

*The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism:  
Race and the Politics of Dislocation* de Reza Zia-Ebrahimi

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Reza Zia-Ebrahimi's *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism: Race and the Politics of Dislocation* is not only a timely contribution to Iranian studies, but also to other fields dedicated to exploring ethnicity, assimilation, nationalism, and comparative studies in general. While scholars juxtapose Iran next to the rubric of cosmopolitanism, simultaneously a dominant form of Iranian ethnic nationalism, dubbed "dislocative nationalism" by the author, casts a shadow over much of the debate. To make sense of this seeming contradiction, Zia-Ebrahimi argues that Iran's current and most dominant form of (dislocative) nationalism actually emerges in Iran's "painful encounter with modernity" *vis-à-vis* two of Iran's most notable thinkers, namely Mirza Fathali Akunzadeh (d. 1878) and Mirza Aghakhan Kermani (d. 1897), whose ideas found official sanction both in the Pahlavi State (1925-1979) and in a disenchanting civil society. Simultaneously, the strength of this thesis is in the practicality and why this form of 'dislocative nationalism' persists to this day. The book is divided into eight chapters, and the Persian translation on which this review is based, includes a glossary, and both an English and Persian bibliography.

The term "dislocative" is inspired by its counterpart in geography studies, but Zia-Ebrahimi's use implies a socio-psychological application: dislocative nationalism is an operation that occurs in the imagination where Iran appears outside of its experienced realities, while ranking as a majority Muslim nation, yet it is somehow dislocated or out of place in the East. Thus, "Aryan" Iran appears accidental, separated from its other Aryan kin. Zia-Ebrahimi's purpose is not to debate historical-chronology or the "collective Iranian spirit" but rather to critically engage with the prevalent historical themes lodged within it. Accordingly, "dislocative nationalism" holds that: a) Iran has always existed, without interruption; b) the essence and golden age of Iran lies within the pre-Islamic era; c) Islam is credited for Iran's decline, and d) that Ira-

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nians are Aryans, sharing “kinship” to Europeans, making them distinct from Semites (see Chapter 6). In addition to arguing that “dislocative nationalism” is “an identifiable body of thought” with doctrinal texts and dogmas, the author’s reading of primary material (*i.e.*, treatises, newspapers, textbooks, memoirs, and interviews) lends weight to his thesis that “dislocative nationalism” has been the essential curriculum of history, nation, and race in the modern era in spite of the numerous nationalist movements within Iran.

The strength of Zia-Ebrahimi’s work is in the thematic organization of Iranian nationalist historiography, highlighting the foundational role of Akhundzadeh and Kermani, problematizing the “incompatibility of Iran and Islam”, and exposing these ideas’ modern and hybrid origins. Thus, Chapter 1, “The paleontology of Iranian nationalism”, contextualizes Iran’s anxiety and “painful/traumatic encounter” to a militarily-advanced Europe, an anxiety emerging out of the perception of “defeat” and “backwardness”.

Chapter 2, “Akhundzadeh and Kermani: the emergence of dislocative nationalism”, exhibits Zia-Ebrahimi’s forte of intellectual history, where the intention of the author of historiography (Akhundzadeh and Kermani) rather than context (modernity), is given priority. In other words, “dislocative nationalism” is not under scrutiny but rather the service and function of its discourse, the “perception of backwardness” within the context of modernism. This chapter demonstrates the intriguing and creative way both interlocutors, indirectly (Akhundzadeh) and directly (Kermani), import Aryanism and race into nationalist ideology, respectively. This reading offers a much-awaited analysis of the position and ambivalence of both intellectuals’ role in nationalist-historiography.

Additionally, Chapter 3, “Pre-islamic Iran and archaistic frenzy”, deals with the European search for a utopian pre-Islamic Iran, Chapter 4, “Of lizard eaters and invasions: the import of European racial thought”, focuses on the origins of Arabophobia and culpability, and Chapter 5, “Europe, that feared yet admired idol”, sheds light on Iranian curiosity and concern of all things European. Chapter 7, “The road to officialdom”, deals with the traction and sanction that dislocative nationalism received within the State and education system, and Chapter 8, “Triumph”, describes its apex in the late Pahlavi Shah’s Iran. The sophistication and strength of Zia-Ebrahimi’s argument lies in Chapter 6, “Aryanism and dislocation”. Here, the author peels away another layer of “dislocative nationalism”: not only that Iran is a monolithic nation, but one that is “culturally and racially out of its place”; an Iran having found its inspiration in archeology, Romanticism, and Orientalist notions of Aryan heritage “language, origin, and race”: a “pain pill” for the “perceived backwardness” of Islamic Iran, in contrast to its European kin. While acknowledging the value and richness of myth (Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh* rendered as national script), Zia-Ebrahimi

familiarizes the reader with the hybridity, ingenuity, and practicality that has informed “dislocative nationalism”. He probes the reader, be it in the diaspora or in Iran, how this form of nationalism, can possess any utility today.

Albeit the author does not employ a postmodern analysis, Zia-Ebrahimi, however, paves the road for scholars by unflinchingly talking about race and assimilation in the context of modernity and intellectualism. Furthermore, Zia-Ebrahimi paints a morose picture of contemporary Iran in need of “open and independent institutions” to solve its own perceived “backwardness/woes”. However, despite the reflection this work provokes, an account of contemporary civil societies that are engaged in confronting issues of racism and self-Orientalization –witnessed not only amongst art and cinema critics, members of academia, and in the State’s efforts in mending relations with its neighbors but even among Islamic associations– is lacking. Zia-Ebrahimi proposes a civic/citizen-based nationalism. But, this proposition remains questionable at best; the assumptions civic/citizen carries are loaded with “events” and histories too complex to trace here.

Nevertheless, Zia-Ebrahimi’s current translation is straightforward and undemanding even for the non-specialist, but it could benefit from a revision as terms central to the interlocutors informing the author’s thesis, such as “backwardness” for example, do not appear in the Farsi glossary. Although there have been unfavorable responses to the author by some in Iran, their focus has relied an “overused” anecdote while among the general readership here, it holds high appraisals. Furthermore, this work appears to be a major milestone in the field of Iranian historiography, and tentatively speaking, it appears that “dislocative nationalism” shares parallels with other manifestations and forms of nationalism across the globe.

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