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Processes of the State and Habitus Formation in Iran in the 19th and early 20th Centuries: The Socio- and Psychogenesis of the Constitutional Revolution in 1906

*Behrouz Alikhani**

Abstract: »Prozesse der Staats- und Habitusformation im Iran des 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhunderts: Die Sozio- und Psychogenese der Konstitutionellen Revolution 1906«. Processes of state building in Iran have been accompanied by various breaches and discontinuities with consequences for the formation of the social habitus of a great number of Iranians. A proper understanding of the Constitutional Revolution in Iran in 1906 is only possible by the introduction of a relatively long-term perspective on such processes. In this paper, the extensive historiography on the time around the Constitutional Revolution in 1906 will be integrated in a process sociological framework to provide a broader and a more reality-congruent picture of this very important phase of the development of the Iranian state, society, and social habitus. Such a study not only serves to understand the processes of habitus and collective identity formation of a great number of Iranians in the 19th and early 20th century, but also could contribute to a better understanding of the complex present political and social development of this country.

Keywords: Iran, process sociology, processes of nation-state building, survival unit, Constitutional Revolution, processes of habitus formation, Qajar dynasty.

1. Introduction

O Iranians! O brethren of my beloved country! Until when will this treacherous intoxication keep you slumbering? Enough of this intoxication. Lift up your heads. Open your eyes. Cast a glance around you, and behold how the world has become civilized. All the savages in Africa and negroes in Zanzibar are marching towards civilization, knowledge, labor, and riches. Behold Your neighbors the Russians, who a hundred years ago were in much worse condition than we. Behold them now how they possess everything. In bygone days we had everything, and now all is gone. In the past, others looked on us as a great nation. Now we are reduced to such a condition that our neighbors of the north and south already believe us to be their property

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and divide our country between themselves. We have no guns, no army, no secure finances, no proper government, no commercial law.

Tehran Sermon (1907) (Abrahamian 2012, 34)

The highlighting of the interconnectedness of three structures – the structure of the state, the structure of society, and the structure of personality – is one of the most important innovations of the process sociological approach developed by Norbert Elias. In particular, the investigation of the impact of the state structure in the course of long-term processes of state formation – from simpler survival units such as clans and tribes to more complex contemporary nation-states – on the two social and personality structures characterize a new perspective of Norbert Elias introduced into sociology. He is among a small number of sociologists who raised the development of the state as a sociological, and not just a political scientist's, subject matter of investigation. "The Civilizing Process," seen from this angle, was an empirical study to illustrate the exact connection between these three structures based on the example of the development of some Western European societies such as Germany, France, and Britain. According to Elias, the inner pacification of a survival unit as the consequence of the monopolization of physical force by a central state was the precondition of the emergence of new social strata and new personality structures (Elias 2012). By using the term "survival unit," one could draw attention to similarities and differences between different units of integration of human beings in long-term processes of state building, from simpler tribal societies to the more complex nation-states of modern days. The main function of a survival unit is providing defense, protection, and safety for its members against other survival units as well as supplying the material foundations for life such as food and shelter within itself.

In different societies, long-term processes of state formation gave rise to different dominant patterns of conduct and sentiment, a different form of social habitus. The term social habitus is a term at a higher level of synthesis to conceptualize the exact relationship between individual and social patterns of conduct and sentiment, which is developed rather as the result of long-term social transformations than as just simply the "result of situational circumstances" (Kuzmics, Helmut, and Haring 2013, 493). In order to understand the current different layers of the social habitus of the people in a specific society, one must employ a long-term perspective, not just over decades but also over many centuries. The study of the state and habitus formation in Iranian society in the 19th and early 20th centuries should serve here as an example of long-term blind but directed development towards the establishment of a nation-state in a less differentiated society.¹ Without the study of such unintended but struc-

¹ The name of Iran was introduced in March 1935 by Reza Shah Pahlavi to a territory which was called Persia before this date, a name from a British perspective. The main aim of Reza

tured development, the understanding of the current Iranian state, society, and social habitus is barely possible. Iranian society in the 19th century was in transition from a tribal to a national one. This transition provides empirical evidence affirming the exact structure of the connection of state, society, and personality structures. From a theoretical perspective, this example should help to establish processual models of studying the long-term social and political transformations in a time of increasing fragmentation of human sciences (Elias 2009, 107-126).

2. State and Society in Iran in the 18th and 19th Centuries

The collapse of the Safavid dynasty (1501-1722) – caused by the invasion of Afghan nomadic tribes from the east – led to the “resurgence” of the nomadic structures at the societal and state level in Iran (Kunke 1991, 5). Overall, the lack of a relatively stable and permanent monopoly of force prevented the necessary security and order which could have led to a relatively lasting pacification of the nomadic warrior regions of Iran. The emergence of industrial ways of production and accompanying new social strata with new personality structures was hardly possible under such uncertain and unstable social conditions. In this context, the sociologist Ahmad Ashraf speaks of an “economic standstill during which no capitalist conditions of production could have developed” in Iran (Ashraf 1980, 38).² After the collapse of the Safavid territorial state, nearly a century of violent power struggles between different nomadic tribes destroyed almost all the state and social structures that might have led to the establishment of a relatively stable and pacified nation-state (Kunke 1991, 155). There was no stable monopoly of force in the country for almost a century.³ While in Western Europe in the 18th century the period of the “Industrial Revolution” began, the period of nomadic struggles returned to Iran again. The

Shah was to integrate all the Persian and non-Persian tribes and ethnicities in the newly created modern nation-state. The occasional use of the term Iran in this paper, referring to the time before 1935, is used to facilitate communication.

² Marxist approaches posit the development of capitalist means of production as the most, if not the only, important cause of the emergence of differentiated societies. However, without the development of a relatively permanent and stable central state and the pacification of a society within this state by means of the monopolization of physical force, the development of capitalist means of production, and the emergence of new social strata would have been barely possible.

