Stephanie Cronin, *Social Histories of Iran: Modernism and Marginality in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021) 306 pp. Hardback $114.95, paperback $33.95, eBook $23.63.

Social Histories of Iran looks at Iran and the Middle East from a comparative perspective. Stephanie Cronin's primary goal is to challenge Iranian "methodological nationalism"—an academic approach to Iran that presents the country as exceptional—and to demonstrate more similarity to surrounding and contemporary countries than previously imagined (25). The current scholarly literature on the Middle East, while rich in monographs, lacks comparative perspectives that show the Middle East as a dynamic ensemble rather than an amalgamation of precisely bordered nation-states. In this regard, Cronin is a trailblazer of comparative Iranian studies. Cronin's work vis-à-vis the broader body of Middle Eastern studies is corrective and experimental. It challenges current narratives surrounding Iran and its history of modernization. As it is still an experiment, Cronin does not go much further than taking this corrective stance: it is up to the reader to take Cronin's new comparative narratives and understand what significance they hold outside of Iran.

This limitation should not be viewed as a weakness as the book does not aim to be a comparative analysis of Iran. Instead, it serves as an introduction to comparative Middle Eastern social history; its ideal audience being later undergraduate or early graduate students. More advanced scholars will still find the book valuable, but will most likely use it as a nexus for the rich catalogue of references that Cronin has compiled on Iran and other Middle Eastern countries that span a wide range of topics: economy, policy, culture, morality, sexuality, and crime, to name the largest ones.

The book is organized unusually. In spite of being a work of social history, it follows a thematic structure rather than a chronological one. Cronin splits the narrative in two parts: the first on Iran, and the second on the wider Middle East. The opening chapter explores the Iranian Revolution of 1979, and then, in the following chapters, moves backward in time to Iran's entry into modernity under the Qajar. While this could be perceived as convoluted, Cronin's introduction clarifies the book's organization from the onset. The Iranian Revolution is the talismanic event that drives methodological nationalism and its narratives of Iranian exceptionalism. The goal of scholarly work revolves around understanding what role Iran itself played in fostering such a powerful political event. Cronin chooses to go in the opposite direction, using surrounding Middle Eastern countries to show that Iran shared similar trajectories, conditions, and qualities with many of its peers, most notably the Ottoman Empire and Egypt.

Additionally, Cronin does not limit the first part of her work to being a monograph of its namesake, Iran. She routinely discusses conditions in other Middle Eastern countries, and relies on evidence and examples from the wider Middle East to make more complete arguments about Iran. Cronin takes this a step further with each new chapter of the book. Indeed, her comparative approach is not simply that of comparing Iran to other states; it is that of comparing each topic at hand with something related, contemporary, and relevant. For instance, in the final chapter, Cronin discusses political issues surrounding the veil in the Muslim world. The discussion swells into women's attire in general, and also opens itself into examining the politics (and even the policy) of men's attire. Thus, for Cronin, women's attire can only be adequately understood comparatively, in tandem with men's attire; just as Iran can only be viewed through the larger Middle East. The book is at its most valuable and most informative when Cronin demonstrates her ability to gain insight on one topic by temporarily moving to a close relative before returning to the central question. These comparative tangents can range from a brief paragraph to many pages, depending on the richness of the topic.

Aside from drawing a new narrative about Iran, Cronin is also interested in reinvigorating the margins with agency. As a book of *social* history, the primary focus of each chapter is the people rather than the state and how their actions shaped Iran's entry into modernity. Cronin heavily relies on Michel Foucault for her understanding of marginality, but is not limited to it. She argues that a Foucauldian perspective overestimates the coercive power of the state and elites and underestimates the agency of the marginal (159-60). Despite being marginalized, the "dangerous classes" (the lumpenproletariat, bread rioters, prostitutes, to name a few) were not just passive receptors of state violence and elite manipulation. This argument is brilliantly illustrated in the second chapter, "Bread and Justice in Qajar Iran." Here, Cronin argues that bread rioters were motivated by a sense of moral outrage at the failure of elites to maintain a stable paternalistic relationship with them, not because of an abstract desperation by an empty stomach. Following her experimental style, Cronin chooses to substitute the category of the "subaltern" for that of the "dangerous classes." This change is exceptional, as she is meticulous in her definition of the "dangerous classes," clearly outlining sections of the population that comprise them. Thus, she does not fall into the trap of being too comfortable with the loose and abstract category of the "subaltern," which could prove alienating to younger scholars reading this work. Additionally, limiting her usage of subalternity allows her to discuss matters of class with more freedom. By the end of the book, the Iranian-Middle Eastern *social* that Cronin depicts cannot fall comfortably within any conventional analytical category, be it Marxian class, Foucauldian marginality, post-colonial subalternity.

While focusing largely on the agency of the marginalized, Cronin does not shy away from discussing their relationship with the state and the elites they are pitted against. The state employs a number of methods to deal with the marginalized:

violence, appeasement, distraction, co-optation, social and political engineering, and, most interestingly, the "twin processes of repression and reform" (111). Simultaneously, the poor and marginalized are given a new depth: they are not always combative or passive. They are at times elusive, confusing, and even dramatic in their attempts to navigate the obstacles imposed upon them by the state and its elites. Most interesting is the exploration of the entertainer-prostitute Mahvash (123). An example of the possible liminality dangerous classes can exist in, Mahvash' narrative is at once cultural, moral, and sexual. Her story challenges simplistic narratives of the passivity and submissiveness of women, while demonstrating the moral outlook others had upon her despite her status as a prostitute.

While generally strong, Cronin's argument for agency does have some issues. In one particular section, Cronin explores some tactics that elites would use to appease bread rioters. One of these tactics is scapegoating, where elites would divert the rioters' violence onto another group, most notably Iranian Jews (77). Here, the idea of agency comes into question: were the rioters, as Cronin argues, true political agents expressing their authentic political anger; or were they a violent mob easily manipulated by the elites? Is it overestimating Foucauldian state power if elites are able to transmute issues of the moral economy into matters of antisemitism? Disappointingly, Cronin does not explore this tension between the agency of the marginalized and their susceptibility to elite manipulation. Cronin will simply examine, for the most part, cases that demonstrate agency, and then will also examine a few rare events that are problematic to her own narrative. Given that there is no mention of such a tension, it is unclear whether the book is aware of its existence at all.

It must also be mentioned that the book does not include a conclusion, ending abruptly with the final arguments of Chapter 6. Perhaps, given its experimental nature, the book would have benefitted from a conclusion to set a scholarly agenda inviting further work to be done following Cronin's comparative methodology. A final chapter dedicated to unpacking some of analytical tensions would be well-received by the reader. At the very least, these tensions could be acknowledged rather than left unaddressed.

Social Histories of Iran is a successful experiment within the comparative school. Cronin casts a seemingly wide net, but each section lends itself to solidifying the validity of her methodological experiment, thus forming a coherent whole despite the seemingly distinct themes explored. The book is not spotless in its approach, but it will prove valuable for upcoming scholars in the field of Middle Eastern studies.

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