International Journal of Communication 2 (2008), Book Review 289-294 1932-8036/2008BKR0289

Mehdi Semati, ed., **Media, Culture and Society in Iran: Living with Globalization and the Islamic State**, London, New York: Routledge, 2008, 277 pp., $108.97 (hardcover).

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This timely volume by Mehdi Semati is a real breath of fresh air for anyone interested in gaining genuine insight into the complex and fascinating developments in Iranian society today. Iran's consequential geopolitical situation, its oil, its prominent political and cultural position in the Middle East and the wider Muslim world as well as its troubled relationship with the U.S. since its 1979 revolution, have all showered it with immense outsider interest — and oftentimes interference — in its internal affairs. Yet frustratingly enough, nuanced scholarship on social and cultural developments inside Iran are hard to come by, whether in English or even Persian.

This weakness in scholarship is in great measure due to lacking on-the-ground research. Not surprisingly, then, one of this book's greatest strengths lies in its collection of an all-Iranian cast of authors , most of whom are based in Iranian academic institutions and have access to highly informative surveys and data that are out of reach to Iran scholars abroad, with the rest nurturing close research ties to their country of origin. The fact that some of the pieces were written in Persian and subsequently translated, is tribute to the original and local research offered in this volume. (Although it must have rendered the editor's job quite challenging because on top of the endeavor to bring together this wide array of articles, clearly there was some heavy editing involved as well.) Another great strength lies simply in the book's subject matter. In addressing political, religious and social questions through an examination of the cultural field, the pieces throw light onto culture as a field of political contestation and struggle, and as such, are not just a contribution to the field of Iranian studies, but also more broadly, to the fields of political culture and cultural politics. Furthermore, the chapters do justice to the book's subtitle "Living with Globalization and the Islamic State" by couching the discussions in the dynamic intersection between localizing and universalizing forces (variably termed traditional versus modernist) in Iran today.

In his introduction to the volume, Semati neatly divides Iran's post-revolutionary decades into the four periods of the Revolution and War years guided by spiritual and political leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1979-1988); the Reconstruction era spearheaded by Akbar Rafsanjani (1989-1997); the Reform years led by Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005); and finally, the Post-Reform period headed by fundamentalists embodied in the figure of current President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005 - ?). Despite the state's severe clampdown in recent years on civil society organizations, intellectuals, journalists, artists, labor union, student and women's rights activists, as well as the Interne, and despite his own analysis that the reform era's promises of a more democratic society ultimately crumbled at socioeconomic obstacles that concerned the greater majority of Iran's population, Semati concludes that "it will be the young, urban, and educated population with access to information and communication technologies that shapes the future of Iran."

While even a cursory look at Iran's demographics would confirm optimistic predictions about Iran's progressive youth shaping its future, recent developments — including the March 2008 Parliamentary Elections that saw the victory of a majority conservatives with 42% of the votes cast by young Iranians below age 30 — would caution against any fast conclusions about what ultimately the outcome of greater youth political participation will mean. Semati's apparent desire and motivation to present a more realistic picture of Iranian media, culture and society that counters endless accounts of an Iran situated within the Manichean "axis of evil" narrative that continues to misrepresent and demonize the country "for ideological purposes," sometimes lead to overly optimistic forecasts about the future of Iranian society.

The book is organized into three parts. Part I constitutes a series of micro-studies on "new and old media in Iran." Part II presents three chapters that are more overarching in addressing "religion, state, and culture." Finally, Part III contains a single concluding chapter "Whither Iran?" by Majid Tehranian that gives an overview of Iranian history and culminates in a defiant and uplifting prognosis on the country and its future. Although Semati's introduction serves well in setting the tone for the chapters following in Part I, it would have strengthened the volume's composition to reverse the order of Part I and II. While the first 10 chapters deal with case studies on the press, Internet, youth media habits, music, satellite TV, video, advertising, poetry, Iranian émigré cinema and finally home-brewed cinema, the last three chapters deal with fundamental philosophical, political and societal questions, and as such, would have provided a rich context for the discussion of the chapters on new and old media in Part I. In line with this analysis, I will first review Part II before returning to Part I.