³ After the collapse of the Safavid dynasty, there were short periods of rule by nomadic Afghans (1722-1729) followed by the Afsharid dynasty (1729-1746) and the Zand dynasty (1750-1779) after which came the rise of nomadic Qajar dynasty (1785 to 1925) (Foran 2007, 100).

big cities suffered most from this “re-emergence” of nomadic structures. According to estimates, the few large cities in the country lost up to two-thirds of their total population (Foran 2007, 127). At the time of the assault of Afghan nomadic tribes, a quarter to a half of this population lived just in Isfahan, the capital of the Safavid dynasty (Foran 2007, 60). After this invasion, the city was literally left in ruins. A large proportion of the city’s inhabitants were killed or expelled. The people of Isfahan did not recover from this violent blow for a long time. The perspective of travelers from more pacified societies to Iran in the 18th century can illustrate the differences before and after this assault. The Ottoman envoy writes in 1729, seven years after the invasion of Isfahan: “Many of the inhabitants of Isfahan died of hunger in the streets. A city whose inhabitants are constantly exposed to fear of being pulled out of their homes and murdered” (Foran 2007, 127). The Scottish author James Fraser, who traveled through the eastern regions of Iran from 1821 to 1822, accurately summed up the general security situation in Iran and its impact on other areas of social life more than one century after this invasion:

The principal direct check to improvement and prosperity in Persia in the insecurity of life, limb, and property, arising from the nature of the government, as well as from the revolutions to which that government is constantly liable. This must always repress the effort of industry; for no man will work to produce what he may be deprived of the next hour. (Fraser 1985, 190)

In the absence of a stable and permanent monopoly of physical force in Iran, unrest, uncertainty, and instability spread throughout the entire 18th century and into the beginning of the 19th century. Under such social and political circumstances, Iran “unwillingly” and suddenly entered a new phase of globalization in the 19th century, which confronted the country with new, strong, and well-organized nation-states. This new situation was accompanied by wars and occupations. Two wars against Russia, in 1804-1813 and 1826-1828, were lost. The accompanying loss of land shocked the newly-established Qajar dynasty (1785-1925). This dynasty would finally put an end to the violent elimination struggles with other nomadic tribes after a century of unrest and uncertainty. Later on, through the peace treaty of Paris in 1857 – which followed Afghanistan’s war with Britain – the Qajars had to renounce dominion over the eastern parts of their territory, present-day Afghanistan (Kasrai 2001, 199).

The military defeats during this period gradually increased the need for a new survival unit at the political and the social level, which would be able to defend and protect Muslim states from attack by “infidel” nation-states. Ironically, this new survival unit was to be built on the basis of the experiences of the same “Western” invaders. As Iranian statesmen had been humiliated by the wars, military reforms were given absolute priority (Adamiyat 2006a, 1620). Experience taught that the nomadically structured Iranian troops had no chance against Russian and British troops armed with modern firearms. Previously, Iranian troops had been armed mainly with traditional weapons such as bows,

swords, sabers, and spears (Foran 2007, 216). Military formations consisted of tribal riders and irregular foot soldiers who were mobilized, when needed, by tribal leaders and regional rulers (Mostofi 2007a, 103-104). They therefore knew no loyalty towards the “Iranian nation,” but only to their chosen or hereditary tribal leaders (Gholamasad 1985, 83).

During the Russian-Iranian wars, the heir to the throne, Abbas Mirza, assumed military leadership and advocated the creation of a strong central state through military reforms. From the record of the discussion between him and Amédée Jaubert, the envoy of Napoleon at the court of Persia, one can sense the feeling of helplessness of the Iranian leadership at this time and the desire to find a way out. The questions of the successor to the throne in this discussion have a significant place in the collective memory of Iranians indicated by the phrase “Tell me strangers” in use even to this day. The successor to the throne, who tried to put an end to this weak military situation and to rescue Iran from this “decline,” praises the military victories of contemporary French troops. Young Abbas Mirza looked at Europe with admiration, lamenting the inferiority of Iran. In a passage still capable of evoking an emotional response in contemporary Iran, Abbas Mirza asked the French envoy a series of questions which testify to the Iranian social habitus:

Which power triggered your dominance over us? What is the cause of your progress and of our long-lasting weakness? You are master of ruling, winning and the use of human capability, while we, like plants, are leading a slow life in shameful unawareness and without thinking about the future. Are the habitats, the fertility and the richness of the orient’s earth lesser than those of Europe’s? Has the radiance of the sunshine less blessing for us, although it is being radiated first on us and then on you? Is the willingness of the generous God geared towards more shares in his mercy for you? I don’t believe that. (Tabatabai 2006, 134)

Before the lost wars, Iranians who knew about Europe did not feel inferior to the Europeans, but often, as Muslims, rather superior. A reorientation can be traced from the few travelogues of Iranians who travelled to Europe. In the reports by Iranians after the wars were lost, for the first time, Europe is looked upon as a role model, as something to be orientated towards. The travelogues of Mirza Saleh and Khosro Mirza were the first critical travel reports concerned with the “causes of the backwardness” of Iran. The term “blossoming” (*abada-ni*) was one of the characteristic terms used by these travelers to refer to the ideal situation of a nation. The unraveling of the “mystery of the strength of Europe” was one of the most important questions for those travelers who were sent to Europe on behalf of the government (Ringer 2006, 67-68). In these travel reports “reform,” “modernization,” “Europeanization,” and “progress” were valued and “backwardness,” “subordination,” and “weakness” were criticized. The strength of the Russians, which the Iranians had underestimated before they lost the two wars, viewing them as “backward” and “uncivilised,” was attributed to their “modernization” or “Europeanization.” Accordingly, the

superiority of Russia was traced back to the military reforms which had been carried out according to the Western European model during the period of the rule of Peter the Great. The recruitment of European military advisors and instructors under Peter's rule and the methods of reforming and Europeanizing the military attracted much attention in the discussions (Ringer 2006, 68-75). In the early attempts at reform, the Iranian reformists made use of the similar experiences of the reformists during the Ottoman Empire. There, the statesmen were also concerned with new reforms after they had lost wars against other nation-states. They too started with military reforms (Ringer 2006, 52). The military skills of Western Europeans were judged by the Ottomans to be the most important cause of their superiority. The military reforms by Sultan Salim III between 1789 and 1809, which were known in Iran as the "new order" (*nezame jadid*), were taken as a model by Iranian statesmen. In the same way, for the first time in Iran, European officers were hired to train Persian soldiers, modern weapons were bought, arm manufacture was established, and students were sent to Europe, in particular, to learn military skills and sciences (Abrahamian 1998, 68).

