

Iran and the world: Societal change, self-images and worldviews in Iran since 1953

Abstracts

Saturday, November 14th, 2009
Orientalisches Seminar
Universität Basel
Maiengasse 51
Raum 105 (1. Stock)

SGMOIK

Die Schweizerische Gesellschaft Mittlerer Osten und Islamische Kulturen (SGMOIK/SSMOCI) versteht sich als Forum für alle, die mit der Region Westasien/Nordafrika beruflich zu tun haben oder ihre Ziele unterstützen: das Brückenschlagen zwischen wissenschaftlicher Forschung, Medien, Politik und der interessierten Öffentlichkeit. Sie wurde 1990 gegründet und umfasst gegen 200 Mitglieder. Näheres unter www.sagw.ch/sgmoik

SSMOCI

The Swiss Society for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (SGMOIK/SSMOCI) sees itself as a forum for all those who in one way or another deal with North Africa or the Middle East in their work. It sets great store by acting as an intermediary between academic research, the media, politics and the interested general public. It was founded in 1990 and has about 200 members. For more information see www.sagw.ch/sgmoik

Diese Veranstaltung wird unterstützt von/

This conference is sponsored by

Schweizerische Akademie der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften, Bern, Pierre F. Haesler, Rapperswil-Jona, Erdöl-Vereinigung, Zürich, Freiwillige Akademische Gesellschaft, Basel.



Grafik/Design

Atelier für Gestaltung, Sandra Gaiser, Arlesheim



UNI
BASEL
Orientalisches Seminar / Institut für Soziologie

Iran und die Welt
Iran and the World



International Conference, Basel
Friday/Saturday
13th-14th November 2009

International Conference

Iran and the world: Societal change, self-images and worldviews in Iran since 1953

Amir Sheikhzadegan, Fribourg

Metamorphosis of political discourse in Iran since 1953: An overview

The toppling of the Mosaddeq administration gave rise to a new modernist ideology advocated by the monarchic regime: Not the core values of modernity (freedom, equality, and fraternity) but simply a materialistic perception of it (expressed in modern economy, infrastructure, army etc.) was now on the agenda. Despite deep differences in worldviews, however, the Mosaddeq administration and the monarchic regime had two common denominators: Both were based on a romantic perception of modernity as well as a negative image of Iran as a backward country; and both strove for the integration of Iran in the modern world system.

The Islamist regime which replaced the monarchic regime in 1979 was based on a radically different ideology. Not integration in, but *exit* from the world system and the creation of a new world order was now on the agenda. However, the exit from the modern world system did not simply mean to retreat into a traditional way of life. While demonizing modernity and its capitalist as well as socialist advocates, the new regime also criticized traditionalism in Iran and cultivated a new utopian self-image, which transcended both modernism and traditionalism.

As the self-conception of the new regime as the ideal society was increasingly scratched by the non-utopian realities of Iranian society, the Iranian civil society began to seek its way back to the family of the world society. This

new rapprochement differs however in many respects from the modernism of the prerevolutionary time.

Firstly, its focus lies upon *individualism*, a crucial dimension of modernity, which was so far neglected in earlier modernisms. Secondly, it is rather an *introvert* perception of modernity than an *extrovert* one. Not combating imperialism or rectifying government policies, but self-criticism, a critical assessment of Iranian social habits, new hermeneutics of Islam and so on are now striven for. Thirdly and finally, it is based rather upon a bottom-up than a top-down modernization process. Whereas before the revolution a modernist consciousness was imposed upon a pre-modern *Dasein*, the recent developments reflect a transformation of a retreatist, conservative consciousness by a rapidly modernizing *Dasein*.

Iran and the world: Societal change, self-images and worldviews in Iran since 1953

Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, Illinois

Hermeneutics as politics: Do theological debates influence Iranian state politics and civil society?

There is no doubt that the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran has given rise to one of the most vibrant theological debates among Muslim intellectuals. The pages of daily newspapers and academic journals in Iran are filled with scholarly arguments on the competing meanings of revelations, Quranic hermeneutics, Islamic jurisprudence, and other topics which used to be discussed by seminarians in their secluded quarters. Many have argued that these debates on abstract and obscure topics have no implication for social and political changes in Iran. By examining the political discourse of major factions in Iranian politics, I will argue that theological assertions and innovations in matters of Islamic jurisprudence have been central to the formation of different political projects since the 1979 revolution. Furthermore, I will argue that religious justification plays a significant role in the determination of the success or failure of projects of social change.

