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Decolonising Iran: A Tentative Note on Inter-Subaltern Colonialism

Comment on ‘Silencing the Past: Persian Archaeology, Race, Ethnicity and Language’

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‘Silencing the Past: Persian Archaeology, Race, Ethnicity and Language’ is an anti-colonial tract. It deconstructs the archaeological vector of national consciousness of the modern Iran as a ‘surrogate colonial state’ (Marashi 2014: 18). It is the latest addition to a growing number of critical texts that in various registers and with different emphases demonstrate and challenge the epistemic colonialism of the hegemonic trends within Iranian nationalism and nationalist historiography. Fuelled by orientalist accounts of West Asian histories, these discourses have produced, and jealously guard, a linear and homogenous account of the Iranian nation that erases, elides or hierarchically orders the diversity of cultures, languages, and histories within Iranian plateau as a basis for historical and political justifications of the Persian domination over the past, present and future of Iran (e.g. Ansari 2012; Asgharzadeh 2007; Elling 2013; Matin-Asgari 2018, 2020; Matin 2019a, 2020; Soleimani and Mohammadpour 2019; Soleimani 2017; Vali 2014, 1998; Vaziri 1993; Zia-Ebrahimi 2018). The aim and effect of this expanding literature is to decolonise Iran.

Decolonising Iran involves a critical reappraisal of postcolonial modernity. Central to this reappraisal is the theoretical recognition that the relation between the modern state and modern colonialism is neither sequential nor contingent. Rather, it is one of mutual constitution (Mamdani 2020: 1-2). This co-constitution is strategically mediated through political centralisation and cultural homogenisation that were pivotal to European colonialism’s ‘civilising mission’ and replicated in postcolonial states’ building of unitary nation-states (Matin 2019b). In both cases, the attempted universalisation of a particular culture has involved systematic violence against stateless cultures and populations which are ideologically otherised and subordinated to a dominant culture as the singular sinew of ‘national’ identity.

There is a large literature on this violent circumstance in relation to European imperialism and postcolonial states with a history of formal European colonialism (e.g., Mamdani 2009). However, the ‘operation of the postcolonial as colonial’ (Young 2001: 20) in countries with a semicolonial past such as Iran and Turkey has attracted comparatively less academic attention. The research programme of decolonising Iran addresses this gap. It is a critique of what I call ‘inter-subaltern colonialism’. Here ‘subaltern’ is understood in its Gramscian sense (Gramsci 1999: 52; cf. Louai 2012), and ‘colonialism’ as ‘foreign domination’ where ‘foreignness’ refers to the historically changing and politically (re-)constructed relations of cultural exteriority, and ‘domination’ to non-hegemonic rule within bounds of capital (cf. Guha 1997). Inter-subaltern colonialism therefore refers to, but is not exhausted by, postcolonial states’ ideological reconstruction of stateless peoples within their territory as ‘ethnic minorities’, which are ontologically securitised and hence subjected to politico-cultural destruction, assimilation or subordination as well as economic exploitation, resource extraction and environmental degradation.

Inter-subaltern colonialism is intrinsically bound up with capitalist reconfiguration of the international, i.e., the ontological condition of societal multiplicity (Rosenberg 2006: 308). The prefix ‘inter-’ reflects this circumstance, for postcolonial states live a double life. Internally, as just mentioned, they perform sovereignty through colonial domination of their ‘ethnic minorities’, which is central to their self-reproduction as (unitary) nation-states. Yet
simultaneously, and beneath their thin veneer of formal (i.e., juridical) sovereignty, they also occupy a substantively, (i.e., geo-politically, economically, militarily) subaltern position vis-à-vis globally hegemonic states within capitalist world order. These circumstances strategically intersected in postcolonial states’ projects of defensive modernisation that aimed at altering their international subalternity through building of unitary nation-states as the subsequent agents of ‘passive revolution’ (Gramsci 1999: 250; cf. Matin 2013b: Chapter 4). Inter-subaltern colonialism therefore involves a complex condition that is international in origins and dynamics and historically subtended by the wider processes of ‘uneven and combined development’ (Trotsky 1985; Rosenberg 2006; Matin 2007). It is therefore in theoretical excess of internalist concepts such as ‘internal colonialism’ (Gonzalez-Casanova 1965).

Inter-subaltern colonialism has been relatively neglected, if not elided, in the vast and growing field of postcolonialism even though interrogating its socio-political effects and historical origins was the key intellectual concern of ‘subaltern studies’ (cf. Guha 1997) with which postcolonialism has strong theoretical and normative links (Chibber 2013). The reason is fourfold. First, postcolonialism’s eurocentric definition of colonialism, which it has a penchant for conflating with ‘imperialism’ (cf. Young 2001: 15-24), tends to push it towards analytical externalism focusing on the international vector of subalternity that defines postcolonial states’ position within currently Western dominated world order. This circumstance is reinforced by the normative impact of the binary politics of anti-imperialism, which tends to impart political radicalism and respectability to postcolonial states resisting Western imperialism irrespective of their internal politics (e.g., Said 1991; cf. Arghavan 2017). It is also within this context that some postcolonial intellectuals unwittingly act as ‘organic intellectuals’ for postcolonial states’ ruling elites (Parmar 2019: 234; cf. Al-Azm 1988). Second, class-centred critiques of postcolonial nationalism reproduce the unitary conception of the nation posited by anti-colonial forces in their struggle against European colonialism and Western imperialism (e.g., Fanon 2001: chapter 3) and therefore elide the production and reproduction of inter-subaltern hierarchies within postcolonial nation-states. The theoretical internalism of modernist, including Marxist, theories of the nation and nationalism (Matin 2019b) indirectly produce a similar effect. Third, postcolonialism is susceptible to ‘orientalism-in-reverse’ (Al-Azm 1980) or ‘postcolonial orientalism’ (Arghavan 2017; cf. Lowe 1991), which involve internalising orientalism’s cultural essentialisation and totalisation of non-Western societies while inverting or flattening its normative hierarchy. This operation analytically obscures inter-cultural hierarchies within postcolonial states. And fourth, postcolonialism’s hostility to the category of the universal per se – rather than its specifically internalist (eurocentric) construction – involves the aversion to general social theory (Matin 2013), which tends to normatively blur the line between immanent critique of cultures and cultural relativism.

The idea of ‘inter-subaltern colonialism’ turns postcolonial critique back on itself in order to fulfil its critical potential. However, overcoming inter-subaltern colonialism epistemically cannot succeed on a purely epistemic level. It requires ‘a kind of ‘undisciplining’, changing larger institutional structures in universities and heritage protection law’ (Schneider and Hayes 2020) that current national, regional and international configuration of power sadly preclude. Nevertheless, the critique of inter-subaltern colonialism remains central to decolonising Iran.

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Bibliography