3. The Transition from Military to Non-Military Reforms

The first reform tried to pursue the "escape route" for Iran (Ajoudani 2006, 241) by means of military reforms, from the middle of the 19th century onwards, reforms in the other areas, such as finance, education and political institutions received more attention. A drive for these new reforms also existed in the continuing desire for the establishment of a "strong central state" based on the pattern of "progressive" nation-states (Adamiyat 2006a, 214). The new reforms in the Ottoman Empire, which were known as "*tanzimat*" served as a model for the Iranian leadership during this period as well (Adamiyat 2006a, 53). The first translation offices, the first embassies abroad, the development of the postal system, and the first official newspaper were initiated during this phase of the reforms by Amir Kabir, the first Grand Vizier of Naser al-Din Shah. Attempts had also been made to reform the financial system (Ringer 2006, 83).

In the second half of the 19th century under the rule of Naser al-Din Shah, which lasted for about half a century (1848-1896), the reforms were carried out more extensively. During this period, despite the structural weakness of the central state, there was relative security and stability in the country. At this stage of the development of Iranian society, the need for "flourishing" and "progress" became more and more important in political and society (Adamiyat 2006b, 146). In order to describe the country's situation before the reforms, academics have employed terms such as "the period of ignorance" (Sheikhholeslami 1988, 11), "decadence," "unconsciousness," "sleep of inattention,"

“sickness of the fatherland,” and “destroyed Iran” (Tavakoli-Targhi 2003, 54) which were used to draw attention to the “chronic disease” of the country (Tavakoli-Targhi 2003, 94). For example, strategies were suggested in the *Book of Reforms* of the Shah Malkam Khan to “heal the very sick state” (Adamiyat 2006b, 30). In this treatise, one can elaborate how gradually the weight of military reforms in Iranian leadership had been shifted to other types of reform. The lack of law and order was slowly brought to the centre of attention and regarded as the more important “cause” of the “underdevelopment” of Iran.

For a more realistic understanding of the shift in the social habitus of many Iranian statesmen and intellectuals of this period, it is helpful to take a brief look at the structure of arguments in their writings. By analysing these narratives, one can access the self- and world-images of their authors, which have very probably exerted an influence on the direction of developments during this period of Iranian history. The emergence of such self- and world-images was, however, very much connected with the social need for new alternatives, solutions, and approaches by many Iranian intellectuals and statesmen. Malkam Khan is one of these well-known personalities who has been credited by many as one of the most influential “pioneers” of this period. He not only shaped the political ideas of many statesmen towards new solutions to problems, but also gave answers to the already existing societal needs of many humiliated Iranians for a positive collective self-image. Political approaches as well as solutions developed out of such a rather simplified perception of social processes had a strong impact on the development of the Iranian state and society in the 19th and 20th centuries. Malkam Khan, for example, discusses in his influential essay *The Secret Book* (ketabche-ye ghaybi) the similarity of the “principle of order” with all other scientific principles as follows:

The Europeans have followed the path of progress and the principles of order in these past two or three millennia. They have, for instance, invented telegraph systems and established precise legal systems. In the same way, the streets of Tehran can be equipped with the Western telegraph, one could also import Western principles into Iran without any hesitation and without problems. (Tabatabai 1970, 13)

Long-term processes of nation-state formation are understood by Malkam Khan as a unique invention of the Europeans, similar to other discoveries in natural sciences. As a solution to problems, he posits a clear necessity for the complete adaption of the Western methods of government (Adamiyat 1962, 125-126; Ajudani 1997, 286). He later attempted to familiarise Iranian intellectuals with the new European principles of rule and governance in his newspaper *Ghanun* (“Law,” c.f. English “Canon”) published in London. In this newspaper, he presented the works and ideas of European philosophers from the period of the Enlightenment. This newspaper, thanks to the new, well developed postal and telegraph system in Iran, reached the larger cities and produced

a wave of demands for “law and order” (*ghanun khahi*) among the small number of literate, dissatisfied statesmen, traders, bazaaris, intellectuals, and clergy.

Many studies of this period of Iranian history have been concerned either with the ideas of such “eminent personalities” and their implications for social and political processes of this time, or their attention has been devoted to the social and economic structures. However, a study that examines the work of these personalities in close connection with the social need of many desperate Iranian intellectuals and statesmen for change will allow a broader understanding of social and political developments at this time.⁴ These well-known and influential individuals were a distinct part of the Iranian society, a figuration in which they were closely linked through a web of interdependencies, which were not only time- but also society-specific. Based on this example, one can see that changes in social, political, and habitual structures took place simultaneously. On the one hand, the exaggeration of the role of these single individuals and their writings may, in retrospect, severely limit the understanding of the real course of events of this crucial period of Iranian history. On the other hand, discussion of the long-term social structures without taking into consideration the people involved with their different scopes of decision making, based on their different power resources, would lead to less reality-congruent explanations. As we will see, these literate groups, with their more or less similar approaches, certainly had a great impact on the direction of the development of Iranian society because, in this transitional period, many Iranians looked for solutions to escape a situation perceived as unbearable.

⁴ The ideas of other influential activists were very similar to ideas of Malkam Khan. Another book that also played an “enlightening” role during this period was a book with the title of “One Word” (*yek kalame*). This one word again referred to “law.” This book was written by Mirza Yusef Khan Mostashar al-Doleh. He was for a short time the envoy of the Iranian ruler in Saint Petersburg. After that, he was General Consul in Tbilisi for four years, between 1864 and 1868. There, he published his book “*The Mystery of Yusef*” (*ramze Yusefi*), in which he championed the adoption of modern laws in Iran. In this book, he tried to combine the individual articles of the Declaration of Human Rights from the French Constitution with the Shariah, the Quran suras, and the traditions of Mohammad and other Imams (Ajoudani 1997, 216). He wrote about freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, the ban on torture, the separation of the legislature and the executive, and the equality of all human beings, whether poor or rich, Muslim or non-Muslim. Such ideas were revisited decades later during the Constitutional Revolution of 1906.