Among the three chapters of Part II, "Secularization in Iranian society" (Chapter 13) by Yousef Ali Abazari, Abbas Varij Kazemi, and Mehdi Faraji (originally in Persian) posits an original theoretical framework for the analysis of secularizing processes in the Iranian context. The authors argue that while Iranian society is "utterly religious," the process of the specialization and autonomy of sub-systems (economy, science, polity) also means that religion itself becomes a sub-system that can provide society with some of its functional requirements. Apart from the fact that they see secularization as inevitable due to this specialization of various sub-systems, they argue that secularization in the Iranian context does not mean less religiosity on the individual level. However, relying on conducted research, they argue that people's religious activities in the public sphere have decreased due to "system interference" (government involvement) in mosques and the clergy's involvement at the system level. Mosques, the authors argue, are fundamentally different from churches in that they have been communal spaces outside of direct power structures. However, with the Islamic Republic and the government's insertion into this sphere, mosques have become "a place of strategic acts (utilitarian and opportunistic) rather than that of genuine spiritual acts," and so "hypocrisy pollutes the context and diminishes the volume of religious acts." It is this hypocrisy that breeds a crisis of identity and motivation. Hence, the authors argue that while secularization in the Iranian context may even mean the devaluation of public religious acts and symbols, it does not necessarily mean the decline in religious belief. Indeed, the increase in non-governmental religious activity in post-revolutionary Iran supports the authors' thesis. But one central assumption of the thesis begs further investigation, namely, whether people necessarily see pious and utilitarian acts as

irreconcilable; in other words, whether people necessarily regard this-worldly concerns to pollute religiosity, or whether the links between this world and the other-worldly are much more fluid.

"Religious intellectualism, globalization, and social transformation in Iran" (Chapter 12) written in Persian by Abbas Varij Kazemi in effect reveals a similar logic to that of the chapter discussed above, which is that religion needs to be taken out of the worldly sphere in order to reclaim its value for humanity. In its more pronounced objective, however, it pays tribute to the theoretical groundwork laid down by Iran's religious intellectuals. The author argues that these intellectuals advanced two goals simultaneously in the 1990s: 1) indigenizing modern principles into the structures of traditional society and establishing modern concepts such as freedom, rule of law, and civil society; and 2), injecting religion and religious principles into the global democratic discourse with the endeavor to build a universal model. The author here argues that in a religious society like Iran's, various interpretations of religion can impede or expand the project of modernity. He posits that the discussed intelligentsia has served Iran by doing the latter, and concludes: "fundamental change in the socio-political structure of Iranian society cannot happen without a transformation in its epistemological structure," and that the work of these intellectuals has been indispensable precisely for this very project.

The remaining piece in Part II provides a fascinating account of the bifurcation of political Islam from traditional Islam, and the theoretical consequences of this for the position of women in society. In "Fundamentalism, gender, and the discourse of veiling (Hijab) in contemporary Iran," Fatemeh Sadeghi argues that the transformation of traditional Islam to a political ideology brought with it new theories that culminated in the two phases of Shi'ite fundamentalism in post-revolutionary Iran. The first phase of this religio-political doctrine allowed women to occupy a different social sphere, a change from traditional Islam's seclusion to segregation, because the traditional doctrine could no longer account for social transformations. The fundamentalist discourse of veiling re-established a strong dichotomy of female/male, private/public, sexual/social, which was based on an essentialist reading of man/woman that disregarded social constructions of gender. After the Iran-Iraq war, Sadeghi explains, a new kind of pragmatism prevailed that ushered in the second phase of fundamentalist Islam. Within this framework, veiling is no longer just a cultural signification, but a political one that above the woman's identity highlights the conflict between Islam and the West. Pointing to the Islamic Republic's stress on veiling, Sadeghi lucidly explicates that a "rejection of veiling signifies a failure in establishing an Islamic utopia and a defeat in the war against the West."