Parviz Piran, Teheran

Youth and rapid social transformations in Iran

Almost 60 percent of Iran's population is less than thirty years old. This segment of the population, the Youth, has to go through a critical process of transition from childhood to adulthood. This transitional process always requires adaptation and coping. However, the adaptation process of Iranian Youth has become even more complicated through two other major factors: the co-existence of capitalist and non-capitalist systems and the sharp contrast between the requirements of an ideological state and the emerging of the "world village" where modern means of communication have made all types of lifestyles available to youth all over the world. Such a combination of factors has been the subject matter of a research conducted by the author. Both qualitative and quantitative techniques of data gathering along with extended review of literature have been applied. As far as quantitative techniques of data gathering are concerned, a random sample of 2500 youth selected in ten major urban centers along with a number of cities with high rates of juvenile problems has been studied. Concerning the qualitative techniques of data gathering, both in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were carried out among youth of different age groups and social origins. The present paper will review some of the most interesting findings of that research among which adaptation and coping mechanisms will be highlighted.

Iran and the world: Societal change, self-images and worldviews in Iran since 1953

David Arn, Zürich

From crime to illness. Shifts in the Iranian press discourse on drugs (1995-2000)

Dependence on opium, the traditionally preferred drug in Asia, has a long history in Iran, but first political measures against drug addiction were only implemented in the 1950s. At the same time, Iranian historians started to identify British colonialism as a main culprit of the country's addiction calamity. Despite growing heroin consumption among young Iranians since the 1960s, drug addiction was not perceived as a specific problem of the youth until long after the revolution. Like their predecessors, the Islamic republic's authorities aimed at the extinction of the addiction problem, but their repressive *tabula rasa* policies and the war against Iraq counteracted this lofty ideal.

A new chapter of the Islamic republic's drug policy was only opened towards the end of Rafsanjānī's presidency. This policy shift was caused by the recognition of the evergrowing addiction rate among the young population, which had increased proportionally as a result from the wartime birth policy. The new pragmatic focus now was on drug demand reduction by means of addiction therapy and of drug prevention, in which the newspapers were assigned a crucial role.

Youth addiction indeed is a central concern of the Iranian press discourse on drugs. Although the addiction problem is still blamed on the conspiracies of the arrogant world powers, an increasingly critical discussion is observable. Newspapers from all ideological camps start to identify

internal addiction causes such as unemployment or lacking recreational facilities. A moral comprehension of drug addiction continues to be depicted at times by some conservative newspapers, especially on a rhetorical level. Yet, in accordance with the official drug policy, the press unanimously supports progressive – and mainly non-religious – prevention measures that are thought to keep increasingly young potential users away from drugs. Interestingly, these changes were not exclusively caused by the pragmatist or reformist press but were the result of an intrinsic dynamic in the press – and in the wider political – discourse on drugs.

Iran and the world: Societal change, self-images and worldviews in Iran since 1953

Roja Fazaeli, Dublin

***Women's movements and social controls in
"Weblogistan"***

A wide array of literature has been written on women's rights in Islam, of women's perceived oppression, and in the last decade, of women's self-determination in the form of Islamic feminisms. In the past, women's magazines such as *Zanan* and *Payam-i Hajar* were thoroughly studied as platforms where women's issues were discussed and religious texts were re-interpreted. In this article a new medium of public voice will be explored in the emerging prison narratives of women activists published on the internet through their personal blogs. These narratives are a part of a greater Persian-language public social space which some have called *Weblogistan*. Some arguments suggest that these narratives are taboo breakers and indicate a new realm of free speech. However, this paper argues, through the study of blog entries and interviews with bloggers, that although blogs do provide space for a new form of expression, this cyberspace is not outside the realm of political oppression.

Roswitha Badry, Freiburg i. Br.

***Fundamentalist (patriarchal) gender discourse and
its liberative ('feminist') counter-discourse in the
Islamic Republic of Iran***

This contribution provides an outline of the major pre- and post-revolutionary gender discourses in Iran. A glance at the argumentation will show the inconsistencies, limits and chances of the conceptions.

In their search of cultural authenticity the chief ideologists of the 1979 revolution attached prime attention to the need of redefining gender relations from an Islamic perspective. As in former political discourses of the 20th century women should become the outward symbol of the nation's identity and its cultural orientation.

