

MODERN IRAN

GRANT M. FARR



MODERN IRAN

A Volume in the Comparative
Societies Series

GRANT FARR

Portland State University

HAROLD R. KERBO, Series Editor

California Polytechnic State University



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This book is dedicated to my mother, Agnes Farr.

EDITOR'S PREFACE

In one of the early scenes of the movie *Reds*, the US revolutionary journalist John Reed, just back from covering the beginning of World War I, is asked by a roomful of business leaders, "What is this War really about?" John Reed stands, and stops all conversation with a one word reply—"profits." Today, war between major industrial nations would disrupt profits much more than create money for a military industrial complex. Highly integrated global markets and infrastructures support the daily life of suburban families in Chicago and urban squatter settlements in Bombay. These ties produce a social and economic ecology that transcends political and cultural boundaries.

The world is a very different place than it was for our parents and grandparents. Those rare epic events of world war certainly invaded their everyday lives and futures, but we now find that daily events thousands of miles away, in countries large and small, have a greater impact on North Americans than ever before, with the speed of this impact multiplied many times in recent decades. Our standard of living, jobs, and even prospects of living in a healthy environment have never before been so dependent on outside forces.

Yet, there is much evidence that North Americans have less easy access to good information about the outside world than even a few years ago. Since the end of the Cold War, newspaper and television coverage of events in other countries has dropped dramatically. It is difficult to put much blame on the mass media, however: international news seldom sells any more. There is simply less interest.

It is not surprising, then, that Americans know comparatively little about the outside world. A recent *Los Angeles Times* survey provides a good example: People in eight countries were asked five basic questions about current events of the day. Americans were dead last in their knowledge, trailing people from Canada, Mexico, England, France, Spain, Germany, and Italy.* It is also not surprising that the annual report published by the Swiss World Economic Forum always ranks American executives quite low in their international experience and understanding.

Such ignorance harms American competitiveness in the world economy in many ways. But there is much more. Seymour Martin Lipset put it nicely in one of his recent books: "Those who know only one country know no country" (Lipset 1996: 17). Considerable time spent in a foreign country is one of the best stimulants for a sociological

*For example, while only 3 percent of Germans missed all five questions, 37 percent of the Americans did (*Los Angeles Times*, March 16, 1994).

imagination: Studying or doing research in other countries makes us realize how much we really, in fact, have learned about our own society in the process. Seeing other social arrangements, ways of doing things, and foreign perspectives allows for far greater insight to the familiar, our own society. This is also to say that ignorance limits solutions to many of our own serious social problems. How many Americans, for example, are aware that levels of poverty are much lower in all other advanced nations and that the workable government services in those countries keep poverty low? Likewise, how many Americans are aware of alternative means of providing health care and quality education or reducing crime?

We can take heart in the fact that sociology in the United States has become more comparative in recent decades. A comparative approach, of course, was at the heart of classical European sociology during the 1800s. But as sociology was transported from Europe to the United States early in the 20th century, it lost much of this comparative focus. In recent years, sociology journals have published more comparative research. There are large data sets with samples from many countries around the world in research seeking general laws on issues such as the causes of social mobility or political violence, all very much in the tradition of Durkheim. But we also need much more of the old Max Weber. His was a qualitative historical and comparative perspective (Smelser 1976; Ragin and Zaret 1983). Weber's methodology provides a richer understanding of other societies, a greater recognition of the complexity of social, cultural, and historical forces shaping each society. Ahead of his time in many ways, C. Wright Mills was planning a qualitative comparative sociology of world regions just before his death in 1961 (Horowitz 1983: 324). [Too few American sociologists have yet to follow in his footsteps.]

Following these trends, sociology textbooks in the United States have also become more comparative in content in recent years. And while this tendency must be applauded, it is not enough. Typically there is an example from Japan here, another from Germany there, and so on haphazardly for a few countries in different subject areas as the writer's knowledge of these bits and pieces allows. What we need are the textbook equivalents of a richer Weberian comparative analysis, a qualitative comparative analysis of the social, cultural, and historical forces that have combined to make relatively unique societies around the world. It is this type of comparative material that can best help people in the United States overcome their lack of understanding about other countries and allow them to see their own society with much greater insight.

