

Book Review

Narges Bajoghli. *Iran Reframed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic*. California: Stanford University Press, 2019, 176 pages.

Zeynep Sertbulut
Haverford College

What does it mean to be pro-regime in the Islamic Republic of Iran? Narges Bajoghli's *Iran Reframed*, the 2020 recipient of the Margaret Mead Award, offers a rare, in-depth look at Iran's pro-regime media producers at a time when they face a crisis of credibility: Iran's youth, who comprise the majority of the population in the country, do not remember (and therefore do not understand) the Islamic Republic's revolutionary stories. Drawing on a decade of fieldwork in Iran among various groups of regime supporters and eighteen months of ethnographic research with their media producers specifically, Bajoghli highlights these men's struggles to "transmit the commitment to their revolutionary project" to younger generations and illustrates what is at stake for them in keeping the revolution alive (5). Bajoghli's ethnographically-rich analysis challenges entrenched stereotypes about Iran's regime supporters, demonstrating that they are far from homogenous, cohesive, unchanging, and all-powerful.

Bajoghli's main argument is that "the various 'pro-regime' categories are in fact fluid" (14). As the Islamic Republic's media producers face a broad range of international pressure and local criticism, they fiercely debate with one another about "how to define the regime and what it stands for today" and dispute the boundaries of who is part of the regime and what the "right" revolutionary narrative is (116). By putting these men's opinions, debates, and strategies at the centre of her analysis, Bajoghli reframes the study of Iran from one traditionally viewed through the lens of Islam to one focused on the worldviews of those who support the Islamic Republic in line with the goals of the 1979 revolution. Such a reframing of analysis allows Bajoghli to illustrate that "contestation in the Islamic Republic is not just between the regime and the people or between

the older and the young” but that it is, in fact, more “multi-layered” and complex than previously discussed (119).

The book’s five chapters guide the reader through discovering this fluidity and the complexity of pro-regime categories. Chapter 1 looks at generational changes and divides. Bajoghli deftly demonstrates the differences between earlier pro-regime generations and today’s, providing insights foundational for the following chapters. For instance, Bajoghli illustrates that the earlier generations of Basij—the Revolutionary Guard’s primary apparatus composed of volunteers who work to enforce state control over Iranian society—discourage their children from joining the Basij as they see it as “a step down the social ladder they have scaled” (46). Bajoghli’s extensive ethnographic research reveals that the older generations prefer sending their children to Europe once they are older because they believe a European experience will grant them “the right cultural capital to be in the social class to which they aspire” (46). At the same time, they feel disdain towards the younger generation who join the Basij to climb the social ladder, a move the older generations see as “opportunistic” (Ibid). Thus, Bajoghli’s detailed analysis illustrates that Iran’s regime producers do not form a monolithic, unified group. By bringing to light these men’s concerns over social status and cultural capital, it also reveals that, contrary to their depictions in Western media, these men are not solely motivated by Islam.

Chapter 2 expands on these insights by exploring the contrasting stories of the 1980–1988 Iran–Iraq war, which, according to Bajoghli, “provides the master narrative of the Islamic Republic” (28). This chapter highlights the differences between the official war stories projected on state television and the “real” ones that veterans usually recount off-camera in private settings. Bajoghli finds that state-produced films in service of the war leave out scenes that do not conform to the official version of the war, such as those that depict mothers who object to sending their kids to war or ones who criticize the regime’s careless treatment of veterans. Through rigorous ethnographic research, Bajoghli shows that although the pro-regime producers find such media “dry” and “boring,” they continue to work for state television for the socioeconomic possibilities it offers, such as good salaries that allow them to support their families and “access to the best camera and editing equipment” (55). These varying versions of the war that Bajoghli outlines in the chapter reveal more than just cracks in the official narrative. By reading about the real war stories of the veterans and the various motivations of state television producers for continuing to make media in service of the regime, we also learn that these men are not just blind followers.

