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“SEEING LIKE A STATE”: AN ESSAY ON THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF MODERN IRAN

This essay argues that with the rise of the autocratic Pahlavi dynasty (1921–79), the state started to cast a long shadow over the historiography of modern Iran. Drawing on dynastic nationalism, modernization policies, and repression, the Pahlavi shahs and their bureaucratic elites produced an image of an all-powerful state completely detached from society. Scholars often reflexively replicated this top-down perspective. The resulting methodological statism, a metanarrative of state action as the inevitable ultimate reference point of all things Iranian, has reified our understanding of the modern Iranian state and, more generally, limited our vision of “the history of Pahlavi Iran.” Fixated on autocratic policymaking, we have ignored routine citizen–government interactions; equally, we lack microhistories of the complex facets of everyday life. By illuminating the politics and history of methodological statism, this essay hopes to prepare the ground for the assimilation of such alternative perspectives into the historiography of modern Iran.