4. Modernization of the Political Institutions: Towards the Nationalization of the State, Society, and Personality

The three visits to Europe by the Persian Shah, Naser al-Din Shah, in the years 1873, 1879, and 1889 point to the role of the European nation states in the fulfillment of the need for continuation of the new reforms in the direction of nation building in the Iranian state and society.⁵ The first journey of the Shah came about in particular through the attempts of Sepahsalar, his Grand Vizier. Sepahsalar became familiar with modern reforms as a political envoy of the Persian court to India, Caucasia and the Ottoman empire (Keddie 2008, 66-71; Adamiyat 2006b, 127). In a letter to the Shah, he explains the importance of this first journey as follows: “On this journey, not only the country’s Shah will travel to Europe. Rather, the entire Iranian state is traveling to investigate the state of the world in order to save this country” (Adamiyat 2006b, 260).

Many Iranian statesmen took part in this five-month journey which involved travel through the Ottoman empire, Russia, Belgium, Britain, France, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, and Austria (Adamiyat 2006b, 263). After this journey, a further thrust was made towards the reform of state and social institutions. Under the supervision of Russian officers, the first trained and disciplined military force in the country was established to finally emancipate the central state from the nomadic troops. This new force played an important role in the later developments of the country, particularly, in Reza Khan’s rise to power through a military coup in 1921 (Keddie 2008, 75). For the first time, the term “*nazmiyeh*” (police) appeared in the newspapers, and a military regiment was used as a “police regiment” (*foje nazmiyeh*) to maintain order in the capital (Mostofi 2007a, 176). Taking the European models, priority was given to the establishment of new political institutions, such as the “Governmental Assembly” (*shora-ye dolati*) and the “Council for Advisory Issues” (*majles-e maslahat-khane*). At the “Government Assembly,” various ministries were formed which were primarily to be responsible to the Grand Vizier and not directly to the Shah. The “Council for Advisory Issues” consisted of high-ranking courti-

⁵ After these journeys, constant comparisons between Iran and Europe became increasingly widespread. After the second journey of Naser al-Din Shah, he explicitly equated “European” (*farang*) with “better” or “higher.” This feeling of inferiority on the part of the Persian Shah towards the Europeans can be determined from his travel reports (Milani 2002, 136-138). One also could observe this feeling of inferiority towards “the West” in the behaviour of Mohammad Reza Shah, who ruled Iran from 1941 until the Islamic Revolution in 1979. The Islamic Revolution is, in this sense, a nativist movement intended to end the situation of feeling inferior by a demonstrative emphasis on one’s own values which are considered to be superior. The establishment of the “discourse of authenticity” and “return to self” (Mirsepassi 2000, 96) of key ideologues of the Islamic Revolution, such as Javad Ale Ahmad and Ali Shariati, cannot be understood without taking into account the long-term development of the Iranian state and society since the 19th century.

ers, who in accordance with a charter were to advise the Shah on political matters (Mostofi 2007a, 182-183).

Other reforms included the setting up of translation offices and government publishing centers, the recruitment of scientists and experts in foreign languages, and the mandating of representatives of the newly established Ministry of Justice to travel to the different regions of the country to monitor judicial processes (Mostofi 2007a, 148; Dolatabadi 2008a, 249). The financial system was also reformed. For instance, the number of tax collectors (*mostofies*) in the court rose from five persons at the beginning of the Qajar dynasty to fifty shortly before the Constitutional Revolution in 1906 (Mostofi 2007a, 733). Plans for the construction of a railway, new roads, the establishment of a “national bank,” and other modern facilities and institutions were also initiated in this phase of the reforms (Adamiyat 2006b, 309-311). Towards the end of the 19th century, reform of the educational system contributed towards national feeling in Iranian society through the setting up of new schools between 1896 and 1907. Gradually, these schools replaced the old religious schools (*madrastas*) administered by the clergy. The first book on “Persian Grammar” was written in this time (Mostofi 2007a, 800-801) and with the establishment of a printing company, school books were published as cheaply as possible (Dolatabadi 2008a, 246). The “Association of Knowledge” (*anjomane maaref*), established by citizens “interested in culture,” played an important role in the development of relatively secular primary schools in the large cities of the country. There was also development of the press, both inside the country as well as abroad. From abroad newspapers reached their small readership in the country more easily than before (Dolatabadi 2008a, 243-246). All in all, in this phase the desire for reforming social and political institutions gradually gained the upper hand over military reforms (Ringer 2006, 162).

5. The “Semi-Colonial Situation” of Iran and the Weakness of the Qajar Dynasty

The process of creating a sense of the “nation” in the realms of state, society, and even personality in Iran in the second half of the 19th century was accompanied by many tensions and conflicts. Despite these reform attempts, the Qajar dynasty was prone to internal power struggles due to a structurally weak dynasty that could not build a stable monopoly of power and taxation over the entire country. A large number of tribal leaders and regional princes, courtiers, and clergymen were critical of the reforms and the expansion of power by the central state (Foran 2007, 219). These forces saw the reforms as causing them to lose their former functions and resources which had given them power. The leaders of the tribes were skeptical about the military reforms and the expansion of the power of the central state in the regions; the courtiers, regional

princes, and clergymen also saw their privileges endangered by the strengthening of the central state and its state apparatus (Ringer 2006, 172-173).⁶

On the one hand, a large section of the clergy insisted on retaining their privileges in education and judicial institutions and was opposed to reforms in these areas (Keddie 2008, 74). On the other hand, Naser al-Din Shah himself, aware of his limited power resources, did not want any direct confrontation with these strong groups. The reforms were only welcome to him as long as the weak central state did not radically change the balance of power between different groups which could put his rule in danger. As we see, therefore, the notion of “oriental despotism” in reference to the Qajars is not realistic. On the contrary, the Qajar state could be described as a state in which Shahs tried to compensate for their limited power through the manipulation and creation of rivalries and disputes in different tribal, rural, and urban areas, a policy of “divide and rule.” The power of the central state in Qajar period, as in earlier periods, was limited to the capital city. The historian, Ervand Abrahamian refers precisely to the lack of a monopoly of physical force and taxation by the central state in Quajar period: “In reality, however, the power of the Shah was sharply limited – limited by the lack of both a state bureaucracy and a standing army” (Abrahamian 2012, 8-9).