Despite their equal participation in the revolution women constituted the main targets of the Islamization laws enacted immediately after the revolution. The changes that occurred in the status of women affected their lives in the legal, political, and social areas; they were subjected to male control in both private and public spheres of life. The state promoted a traditional role of mother, spouse, and homemaker for women. Demands for gender equality as well as feminism were rejected as western and anti-Islamic. The supporters of such conservative, traditional patriarchal norms ground their arguments on the naturalness of Islamic law and its compatibility with human nature. The theory of the complementarity of sexes and gender roles rationalizes discrimination regarding marriage, divorce, or inheritance with reference to biological and psychological differences

Iran and the world: Societal change, self-images and worldviews in Iran since 1953

between men and women. Historical figures of early Islamic times, particularly Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet and the mother of the Shiite Imams, are used as sources of legitimacy and presented as role models for contemporary women.

Political and social changes in the post-war/-Khomeini era resulted in minor shifts in the mainstream discourse and in the removal of some legal restrictions for women. Although the 'Neo-Traditionalists' admit the need for change, they continue defending the immutability of the gender model manifested in pre-modern Islamic law. Hence, they are confronted with the same dilemma as their colleagues. On the one hand, they see the necessity of the political mobilization of women; on the other hand, they wish to confine women to the private domain of the household.

Growing discontent on the gender inequalities provoked objections and resistance to the official interpretation of Islam. Particularly the 1990s witnessed the emergence of a 'liberative' counter-discourse among reformist circles that argues for a more tolerant and egalitarian view of gender relations. The Reformers and "Islamic feminists", women as well as men, reject divine justification for gender inequality through a new reading of Islamic texts and a historical-contextual approach to Islamic law.

It remains to be seen whether the modernist counter-discourse has the potential to be a serious challenge to the traditionalist discourse, whose adherents are still monopolizing both the religious interpretation and formal jurisprudence.

Tobias Nünlist, Basel

Between change and persistence: Riḍā Ğūlā`ī's short story „Mīṭī-Ğinn“ as a mirror of recent social developments in Iran

This paper explores different aspects relevant to the understanding of recent developments in Iranian society through Riḍā Ğūlā`ī's short story „Mīṭī-Ğinn“ (published in *Tālār-i Ṭarab-ḡāne*, 1371/1992). Ğūlā`ī, born in Teheran in 1950, is a wellknown writer and has won several literary prizes.

Frequently, Ğūlā`ī situates his stories and novels (e.g. *Sū`-i qaṣd bi dāt-i humāyūnī*) in the Qāḡār period (1796–1925). But after a closer look at his oeuvre one cannot ignore the contemporary dimensions of his interpretations. The short story „Mīṭī-Ğinn“ allows us to identify several constant and changing elements in the development of modern Iranian society between the Constitutional Revolution (1905–11) and today.

The analysis concentrates on the tensions between reason and superstition, reality and surreality, with a focus on Riḍā Ğūlā`ī's use of traditional demonological beliefs as a key to the understanding of central problems in present-day Iran.

Iran and the world: Societal change, self-images and worldviews in Iran since 1953

Katja Föllmer, Göttingen

*Images of social life in Iranian feature films:
Continuities and discontinuities*

In the 1990s, Iranian films received many awards at international film festivals. They attracted attention from all over the world because of their special sensitivity to the aesthetic presentation of their subjects. In a national context, many Iranian films have become extremely popular when they raise issues that touch the feelings of the Iranian people, and point to the needs and problems of the society. Still, Iranian film makers always have had to find compromises between their individual aims and ideas, and the restrictions of censorship. This may often have detracted from the clarity of a film, and obliged the director to use symbolic language. In spite of this, an unconscious element of common sense about social life is also implicitly present in these films, which can offer good insights into Iranian society.

The paper will examine images of social life before and after the Islamic Revolution (1979) on the basis of some examples.

Vanessa Langer, Lausanne

"Teheran: 11pm", A documentary film by Vanessa Langer & Nasrin (Ethos Films Production, 26 min, 2007)

In the stripped-down setting of her bedroom, a young 23-year-old Iranian woman opens a door to her private life. This fragmented space is gradually built as Nasrin reveals herself. The sincerity with which she recognizes the constraints of her enclosed space generates a game of hide-and-seek between her and the camera. With candour and clarity, her gaze creates a meeting place. It is between these four walls, late in the night, that Nasrin is freed from imposed values.