

Letters to the Editor

15 September 2018

Dear Editor of *Iranian Studies*,

I am writing to you about the recently published article in *Iranian Studies* by Matthew Shannon, “Reading Iran: American Academics and the Late Shah” (51/02, March 2018, pp. 289–316), which was brilliant in its documentation, but mistaken in many ways in his attempt to “explore the field’s origins during the Cold War era.”

Maybe it was the off-hand 1979 quote from former US Ambassador to Iran William Sullivan, who observed that US and Iran relations were represented by the liberal-democratic worlds of James Bill and Richard Cottam on the one hand, and the illiberal and imperial worlds of Henry Kissinger on the other that misled Shannon into thinking that he need only deal with a few of the original Iranian studies scholars in exploring the origins of Iranian studies.

To begin with, the original scholars of Iranian studies were neither James Bill, Ali Banuazizi, Majid Tehranian nor myself. We were, like many others, strong supporters of the 1967 collaborative venture that formed the Society for Iranian Studies and its impressive journal, *Iranian Studies*. Like so many of us who pursued Iranian and Middle East studies PhD programs either as returned Iranian Peace Corps volunteers (RPCVs) such as Jerry Clinton, Don Croll, Dick Eaton, or Ed Davis, Mary Hegland, Eric Hooglund, John Limbert, Michael Hillmann, and myself, or were established

scholars such as James Bill (University of Texas at Austin), Amin Banani (UCLA), Marvin Zonis (University of Chicago), Richard Bulliet (Columbia University), or Nikki Keddie (UCLA), who wrote for *Iranian Studies*, and followed the tumultuous social, cultural, economic and political changes in post- World War II Iran.

While Shannon correctly identifies three of the leading 1950s scholars and early founders of Iranian centers in their respective universities as T. Cuyler Young of Princeton University, Richard Frye of Harvard, and Richard Cottam of the University of Pittsburgh, the landmark events for the origins of Iranian studies were the years between the 1958 establishment of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) grants, and the 1960s, when eight Middle East area studies programs were established on the campuses of Chicago, Columbia, Indiana, Harvard, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Texas/Austin, Princeton, and Yale as Iranian studies by Heshmat Moayyad (University of Chicago), Ehsan Yarshater (Columbia University), Wadie Jwaideh (Indiana), Richard Frye (Harvard University), Kenneth Luther (University of Michigan), William Hanaway and Brian Spooner (University of Pennsylvania), Mohammad Ali Jazayeri (University of Texas at Austin), T. Cuyler Young (Princeton University), and Firuz Kazemzadeh (Yale University) with academic programs of Iranian studies as we know them today.

In any case, the distant origins of Iranian studies began with the 1950s Centers of Iranian studies at Harvard, Princeton, and Yale but more importantly blossomed in the 1960s with NDEA funding American research centers at the universities of Chicago, Columbia, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Texas/Austin, UCLA, and at Tehran's American Institute of Iranian Studies (AIIS). Conservative scholars were prone to support the Pahlavi monarchy and US policies and interests in Asian countries, particularly George Lenzowski and Leonard Binder at UCLA. Other centers and scholars found company at times with those liberal scholars who argued for incremental reform of the monarchy, such as Richard Cottam (Pittsburgh), James Bill (Texas/Austin), Marvin Zonis (University of Chicago), and Amin Banani and Nikki Keddie (UCLA).

While Matthew Shannon's research led him to exaggerate the "old guard's" role in shaping Iranian studies on US campuses, and in supporting US policy toward the monarchy, he missed the more dominant and newer role of the "young guard" in league with established tenured faculty at UCLA (Nikki Keddie and Amin Banani), at Chicago (Marvin Zonis), at Michigan (Kenneth A. Luther), at AIIS (Jerry Clinton), and at Texas/Austin (James Bill). For many of us in the field of Iranian studies, the younger faculty of Majid Tehranian (Harvard University), Ali Banuazizi (Boston College), Ervand Abrahamian (Baruch College/CUNY), Manoucher Parvin (Hunter College/CUNY), Jacqueline Mintz (Connecticut/New Haven), and Farhad Kazemi (NYU), who established the Society for Iranian Studies in 1967 and the journal, *Iranian Studies*, precisely to distance themselves and their social science research from the larger association of that same year, the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA), and the government-sponsored funders such as the NDEA area studies grants. The "new guard" was soon joined by others of similar backgrounds in challenging the conservative and liberal American