Whenever the reforms were perceived as a threat, the leadership gave in to the demands of the clergy. The forced abdication of the Grand Vizier Sepahsarar, who was esteemed by the Shah during the years following his return from Europe in 1873, is a clear example of how the Shah relented in the face of an alliance of powerful groups in the country (Mostofi 2007a, 190-191). This backing down, however, always had its limits. It had always been countenanced only to the extent that his ruling privileges had not been threatened. Otherwise, one cannot explain why the Shah had appointed the suspended Grand Vizier – who was condemned to death by Grand Ayatollah Kani – as governor of Gilan province and, just months later, as Foreign Minister (Adamiyat 2006b, 264-277). This process allows one to take a look at the power figurations of various, partially pre-nation-state groups in Iran during this period and the relative weakness of the central state trying to become a modern nation-state. By carefully regulating the pace of the reforms, Naser al-Din Shah tried consistently to overcome the threat to his own ruling privileges and those of his allies arising from these reforms. In particular, at the end of his rule, his interest in new reforms sharply decreased as he increasingly became aware of

⁶ In the first 40 years of the reign of Naser al-Din Shah, which represented the most “secure” periods of Qajar rule, Etemad al-Saltaneh writes of 169 revolts and uprisings in the country. Above all, nomadic tribes were involved in these uprisings and revolts. Even Naser al-Din Shah himself complained about the lack of security in his country. He saw a direct link between security and the “flourishing” of a country in which he said, “no confidence could be established without security” (Ashraf 1980, 41).

the consequences of these reforms as a potential risk to his fragile rule (Keddie 2008, 89).

Another development which contributed strongly to the weakening of the Qajar dynasty was the power struggle between powerful states of that time on the international stage, especially between Russia and Britain. Since the lost wars Iran was, due to its geopolitical position, not completely colonised. The country had been divided in two different “spheres of influence”: Russia in the north and Britain in the south and east. Through this “semi-colonial situation” (Ashraf 1980, 46), which was promoted and supported by the occupiers, the country was supposed to act as a buffer zone preventing disputes which could lead to a direct military confrontation between these two countries. Britain aimed to shield its colonies in India and the Near East from Russian influence. The structural weaknesses of the Qajar dynasty are also evident from the fact that in Iran itself, the central state, in order to continue the reforms and finance its growing state apparatus, was increasingly dependent on the financial aid of these occupiers (Foran 2007, 217). The granting of new concessions to foreign companies and citizens and the direct issuing of high-interest bonds in particular from these two countries, were among the two most common methods for financing the state apparatus, which became more and more differentiated and complex (Abrahamian 2012, 38-39). To facilitate the exchange, British and Russian banks opened their first branches in the country even before the Iranian state itself was able to establish a “national bank” (Ashraf 1980, 48-50). However, the granting of new concessions and the acceptance of loans by these countries, which were perceived as “alien,” led to opposition from a large number of traders, bazaaris, clergy, statemen, and new intellectual circles. Each group reasoned their antagonism from their own perspective (Keddie 2008, 73). Out of the resistance to the “foreign powers” and against the weakness of the central state, different trends of nationalism developed around the end of the 19th century.

6. The Psychogenesis of the Constitutional Revolution

From the second half of the 19th century onwards, the development of a national social habitus started in Iran. The reconstruction and reestablishment of a “great lost past” in the pre-Islamic period constituted the core of these processes, which became stronger in the course of the Constitutional Monarchy up to the rise to power of Reza Khan as the new Shah in 1925. One could highlight processes of nationalism in the Iranian social habitus before the Constitutional Revolution in 1906 on the basis of two central concepts of this period and on the basis of changes in their symbolic representations. One is the term “*vatan*” which could be translated into English as “fatherland,” and the other is the term “*mellat*,” which can be equated with the English “nation” or “the people of a

nation.” In other words, the term “*vatan*” referred to a land called “Persia” whose population was described as “*mellat*” (Ghahari 2001, 131).⁷ From the second half of the 19th century, these two terms represented new experiences at the level of state and society in Iran. Until then the term “*vatan*” symbolised the “place of birth” (Ajoudani 2006, 210) or the “place of residence” and the term “*mellat*” just referred to the “follower of Sharia” or even just to the “religion and teaching.” This conceptual development was accompanied by social changes that were aimed at the establishment of a new unit of protection and defense, a “survival unit” (Elias 2010, 147) on a national level. In the course of such processes, the boundaries of this new survival unit shifted. On the one hand it became more limited, no longer applied to the borders of all Islamic societies. On the other hand, it became extended from the narrowing borders of different smaller tribal units to the borders of a country in which was found the “Persian nation.” In this context, the attempts to create an “alliance of all Muslims” (*Zargarinejad 1995*, 78) from all Islamic societies humiliated after the lost wars against “infidel” nation-state societies ultimately failed to gain dominance over nationalist tendencies.⁸ Although an “Islamic-Shiite Persia” has always been referred to, the emphasis on Iran as a nation and not an ethnic or religious community came increasingly dominant as a discourse over time (Ajoudani 2006, 196-197). On the basis of the texts of writers and poets of this time, one can analyse the direction of the change of this frame of reference of people’s self-experience in favour of a “Persian or Iranian nationalism.”

While Malkam Khan complained in his early writings about the weakness of the “Sharia followers” in the Islamic countries because of their “careless sleep” (*khabe gheflat*), the other nationalist-oriented writers distanced themselves from the Islamic past of their country and thus from a relatively dominant Islamic layer of their collective identity as an integral part of their social habitus. They merely concentrated on the pre-Islamic “greatness of Iran,” which was to be directly connected to the present time without any reference to the almost 13 centuries of Islamic presence between these two periods. A new historiography systematically attempted to conjure a past which up to that time was more or less forgotten. In a very exaggerated way, this “new constructed past,” saw new historic figures with new roles constructed, typical examples being the Persian king Keyumars, portrayed as the first king of humanity, the Persian religious reformer Mazdak as a theorist of “freedom and equality,” the

⁷ From a process-sociological point of view, the study of conceptual developments in a language methodologically provides access to the social development of people who speak this language. Therefore, the study of changes of concepts, as the symbolic representation of the reality, provides at the same time an explanation about the direction of transformation in a society (Elias 2010, 141-143).