The Comparative Societies Series, of which this book is a part, has been designed as a small step in filling this need. We have currently selected 12 countries on which to focus: Japan, Thailand, Switzerland, Mexico, Eritria, Hungary, Germany, China, India, Iran, Brazil, and Russia. We selected these countries as representatives of major world regions and cultures, and each will be examined in separate books written by talented sociologists. All of the basic sociological issues and topics will be covered: Each book will begin with a look at the important historical and geographical

forces shaping the society, then turn to basic aspects of social organization and culture. From there each book will proceed to examine the political and economic institutions of the specific country, along with the social stratification, the family, religion, education, and finally urbanization, demography, social problems, and social change.

Although each volume in the Comparative Societies Series is of necessity brief to allow for use as supplementary readings in standard sociology courses, we have tried to assure that this brief coverage provides students with sufficient information to better understand each society, as well as their own. The ideal would be to transport every student to another country for a period of observation and learning. Realizing the unfortunate impracticality of this ideal, we hope to do the next best thing—to at least mentally move these students to a country very different from their own, provide something of the everyday reality of the people in these other countries, and demonstrate how the tools of sociological analysis can help them see these societies as well as their own with much greater understanding.

Harold R. Kerbo
San Luis Obispo, CA
June 1997

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

In 1979 Iran experienced a revolution that ranks among the most important and profound in world history. Millions of Iranians took to the streets in the cities and towns of Iran willing, it seemed, to give their lives in the effort to overthrow the Shah of Iran and his ruling oligarchy. The Iranian people, mostly unarmed, were able to drive the Shah of Iran from power. Iranian society was turned upside down and profoundly transformed. The religious clergy, with the Ayatollah Khomeini at the head, established an Islamic government, which appeared to bring back an older form of religious rule but which, in fact, created a kind of political Islam that the Islamic world had not seen before.

The United States and Iran have become bitter enemies in the aftermath of that revolution. Americans continue to view Iranians and Iran in a negative light. In 1979 Iranian youth stormed the American Embassy in Tehran and held American diplomats hostage for more than one year. Each night during the hostage crisis American television showed the American viewing public tens of thousands of Iranians demonstrating at the US Embassy in Tehran chanting, "Death to America." It was a time of great emotion and anger in both the United States and Iran. Eight American servicemen lost their lives, and many Iranians in the United States were insulted or mistreated.

In the aftermath of the Islamic revolution of 1979, the Iranian leaders told their people that everything from the United States, and the West in general, was bad. America was, and still is, referred to as the "Great Satan" (the former Soviet Union is the "Little Satan"). Iranian leaders continue to this day to preach of the evils of American life and society. Almost 20 years after the Iranian revolution, the United States and Iran still do not have diplomatic relations, and the rhetoric of distrust and hatred continues on both sides. To many Americans, Iran still appears to be a country of religious fanatics, troublemakers, terrorists, and religious zealots—traditionalist, bearded, and anti-Western.

Yet there is another side to this story. Historically, there have been good relations between the United States and Iran, and between Americans and Iranians. Thousands of Iranian university students have studied in the United States, and over a quarter million Iranians now live in the United States, most, but not all, of whom came to the United States after the revolution. Over the years, many Americans, including this author, have worked and traveled in Iran. Americans have generally been well treated and graciously accepted in Iran, even during the Islamic revolution.

While the West now thinks of Iran as a country of violence and fanaticism, it is also a society that has produced great poetry and beautiful

literature, a society of enlightened philosophers and learned scholars. It is a country of great buildings and beautiful gardens and parks. Iranians are gracious hosts. Anyone invited to an Iranian's home will be treated with great respect and courtesy. Iranian society also values many of the same things American society values, appearances aside. In Iran the family and community are important. In sum, Iranians are gracious, cultured, and enlightened people, with a long tradition of culture and history.

In fact, as this book will show, we in the West know very little about Iran. Iran is vitally important to the West, if for no other reason than that it has enormous oil reserves, yet we know very little about who the Iranians are, their history and culture, the way their society works, and how they see the world. As we will find out, even though Iranians geographically are part of the Middle East, their cultural background is not Arabic or Turkish, as is most of the Middle East. While Iran shares much with other countries around it, it is also unique, with its own particular way of doing things. In fact, Iran has more in common with the West than we appear to know.

The challenge of this book is to understand both sides of this paradox. To do this, we will examine Iran from several points of view. This examination will use the tools of sociology to look at Iranian society. How does their social structure work, how do the Iranians see the world, and what is important in their society? We will find that to understand Iran, we must know something of its history and geography. Iran has a long and colorful history that goes back for over three thousand years. Iranians know their historical heritage and are proud of it.