Iranian specialists with recent social science and secular paradigms critical of US interests in Iran and the Middle East in general and continued US support for the shah in particular. Apart from Richard Cottam and James Bill, few of the “old guard” voiced assent to the gradual demise of the monarchy or multiple changes in US foreign policy, while the “new guard” emphasized the founding principle of US foreign policy for national self-determination, and, by the 1960s and 1970s, human rights issues as bellwether concepts for a future progressive Iran and US policies. While I was “active” in supporting the “new guard’s” politics, Shannon’s characterization of my activism distorts my own career research into peasant studies, the slave trade, and the work of the American missionaries in Iran’s educational work in schools and colleges in Iran.

While it is true that leftists had become noticed in the 1970s with publications such as Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP) Reports, and other campus-based publications not unlike other area studies scholarly works, it is also true that a well-informed Iranian American generation of researchers was grounded in the British School of Social History and the French *Annales* school and armed with newer methodologies and theories of the social sciences with which to assault the then current modernization theories of the cold war era. The “new guard” carried out field studies and extensive research of non-state agencies and contrary theories of growth versus development for Third World countries. Influenced greatly by the growing turbulence and frequency of the protests within Iran as well as the widespread 1960s anti-war and anti-US policies, a new generation of American and Iranian scholars examined the weaknesses of accepted cold war liberalism with various Marxist studies less interested in incremental and other routes toward reform of the shah’s Iran and more interested in understanding “Iran’s revolutionary movement.” The catalyst for the shah’s removal, in the end, came from Iran’s streets, mosques and madrasahs. Neither Richard Frye, nor T. Cuyler Young, nor Richard Cottam, nor this author overthrew the monarchy any more than did *MERIP* or *RIPEH* or the *New Left Review* or the socialist *Monthly Review* or *Iranian Studies*.

In ignoring the collective work of a number of American and Iranian American scholars, such as Ali Banuazizi (Boston College), Majid Tehranian (Harvard University), Farhad Kazemi (New York University), Ervand Abrahamian (CUNY/Baruch College), and Jerry Clinton (Princeton University), all of whom founded the Society for Iranian Studies in 1967 and the rich publication of *Iranian Studies*, Shannon leaves us with a caricature of the lineage of Iranian studies resting entirely on the shoulders of a few of the earlier scholars of the post-World War II era whose attention was more focused on centers of Iranian and Persian studies, or advice aimed at the State Department and US lawmakers, or on their colleagues’ scholarship and studies. In any case, the leadership of the Society for Iranian Studies pursued its academic work with full attention on understanding the turbulent events in Iran.

Finally, Shannon highlights the monarchy’s Achilles heel of human rights violations as a special goal of the Iranian Students Association in the US (ISAUS) and other American and Iranian American scholars without pointing out that in fact Congress made it obligatory that any arms agreement with an overseas nation had to have a

State Department report on its human rights practices. Insinuating that the outspoken human rights American specialists were “revolutionary” when the wide public discussions of human rights and other violations were central in the days leading up the 1979 eventual overthrow the Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi is slightly off-putting when the grassroots secular and religious movements in Iran were “revolutionary” in many more significant ways than any House hearing into William Sullivan’s appointment to ambassadorship to Tehran, or the human rights hearings on incremental reform in Congress. Lastly, it is a pity that Matthew Shannon spent no time interviewing the younger Iranian studies scholars, or those “old guard,” about the origins of Iranian studies—especially the late Ehsan Yarshater, who rightly can be considered the “father” of modern Iranian studies in the US.

One can only hope that Matthew Shannon will use his impressive research skills to refocus his research on the American scholars on Iran to include the Iranian Americans of the Society for Iranian Studies, now celebrating its fifty-first anniversary of work, or write a lengthy paper as Part II on the Association for Iranian Studies’ distinguished history and contributions to the American public’s knowledge of Iran’s past and present.

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