⁸ This tendency can be studied in particular in the letters and works of Seyed Jamal Asad Abadi. In his work “Why has Islam become weak?” he advocated an alliance of all Muslims against the “infidels” (*Zargarinejad 1995*, 78).

rebel Kaveh Ahangar as the founder of all national movements, and another Persian King, Anushirvan, as a just and constitutional monarch (*Tavakoli-Targhi 2003*, 9). The aim of this movement was the “restoration of the lost past greatness of Iran” after a period of perceived humiliation and weakness, particularly as the result of the lost wars with other nation-states. The bearers of this movement sought to dissociate themselves from other dominant layers of their social habitus which had existed up to that time, such as Islamic-Shiite and ethno-regional layers. Without taking into account the new thrust of colonialist-oriented globalization, these nationalist tendencies in Iran and other Islamic countries are hard to understand. According to the Iranian historian Fereydon Adamiyat, the establishment of a reform-oriented and progressive nation-state similar to Germany during Bismarck’s reign was the goal of many statesmen and intellectuals before the Constitutional Revolution (Adamiyat 1985, 31). With the new nationalist-oriented historiography in Iran, the previously established historiography was called into question. It had propagated the idea of the Islamic period as a “period of civilization” and the pre-Islamic period of Iran as a “period of ignorance” (Tavakoli-Targhi 2003, 15). The need for a new we-identity was responded to on the basis of ancient Persian texts. These were published to a greater extent during the 19th century mainly due to the spread of the printing machine in India. Moreover, the attention of European Orientalists had contributed to the level of attention given to such texts (Tavakoli-Targhi 2003, 16-17).

This period of the development of the “national” aspects of state, society, and personality in Iran is characterised, among other things, by writers who were interested in “cleansing and purifying” (Ajoudani 2006, 65) the Persian language of Arabic and Turkish words. By modernising the language, the aim was also to make it possible to spread literacy to a wider section of Iranian society. The emphasis on “simple and clear writing” was supposed to lead to the emancipation from the elitist writing style of those who had previously claimed the monopoly over education and knowledge, above all the clergy (Ajoudani 2006, 87). Many writers such as Akhundzadeh, Talebof, Aghakhan Kermani, Malkam Khan, and Maraghei belonged to the group of writers of this period, who for the first time tried to write in a simpler style. They also systematically introduced many new terms from the English and French languages into Farsi (Soroudi 2004, 169). Through the publication of new-style newspapers and the translation of scientific and historical books, especially novels from European languages that were supposed to “open the eyes and ears of many Iranians” (Adamiyat 1985, 54), this new “modern” writing style was promoted and disseminated (Ajoudani 2006, 72). The large increase in the number of travel reports by Iranian statesmen towards the end of the 19th century can be seen in the context of this relative “democratization of the Persian writing style” (Soroudi 2004, 169). In addition to the spread of socialist ideas from the Caucasus region by Iranian emigrants in the northwest regions of the

country, the establishment of modern institutions, such as a lodge of freemasons and a “high school for political sciences” (Ringer 2006, 189-190), also accelerated secularization and the accompanying nationalist trend of the social habitus in Iran. By developing a new, although very small, middle class in the larger cities in Iran, the message of these critical intellectuals could find a broader resonance.

7. The Constitutional Revolution and the Desire for a “Strong Central State”

Shortly before the Constitutional Revolution in 1906, the desire for a “strong central state” can be detected within five influential groups. Such a state was, among other things, supposed to be capable of protecting its citizens and their interests against the citizens of other nation-states and their interests. The development of these groups is, as indicated, closely linked to the development of the state in Iran in the 19th century. The relative stability and security throughout this century strengthened the small middle class living in the larger cities (Foran 2007, 195). The emergence of the constitutional movement can hardly be understood without taking into account the role of these new growing groups (Foran 2007, 195; Abrahamian 1998, 103). A large number of traders, bazaaris, clergy, intellectuals, and statesmen were dissatisfied with the economic and political situation, especially in the last three decades of the Qajar dynasty. The increase in foreign interference was attributed by these groups to the weakness of the central state. The intellectuals and “enlightened” statesmen compared their weak state with European states. The traders and bazaaris were dissatisfied with the state due to the lack of support in their economic competition with foreign traders and firms. And, finally, the increasingly powerful clerics who worked closely with bazaaris and traders, criticised above all the “rule of the infidels” over their “Islamic country.” The Constitutional Revolution, which up to then had played an important role in the direction of social and political development in Iran, was the result of the close collaboration between these five different groups.

In the last two decades of the rule of Naser al-Din Shah and of his successor Mozaffar al-Din Shah, Iran was compelled to seek foreign bonds from Russia and Britain to finance the growing state apparatus which was weakened as a result of inflation and the sharp decline in the value of the Iranian currency. These two “great powers” were strictly set against Iran’s taking up of loans of such bonds from other countries (Ashraf 1980, 93-94; Martin 2004, 68). However, these high-interest bonds were always linked to conditions which were to the detriment of the majority of Iranians. The more favorable customs tariffs for the foreign traders and the introduction of tax relief for the foreign companies and citizens led to growing dissatisfaction on the part of the growing num-

ber of Iranian traders. In particular, textile work in Iran suffered under these conditions (Foran 2007, 196). Accordingly, one of the most important demands which these traders made of their government was the support of domestic goods and traders in their competition with strong and better organised foreign traders and companies (Ashraf 1980, 94-96). Iranian traders compared their own situation with the position of similar traders in more developed European societies and demanded more influence in political decision making (Ashraf 1980, 106-107).⁹ From this tension there developed over time a “political consciousness” aimed at securing a better future. The manifestation of this new political consciousness would be realised in the demonstrations and protests between 1900 and 1905 in the larger cities of Iran (Martin 2004, 68). The government’s flogging of Iranian sugar traders in 1905 is often understood as the beginning, even the cause of the Constitutional Revolution of 1906. This revolution is, however, hardly comprehensible without the previous long-term unintended shifts in the balance of power between different groups in Iranian society and the resulting change in the self-experience of small and medium-sized groups in the larger cities.¹⁰ Many of these traders and their allies later constituted the leadership of the Constitutional Revolution and held important positions, especially in the First Parliament (Ashraf 1980, 100-101).¹¹