While the chapters above deal with three of the most important challenges facing Iran, namely questions surrounding the relationship between religion and democracy as well as women's role in society, the first 10 chapters of the book offer precious insight into new and old media issues. The first chapter, "The Iranian press, state, and civil society" by Gholam Khiabany explores the role of the press on civil society. The author further explores the reform movement's strong association with the press, and argues for a more nuanced understanding of Iranian politics and society that departs from the "solitary focus on state and civil society dichotomy." He further argues that the reform movement (and its affiliated press) failed because it was an elitist-centered model of organization and leadership that was unable to free itself from the framework of the Islamic Republic. This critique is not only heaped on the reformists from outside analysts, it's one that the reformists themselves are internally discussing in order to get out of the

political deadlock they've found themselves in for years, unable to inspire the confidence of voters. Khiabany then asks for a critical analysis of media and democracy in Iran to move beyond a liberal theory of the press which focuses on the repressive role of the state and fails to offer a "more complex examination of the contradictory nature of the Islamic state and its relation to media."

"The Politics of Internet in Iran" by Babak Rahimi, while offering a well-narrated history of state Internet policy, tends to leap into over-optimistic forecasts, such as "the Internet continues to pose an insurmountable threat to the clerical-led regime." Perhaps it is the nature of this subject — the Internet — that renders any analysis outdated by virtue of the speed at which developments in this field advance. Severe crackdown on the Internet in the past years means that many thousand sites, especially any sites with even remotely politically sensitive information are blocked and Iranians have to constantly reach for proxy sites to surf on the Web. Increasingly, the state is finding means of blocking most proxy sites as well, which makes for extremely limited access to information. In addition, state bodies are making use of the Internet to advance their own agendas. Rahimi himself admits that "a democratic breakthrough via the Internet is unduly optimistic" but he is extremely hopeful in the possibility of a virtual dissident community. One cannot help but wonder what the outcome of such a community could be in practice, even if it were to be gradually formed, considering that the Internet's heyday in the late Khatami years failed to provide tangible results to leap from virtual into real reality.

Kavous Seyed-Emami's research based on surveys of youth media consumption conducted in 1998-2005 is an eye-opener in its revelation that "most young people get their news through national television networks." In "Youth, politics, and media habits in Iran," Seyed-Emami investigates youth media habits but stops short of drawing conclusions about youth media use and political behavior. His research is thoroughly conducted and draws sober correlations that provide insight into the larger picture of Iran's media landscape and consumers' trust and use of the various outlets. While state TV was indicated in the surveys as the main channel for access to political news, followed by newspapers and the Internet as an emerging source, Persian satellite TV and radio use were not reported to be very high. Seyed-Emami then finds that youth trust the Internet most, followed by reformist newspapers (though this trust has also been decreasing compared to a few years ago when they had emerged as a genuine voice within civil society), then state TV and lagging behind, satellite TV. Other interesting findings of his study are the steady decline in interest in politics from 1998 to 2005, and the strong correlation between reading newspapers and interest in political news, as well as political activity and participation. Finally, Seyed-Emami contends that if he were to draw correlations between state TV consumption and political participation, he would assume an inverted relationship because he believes that negative coverage of the reformist government leads to greater cynicism. Needless to say, it would be interesting to continue the research and further investigate this relationship with view to the conservative government currently in power. In fact, if there is one chapter missing from this edited volume, it is a study of the politics of the Islamic Republic of Iran's Voice and Vision (state TV).

In examining rock music in Iran, Laudan Nooshin highlights the universalizing discourses that have emerged and are projecting a new understanding of national identity. In her brilliant article, "The language of rock: Iranian youth, popular music, and national identity," she paints the picture of a predominantly urban and cosmopolitan group of rock musicians. They are "connected to a global youth

culture primarily through the Internet" whose created discourse projects a universalizing and global consciousness that is in contrast to the nationalist and isolationist discourse of the Islamic Republic; and whose vision of national identity is both rooted at home and is outward-looking and cosmopolitan.