Rather, they are discontent with the proffered account but continue to work in the service of the official line for the financial and social opportunities it offers.

Chapter 3 turns to the question of who is cast as an insider (*khodi*) of the regime and who is cast as an outsider (*gheyr-e khodi*) from the vantage point of regime media producers. The chapter begins with a detailed account of a screening event, where Mr. Hosseini, a former Basij who has “friends from all political stripes and has helped in getting ghery-e khodi artists from out of prison,” invites writers from Iran’s most hard-line publications and a gheyre-khodi filmmaker, Amir-Youssefi, to discuss the latter’s latest film (66). Bajoghli finds this film to be “the most blatantly political film against the Islamic Republic” that she has ever seen produced in Iran (70). What follows is a passionate discussion among the critics in the room about “how to minimize the impact of this film” (70). Yet, in the end, Amir-Youssefi refuses to change any of the scenes in his films. Through this vivid example, Bajoghli engages in a discussion of how pro-regime media producers, while possessing political power, lack the social and cultural power that outsider filmmakers with international connections have. Here, Bajoghli also emphasizes the contested nature of the khodi–ghery-e khodi divide and how being a khodi or a gheyre-khodi is a “fluid association that changes based on time, place, and circumstances” (77). The chapter illustrates that not only can one be treated as a khodi in one circumstance, and as ghery-e khodi in another, but men like Mr. Hosseini, in certain circumstances, can perform khodi-ness through their dress and outward appearances. Bajoghli concludes that as long as regime producers cannot agree on who should be considered an insider of the revolutionary collective and how flexible this category should be, they will fail to “expand the revolutionary collective they fear is shrinking” (82).

The remaining chapters focus on regime media producers’ efforts to expand the circle of insiders by developing new strategies to make their films more appealing to younger generations. Chapter 4 details producers’ new distribution tactics, such as circulating their films as “underground” films and creating film festivals in provinces targeting non-urban youth, with the aim to remove “as many fingerprints of regime cultural centers as possible” (91). The strength of the chapter lies in its detailed descriptions of regime producers’ successful and failed dissimulation strategies, illustrating their continuous struggles to attain cultural power in the country. For instance, Bajoghli describes how the strategy of a group of producers to distribute their films to high school teachers failed when challenged by the teachers’ union that “demands a more independent

curriculum” (96). Such examples aptly prove one of Bajoghli’s main points in the book: “the work of messaging ideology and defending a revolutionary project to a population is never-ending” (116).

The final chapter details regime media producers’ latest but most important strategy for tailoring the content of their productions to make it appealing to youth. Here, Bajoghli argues that as the original regime discourse that recasts the war as a “religious quest” loses power, media producers turn to using national symbols and figures in their productions to rejuvenate dormant Iranian nationalism as a “unifying force beyond political ideology” (117). She gives various examples of how regime producers hire gheyr-e khodi singers in their music videos in order to attract “those who view themselves as critical of the regime” (110). Throughout this chapter and in Chapter 4, Bajoghli’s poignant observations foreground regime media producers’ anxieties about the need to create new strategies in order to uphold the system and protect their class and socioeconomic status. These chapters, alongside previous ones, illustrate that the Islamic Republic’s media producers continuously debate about “the ‘right’ path to take” and they are far less rigid than commonly understood as they attempt to adapt their tactics to new socio-historical circumstances (116).

In short, *Iran Reframed* not only breaks new ground in the study of Iran but also expands our understanding of the Islamic Republic and its elites. It will appeal to many readers, whether they are interested in contemporary Iranian politics and culture, the intersection between media and politics, nationalism, elites, or revolutionary projects. The book’s digestible length (119 pages), alongside Bajoghli’s engaging storytelling style and use of accessible language, makes it a favourite for undergraduate students in media and Middle Eastern studies. Ultimately, *Iran Reframed* is a landmark ethnography of how revolutionary ideals are transmitted across generations and the kinds of power struggles, anxieties, and contestations such a process entails.