeles are also involved in a search for personal and cultural purity: essential Iranian culture. As exiles, their essential Iranian culture is lost to them, and the pain is acute. The search for a pure cultural core is difficult. Iran is a multiethnic, multireligious culture. Armenian and Assyrian Christians, Jews, and Arabic- and Turkish-speaking Sunni Muslims identify, along with Persian speaking Shi'a Muslims, as Iranian citizens.

The odd postmodern discovery of identity through commercial television both defines and unifies this diverse community in a way that was perhaps never realized in Iran itself. Naficy's detailed account of the Los Angeles ethnic television industry—replete with reader surveys, tables, and program lists—may be the definitive study of a specific television audience. A profile of television programming for this million-person exile group (including Iranians outside of Los Angeles reached through satellite broadcasts) is able to make a point that could never have easily been proven by researchers working in prerevolutionary Iran: that the Iranian community truly embodies diversity within cultural unity. To appeal to all who call themselves Iranian, the divisive elements must be downplayed in the public culture. In such a community, what "counts" as Iranian must minimize religious, linguistic, and ethnic differences. This is reinforced by the fact that much of the economic backing for the programming is from Iranian Jews and Armenians. After eliminating all that is controversial, a bare core of the symbolic trappings of civilization is left: music, poetry, discourse, and visual symbols. The exile television industry takes these materials and "fetishizes" (in Naficy's terms) Iranian culture.

Neither the form of institutionalized torture as it developed in Iran over the past two centuries nor the development of television as an Iranian public cultural medium arose in a cultural vacuum. Both are the result of Iran's interaction with Western culture. This forms a second, powerful unifying theme in both studies. It is noteworthy that discussion of major Iranian critics of Westernization, notably the sociologist Jalal al-e Ahmad, is a common theme in both studies.

Institutionalized torture as presented by Rejali is seen as a tool emerging in direct response to the development of the modern Iranian state, which in turn was forged as a result of the direct challenges posed by the Western world in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. The need to develop modern military and educational institutions, with disciplined soldiers and citizens loyal to the ideals of the state, necessitated the practice of state purification through purging of oppo-

sitionist forces. To this end, torture was seen as both a ritual and an instrumentality.

Often the resistance to the state on the part of the citizenry had to do with aspects of the modernization process itself. At times the citizenry was opposed to economic or political policy that allied the throne with foreign powers. At other times the public was pushing a reluctant government toward reforms inspired through knowledge of human rights advances elsewhere. This push-pull syndrome became a mode of interaction between the government and the people that continued through three dynasties and is pervasive in the Islamic Republic today. The ideological controversies merely shifted, depending on what seemed to be a plausible threat to the state at any given time, from democracy to secularism to communism to Western dominance—all of which ultimately emanated from the West. Thus, both the practice of torture and the reasons for which torture was employed resulted from the interaction between traditional Iranian culture and Western culture.

Television is of course a Western invention that was introduced into Iran on a massive scale during the final two decades of the Pahlavi dynasty. It was a particular interest of the Shah and the Empress as the hallmark of a “modern society.” Thousands of middle- and upper-middle-class Iranians born after World War II were involved with the development of television (and film) in Iran. At the time of the Iranian revolution, those individuals were under direct attack by the Islamic regime as purveyors of corrupt Western culture. Many fled to the United States, where they found they could make a living, as Naficy shows, with the technical and administrative skills they had learned in Iran. Moreover, the kinds of programs that brought them under attack by the Islamic authorities—music, dance, romantic and mystic poetry, and political discussion—were exactly the things the exile community was longing to see. In this way the continuance of Iranian culture in the West through a quintessential Western medium was preordained, even before the Is-

lamic revolution, through the extensive process of Westernization undertaken by the government of the Shah.

As Naficy shows, a great irony in this pattern is that one set of television broadcast programs showing in the United States today emanates from Iran. It is called the Aftab (Sun) Network. Like American-based programming, it eschews religion and other divisive topics and sticks to cultural themes, largely travel, literature, and history. It is produced by members of the same cohort of television professionals that engendered the Los Angeles television producers and directors. Nevertheless, the Aftab programs show Iran today in a positive light—a direct contradiction to the pervasive view among the Los Angeles Iranian community that Iran had deteriorated after the revolution. Some members of the émigré community in Los Angeles called for a boycott of this programming, but to no avail. It remained nonpolitical and attracted both advertisers and viewers. Its presence has “led to the gradual crumbling of the barriers that fetishization had erected in the path of understanding the complexities of life both in Iran and in exile” (p. 171).

In the accounts given by Rejali and Naficy, there is much food for thought for all students of cultural process. We who wrote about the tribes, villages, and cities of Iran in the 1960s and 1970s as if they were cultural isolates can no longer do this in good conscience. Iranians have, since the late 18th century, lived in a world that has become increasingly dominated by a dialogue with the forces of Westernization that has both enriched their own vibrant culture and at the same time threatened its destruction. Whether native-born or adopted residents, we who live and work in the West on a permanent basis cannot fully appreciate the power of this dialogue, as James Clifford’s most recent writings have warned. As social scientists, however, it is our duty to try our best not to ignore it as we try to interpret nations as fascinating and complex as Iran. ■

East African Politics

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The Culture of Politics in Modern Kenya. Angelique Haugerud. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. 266 pp.

Networks of Dissolution: Somalia Undone. Anna Simons. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995. 246 pp.

Understanding and analysis of postcolonial Africa is well underway within anthropology, but unlike the hegemonic postcolonialism of English studies, anthropology’s focus tends to be much broader than a dialogue between colonizer and colonized. Haugerud’s concluding sentences bring home the critical lesson of the monographs under review: the dangers of an aestheticized politics.