The clergy was another group which gained enhanced power in the second half of the 19th century. This development, like the development of the trader and bazaar groups, required a degree of (relative) security and stability in the country. The increase in the power of the clergy also went hand in hand with the increase of population in various cities. The Qajar dynasty attempted to take advantage of these shifts in the power of the clergy for its own dynastic ends. During the Russo-Persian wars, Abbas Mirza tried, for instance, to win the support of this group. Some of them issued Fatwas to the effect that the war between Russia and Iran was a “holy war” against the “infidels” and strongly contributed to the mobilization of the voluntary jihadists (Zargarinejad 1995, 65). However, in the reigns of the last three Qajar kings up until the Constitutional Revolution, tensions between the Qajar rulers and ever-growing numbers of clergy increased. First, the Sharia-oriented clerics were opposed to the nomination of a Sufi-oriented Grand Vizier by Mohammad Shah (Zargarinejad

⁹ The opportunities for power for the traders at the political level were still much lower than those of the tribal leaders and courtmen (Foran 2007, 195).

¹⁰ Ala al-Dowleh, the governor of Tehran, accused sugar traders of hoarding and selling at inflated prices. The violent seizure and opening of the sugar storage facilities as well as the public flogging of the biggest sugar merchant Seyed Hashem Ghandi and his son led to a great uproar among many traders, bazaaris, and clerics.

¹¹ The constitutional movement was an urban movement that took place mainly in Tehran. The number of MPs in the first parliament from Tehran alone (60) amounted to half the number of MPs from all other cities and regions in the country (Hedayat 2006, 141-142; Mostofi 2007b, 1191).

1995, 72). Later, the clergy recognised in the course of the reforms of the second half of the 19th century that their monopoly on education and justice was threatened by the developing central state. The increase in the opportunities for increases in the power of the clergy could be demonstrated, among other things, by examining a particular incident. When Naser al-Din Shah returned from his second journey in Europe in 1872, he was not allowed to take his popular Grand Vizier Sepahsalar with him to Tehran. The context of the issue was clergy opposition to a contract for railway construction granted during the European visit to a British citizen Julius Reuter. The clergy perceived Sepahsalar to be the main initiator of this contract being granted to an “infidel” (Kasravi 1984, 10). The group of disaffected clergy was very closely connected with the dissatisfied traders and bazaaris. In the course of the 19th century, an alliance developed between these urban groups, which is still more or less present in the Iranian society. The traders and bazaaris funded the clergy in the form of a religious tax in the large cities because of their religious convictions. This made the clergy financially independent of the state (Zargarinejad 1995, 74). The clergy, on the other hand, supported the traders and bazaaris against arbitrary rule (Ashraf 1980, 111). Both the clergy as well as the traders and bazaaris felt threatened by the weakness of the central state and the increase in the influence of foreign citizens and firms in their country. The traders and bazaaris saw themselves as insufficiently protected by the government against the massive import of foreign goods by well-organised foreign companies and dealers. They also felt threatened by the new market order. The state, as indicated, was not in a position to comply with the demands of these dissatisfied traders and bazaaris because of conditions imposed on it in its treaties with Russia and Britain (Keddie 2008, 67). On the other hand, the clergy was concerned about the “rule of the infidels” over their Islamic land (Keddie 2008, 96). The granting of new concessions to the foreign companies and citizens was for them the epitome of the “domination of the infidels” in an Islamic country. They referred to a verse from the Koran (Nessa 141), which strictly prohibited the “rule of the infidels over the Muslims” (Zargarinejad 1995, 74).

8. The Constitutional Revolution of 1906

Common internal and external enemies strengthened the cohesion of dissatisfied traders, bazaaris, and clergy, the three increasingly powerful groups. The emergence of the Tobacco Movement (1891-92) in reaction to the granting of the tobacco concession to a British citizen, Major G. F. Talbot – which was granted to the detriment of many local tobacconists – was not a spontaneous movement. It was, on the contrary, based on the already established long-term cooperation, especially through the mosques, between these three groups. This movement, which contributed to the increase in the power of the clergy and its

allies on the social and political levels, had far-reaching consequences for the further development of Iranian society from the assassination of Naser al-Din Shah in 1896 up to the Constitutional Revolution in 1906 (Adamiyat 1985, 35-37). The victory of the Tobacco Movement under the leadership of Grand Ayatollah Shirazi and the cancellation of the tobacco concession by the state pointed to the weakness of the central state in Iran and the strength of the clergy in mobilising the masses at this time, particularly in big cities (Keddie 2008, 86). It was a state that, because of the predominant influence of tribal leaders and regional princes, also had little power outside the big cities. In this respect, the Tobacco Movement can be understood as a prelude to the Constitutional Revolution and a test for these three groups to be cognisant of their opportunity to wield power. This movement, under the leadership of the clergy, took the form of a protest against a central state which was perceived as weak and incapable of defending their Islamic citizens against “infidel foreign powers” (Adamiyat 1985, 3). As historian Nikki Keddie notes, this movement was significant because “Iranians saw for the first time that it was possible to win out against the Shah and foreign interests” (Keddie 1966, 131).