This examination of Iran will also look at Iranian geology and geography. The mountains, plains, and deserts of Iran play an important role in shaping Iranian society, just as the geography of the United States has played an important role in the shaping of American society. In addition, it will be important to look at the location of Iran in the world. Between east and west, and between north and south, Iran's central position in the crossroads between Europe and Asia has allowed it to play an important political and economic role in the region, but has also opened it to attack from marauding armies.

We will also look at some of the important social institutions in Iran. What is the role of the family in Iran, and is it different from the role of the family in the United States? How do Iranians find a mate, get married, raise their children, and treat their elderly? Are the roles and expectations of women and men different in Iran than in the West, and why is this?

We will also examine the role of religion. The religion of Islam plays a very important role in Iranian society, perhaps a more important role than religion plays in American society. But what are the basic tenets of Islam, and how are they different from the basic tenets of other religions, especially Judaism and Christianity, to which it is closely related? And how is Islam interpreted in the daily life of the average Iranian?

To solve this paradox of the two Irans, we will also look at social inequality in Iran. Are there social classes in Iran, and if so, how many and how are they determined? Can individuals improve their position in the Iranian social stratification system? How? And probably of more importance, what are the consequences of being upper or lower class?

We will also examine the demographic characteristics of Iran. We will see that Iranian society is growing rapidly. It has a high birth rate and declining death rate. Why is this, and what are the consequences for Iranian society? An examination of the cities of Iran is also of importance. Cities of the Middle East, including Iran, existed much earlier than those in Europe and the United States. In addition, cities in Iran are growing rapidly not just from the high birth rate, but also because people are leaving the countryside and moving into the urban areas. Iranian cities are becoming crowded and lack proper services.

Finally we must see Iran in the bigger picture, that is, in its relations to its neighbors and the other countries of the world. Iran is part of the world system of countries. It is embedded in a series of concentric webs of obligations and rights with other countries and peoples. Starting from the smallest web, Iran is the center of Persian culture. Other Persian-speaking countries in the surrounding area, including Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and parts of Uzbekistan look to Iran as the heartland of Persian language and literature.

Iran is also an Islamic country and shares with other Islamic countries obligations to the rituals and duties of the Islamic faith. These Islamic obligations include the pilgrimage to Mecca and the care of important Islamic shrines, as well as political and economic support for Islamic movements around the world.

Iran is also located in the area of the world now called the Middle East. Although culturally distinct from other Middle Easterners like the Turks, Arabs, or Israelis, Iranians nonetheless share much in common with their neighbors in the region. Iran belongs to OPEC, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, for instance, and is an important oil-producing nation.

Finally, Iran is a significant country in the world of nations. It belongs to the United Nations and has economic, political, and cultural relations with many countries. Despite the economic ban placed on Iran by the United States, Iran trades actively with most of the European nations and Japan. It has close ties with China and Russia, as well with other countries in the region, particularly Pakistan. Historically, Iran was never colonized by the West, as were many of the other Middle Eastern countries, but nonetheless its development was clearly shaped by its association with the Western powers.

I would like to express my gratitude to my wife Mary Ellen Page Farr, for her help on this manuscript, and to my colleagues Professor Veronica Dujon, Lee Haggerty, Arezu Movahed, Robert Liebman, and Robert Shotola. These dear friends suffered my tedious chatter about this

book and listened kindly, and their suggestions have helped immensely. My greatest gratitude goes to Professor Leonard Cain. Dr. Cain patiently read every word of this manuscript, correcting or questioning every strange usage, every misspelling, and every misplaced comma. He helped me enormously, and I am a better writer because of him.

There are two technical points to make. First, there is no agreed-upon transliteration of Persian words into English. Therefore, I have tried to use the most common English spellings of the Persian or Arabic words so that readers who might see the words elsewhere would recognize them. My apologies to the linguistic purists. Second, when written by Moslems, the name of the Prophet Mohammed is followed by a salutation, generally "peace be upon him." For editorial efficiency I have not done this. I mean no disrespect to the Islamic religion.

Finally, I write this book with deep affection and profound respect for the Iranian people. I have lived and traveled in Iran for many years and was a professor at an Iranian university. I have almost always been treated with the greatest respect, courtesy, and hospitality in Iran, even by strangers who did not know me. I continue to have friends in the Iranian community, both in Iran and in the United States.

Iran is a complex society, and I would never claim to understand it completely. I have tried to be fair to all sides of the Iranian story and to describe and analyze the situation in Iran honestly and objectively. Iranians are wonderful people, and they deserve to have their story told.

Grant Farr

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