Fardin Alikhah's study of "The politics of satellite television in Iran" shows how the Islamic Republic has been struggling to formulate policy on a device that is viewed as a purveyor of foreign and expatriate Iranian values. Soon after the Iran-Iraq war, the government's stance on satellite TV relaxed, but while the ban has remained in place, it hasn't been strictly enforced, inadvertently allowing more than half of Iranian households access to foreign programming. The reformists tried to change the law and formally allow satellite TV, but interestingly enough, as Alikhah explains, "each time they had a bill, it coincided with unrest and protests instigated by these channels," forcing them to abort their endeavors. Although the popularity of expatriate Persian satellite TV channels has waned because "people are tired of the political squabbling on these channels," Alikhah concludes that satellite TV could still pose a serious challenge to the Islamic Republic in the long-term, but then devaluates his own prognosis by stating the possibility of the exact opposite, namely that satellite TV becomes irrelevant. The latter scenario would happen if people are given a greater stake in the country's politics.

Mahmoud Shahabi's, "The Iranian moral panic over video: a brief history and policy analysis," resonates in its discussion of government policy with many of the traditionalism versus modernism issues raised by the chapter above. Shahabi relies on theories on moral panic for the framework of his analysis, and points to the major elements of the rhetoric of crisis on video, namely protecting the Islamic revolution, family and community, but concludes that ultimately, legalization of video "was recognition of a reality that the state had to accept." In allowing video, the state shifted its focus to issues regarding satellite TV. What is interesting here is that the Iranian government has throughout the past decades tried to support its own artistic production in order to counter the invasion of foreign media content. A similar development is now discernible on state TV, where suspenseful serials (usually broadcast during holidays such as Ramadan) increasingly attract viewers away from programming on satellite television.

The next two chapters are "Sociolinguistic aspects of Persian advertising in post-revolutionary Iran" by Mohammad Amouzadeh and Manoochehr Tavangar, and "Trends in contemporary Persian poetry" by Alireza Anushiravani and Kavoos Hassanli. Both illustrate convincingly the reflection of debated issues in Iranian society — many of them squarely on the traditionalism vs. modernism intersection — in the cultural fields of advertising and poetry, respectively. Amouzadeh and Tavangar offer a qualitative analysis of the discourse in advertising, demonstrating the country's eagerness for openness as mirrored in the reform period advertising's symbolic use of English to denote the international status of a product, versus the post-war reconstruction era's preoccupation with reasserting nationalist ideology and local values. Similarly, Anushirvani and Hassanli, after a discussion of poetry's development in the past three decades, strike a positive note about innovative lyrical creations that reflect society's concerns.

The last two chapters of Part I both deal with cinema, one with homemade Iranian, the other with émigré Iranian cinema produced abroad. Hamid Naficy's article "Iranian Émigré cinema as a component of Iranian national cinema" gives an excellent overview and analysis of diaspora cinema, from a demography of the members of this community to a thematic and stylistic discussion of their work. He categorizes

these films as part of Iran's national cinema because "in an age of globalization national cinema is no longer limited to films produced in a country." Through a discussion of themes and specific films, Naficy reveals the issues of universality and specificity that are reflected in the discourses of these "accented" films. Zohreh T. Sullivan's brilliantly argued "Iranian cinema and the critique of absolutism" contends that Iranian art cinema filmmakers "reconceptualize cinema as a new site of contestation between meanings and truths, between power and knowledge" with the most prominent among them, Abbas Kiarostami, even increasingly refusing the god-like position of the author/director. After a discussion of several works, mostly by Kiarostami and Mohsen Makhmalbaf, and a list of characteristics of these works, she argues that these films are modernist in that they compel the audience to see and experience for itself, in a subversive and liberating move against efforts to forge "monolithic moralities and censorial evaluations." Iranian filmmakers are at the frontline of world cinema, out to question, interrogate and doubt not just narratives of the nation, but also narratives of modernity that concern people around the world. Sullivan then concludes that the "triumph of the cultural work of these films is that they reflect the failure of any system of absolutism."

Mehdi Semati's edited volume on Iran achieves no less than what it promises, namely to give readers a sense of the cultural dynamism in Iran and to provide a picture of how Iranians manage to live productively and creatively with globalization and the Islamic state despite great constraints. It further offers illuminating insight into the ways in which Iranian society negotiates between the forces of tradition and modernity, theocracy and democracy, isolation and globalization. And finally, it provides a glimpse into the work on culture and media practiced by academics inside Iran.