The cooperation between the three above-mentioned well-organised groups and their support through the newly created intellectual circles and the disappointed reformist statesmen would finally lead to the Constitutional Revolution of 1906. The ruling ideology of “progress” among the intellectuals and reform-oriented statesmen of that time meshed very well with the desire of the clergy, bazaaris, and traders for “security, prosperity and protection from the rule of the infidels” (Adamiyat 1985, 226; Ajoudani 2006, 174-176). In this collaboration, however, a change in the direction of the demands of the protesters could be observed, from the desire for a “House of Justice” (*edalat khaneh*) expressed in the first stages of the protests by the clergy, traders and bazaaris to the desire for a “National Assembly” (*majleis shora*) or a parliament, represented by the intellectuals and dissatisfied statesmen (Ettahadieh 2002, 43-44). In the first phase of the protests the return of the expelled clerics and the abolition of their “strike” (*tahason*) as well as the establishment of a “House of Justice” was given as conditions for the ending of the protests. Later on, in the second phase, however, the desire for a “popular assembly as it exists in other countries” won the upper hand. While the first desire pertained to “the practice of Sharia and the security of subjects,” the second desire was to introduce a “constitution” according to “the European model” (Adamiyat 1985, 162). Japan’s victory in the war against Russia, the archenemy of many dissatisfied Iranians in 1905, which led to many economic problems in Iran, contributed decisively to this shift. The Japanese victory was perceived as the victory of the constitutional monarchy of a small Asian state with a “constitution” against a European country without a constitutional monarchy and a “constitution.” Thus “constitution” was perceived by many reformists and intellectuals in Iran as the “main cause” of the success of the Japanese (Keddie 2008, 96-97). The propa-

ganda of newspapers published abroad on the new form of the government also played an important role in the desire for such a ruling system by dissatisfied politicians and intellectuals in Iran (Soroudi 2004, 146-147).

At first, there was little resistance on the part of the clergy with regard to this change in direction. A part of the clergy was even trying to religiously legitimize this new form of government. The constitutional form of rule, in comparison to despotism, was evaluated as being closer to the “absolutely just Shiite rule” which would occur under the leadership of Imam Mahdi after his return. This constitutional form of rule was therefore perceived as the lesser evil in the absence of the twelfth Imam, Mahdi (Zargarinejad 1995, 80).¹² The theory of the “*Vilayat-e Faqih*” (Shiite version of the Khalifa) was, at this time, a marginal theory. The conception of Ayatollah Tabatabai, one of the leaders of the constitutional movement, of the “constitution” is very revealing in this context (Zargarinejad 1995, 80).

We have not experienced our own constitution. But what we have heard from those who have seen constitutionally-governed countries nearby who have suggested that a constitution brings about the security and prosperity of a country. So, we are encouraged to establish a constitution for this country. (Adamiyat 1985, 226)

All the protesters, including the clergy, agreed on the necessity of establishing a “strong and functioning central state” through a constitution. The revolution was intended to build up a regime based on the model of other strong nation states. Even the Shah was not resolutely opposed to the idea of Constitutional Monarchy and the limitation of his power. There are statements from him in which the Constitutional Monarchy is rated positively: “All European kings rule with their parliaments and their power and independence is greater than ours” (Adamiyat 1985, 164).

Thus, after the “order of the constitution” (*farmane mashruteh*) issued by the Shah in August 1906, constitutionalists drafted a constitution based on the Belgian constitution of 1831. This document containing 51 paragraphs was finally passed in December 1906 (Amir Arjomand 2004, 100-101; Bahar 2007, 2). Through this new constitution, the power of the Shah was severely restricted, and a prime minister and cabinet was made directly responsible to a parliament elected by the people (Ettahadieh 1996, 46). Through the translation of

¹² Mahalati, Torshazi, and Naini were included in this group of clergy. There was, however, another part of the clergy who were very skeptical about terms such as “freedom” and “equality.” This part perceived the new changes as threatening. The understanding of the term “freedom” as “a concept of shame” (*kalame-ye ghabih-e-ye azad*) by Ayatollah Kani refers to the attitude of this group of clergy which, however, represented a minority position during and after the constitutional revolution. Grand Ayatollahs, such as Mazandarani and Khorasani from Najaf, supported the former part of the clergy. According to Kasrawi, without their support, few people would have supported the constitution (Kasravi 1985, 730).

electoral legislations from other constitutional forms of government in Europe, especially from France and Belgium, constitutionalists organised the first parliamentary elections in Iran (Dolatabadi 2008b, 523) in the hope of the establishing a strong and independent central government.

9. Summary

Processes of nation-state building in Iran demonstrate various discontinuities and breaches up to the present time. Until the rise of Reza Shah in 1925 – with the exception of the Safavid dynasty which came to power with the help of nomadic groups – all ruling dynasties in Persia had nomadic backgrounds. A relatively stable and long-lasting monopoly of physical force and taxation and accompanying processes of pacification and socio-economic developments would emerge during the Safavid dynasty (1501-1722), which was violently overthrown by Afghan nomads. After this dynasty, Persia was the battlefield of different brutal nomadic groups for nearly 80 years until the Qajar nomads were able to defeat other rivals and established a new dynasty. In the early 19th century, Persia was also confronted with new global challenges. Russia in the north and Britain in the south divided the country into two zones of influence. These led to more fragmentation of a territorial state which had been already suffering from severe structural weaknesses. The Qajar dynasty, as with other dynasties in Iran, was not able to establish even a relatively stable and long-lasting monopoly over physical force and taxation. The humiliation of the lost wars against the two major foreign powers led to the emergence of a perceived need for military, political, and bureaucratic reforms among many Iranian statesmen and intellectuals. The Constitutional Revolution of 1906 was another attempt to create a nation-state based on foreign examples, including those of the occupiers. This phase of Iranian history saw the strategy of full adaptation and imitation which had severe consequences for the social habitus and the formation of a collective identity of many Iranians up to the present time. This strategy was replaced almost a century later by a nativist “discourse of authenticity” based on the notion of “westoxification” and “return to self,” which contributed to the Islamic Revolution in 1979. The most obvious example in determining such a connection is the forced veiling of Iranian women during and after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 as a reaction to the forced unveiling of the Iranian women in the 1930s by national modernists under the rule of Reza Khan (Chavoshian 2019).

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¹³ Many resources that have been used for this paper were originally written in the Persian language or translated into English by the author. Next to the English translation of the titles, the Persian titles of these books are mentioned in brackets in Latin letters as well.

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