

KATJA RIECK & KATJA FÖLLMER

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# BEYOND LIBERAL NARRATIVES

RETHINKING AGENCY AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY IRAN

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## GISCA OCCASIONAL PAPER SERIES

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**Title page image:** Wall painting in the north of Tehran with the inscription: „In the name of God: Start doing sports.“ Foto: Katja Föllmer, 2019.

**GISCA** göttingen institute  
for social and cultural  
anthropology

Göttingen Institute for Social and  
Cultural Anthropology

Theaterstr. 14  
37073 Göttingen  
Germany

+49 (0)551 - 39 27850  
[ethno@sowi.uni-goettingen.de](mailto:ethno@sowi.uni-goettingen.de)

<https://www.uni-goettingen.de/GISCA>

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*Katja Rieck & Katja Föllmer*

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## Abstract

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This contribution discusses the empirical and theoretical biases of liberal narratives of social change. Such narratives of change are often analyzed as manifestations of civil disobedience to a strongly regularized state or as acts of rebellion against tradition and moral norms in a seemingly monolithic religious community of Shiites. By examining Asef Bayat's *Life as Politics* we chose a work that represents a seminal empirical and theoretical contribution to the study of change in Iran and the Middle East more generally and that continues to inspire research perspectives not only within anthropology but also in area studies and political science. We argue that such narratives that predominate in ethnographic works on Iran limit our understanding of transformation processes to conflicts and negotiations between "the state" and "civil society". For a deeper understanding of processes of change we have to consider the specificities and complexities of Iranians' lived realities and how they make meaningful lives.

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*Der vorliegende Beitrag diskutiert die empirischen und theoretischen Schwachstellen liberaler Narrative sozialen Wandels. Solche Narrative werden oft als Manifestationen zivilen Ungehorsams gegenüber einem streng regulierten Staat oder als Auflehnung gegen Tradition und Moral in einer scheinbar monolithischen religiösen Gemeinschaft von Schiiten verwendet. Unsere Diskussion konzentriert sich auf Asef Bayat's *Life as Politics*, weil dieses Werk als grundlegende Studie über sozialen Wandel in Iran und dem Mittleren Osten im Allgemeinen gilt und Forschungsperspektiven sowohl in der Ethnologie als auch in den Regional- und Politikwissenschaften beeinflusst. Wir argumentieren, dass diese Narrative, die ethnographische Studien über Iran dominieren, Transformationsprozesse auf Konflikte und Aushandlungen zwischen „Staat“ und „Zivilgesellschaft“ begrenzen. Für ein tieferes Verständnis von Wandlungsprozessen muss man jedoch die Besonderheiten und Komplexitäten der gelebten Wirklichkeit berücksichtigen und wie Iranerinnen und Iraner ihrem Leben Bedeutung verleihen.*

## 1. Introduction

The following working paper represents the outcome of discussions that followed the ERC-conference *Processes of Individualization: Social Milieus, Gendered and Inter-Generational Perspectives* held 2021 in Göttingen.<sup>1</sup> The aim of the conference in the framework of the ERC-project on "private pieties" (and "non-pieties") was not only to put a stronger focus on the individual as such, but also for an empirically grounded analysis of processes of individualization in society in general.<sup>2</sup> The concrete meanings and articulations of such

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<sup>1</sup> We thank Shahnaz Nadjmabadi, Ariane Sadjed and Maliheh Bayat Tork for their useful comments to this paper.

<sup>2</sup> The ERC-project "Private Pieties: Mundane Islam and New Forms of Muslim Religiosity: Impact on Contemporary Social and Political Dynamics" (2016–2022) was headed by Roman Loimeier and is comprised

processes of social and religious change were elaborated in different panels focusing on case studies such as Senegal, Tunisia, Egypt and Iran.

The panel on Iran was based on developments observed in recent years, which suggested a growing tendency in Iranian society for people to express “individual” needs, attitudes and ideas of belonging and differentiation. Characteristic for such processes of apparent “individualization” in Iran is that the various kinds of self-expression happen in a strongly regularized state under the umbrella of a seemingly monolithic religious community of Shiites. Consequently, these changes are often analyzed as manifestations of civil disobedience to the state or as acts rebelling against tradition and moral behavior.

To investigate the purported “individualizing” processes taking place in Iran we enquired whether such processes are the result of an inevitable dissolution of the bonds of family, tradition and social collectives with “the choice and reflexivity in identity and the privatization of social and political problems” (Dawson 2012: 307) at the expense of conventional collective categorization or, rather, whether these processes are determined by a continuous negotiation between moments of individual self-expression and continued demands of norms and social obligations. The three members of the panel approached this issue from different perspectives.

One panel contribution presented critical reflections on the empirical merits and hence applicability of individualization theory as an analytical framework, especially with regard to how it relates to the study of change in the Middle East and Iran specifically.<sup>3</sup> This contribution drew on Michel Foucault’s work on the “hermeneutics of the subject”, which historicizes sociological conceptions of the individual and so shows these to be embedded in specific political, cultural, historical and sociological developments. Consequently, presuming the individual and processes of “individualization” as the primary locus of change in Iran or the Middle East more generally, presumes the universality (and totality) of what are basically liberal conceptions of the subject (referred to as “the individual”). The presentation thus argued that working within an analytical framework of individualization simply re-hashes modernization theory on the micro-level and consequently forecloses more open and empirically thick explorations of shifts in forms of subjecthood and how these play into socio-cultural and political transformations. The presentation suggested instead to leave liberal models of social change behind that attribute transformation to the unfettering of “individuals” from the bonds of social collectivities and their norms. Instead, the talk argued that we must undertake investigations of shifting forms of subjectivity and processes of subjectification that are open to new models and narratives of change, grounded in the experiences of actual subjects. This would entail an analysis via specific case studies of the various circulating discourses, norms and practices of being that subjects embody that circumscribe different forms of subjecthood as they exist in post-revolutionary Iran as well as the “technologies of the self” employed to achieve new forms of subjecthood.

A second panel contribution discussed the options for the self-determination of women with regards to labor employment in post-revolutionary Iran.<sup>4</sup> The main focus was directed to the question of the entanglement of individual freedom and social control within the family and the workplace and the way women maneuver through common notions of chastity, prejudice and paternalism under the guise of religion. Many scholars have stressed the role of women’s activisms in Iranian society as a means of exercising power for social and political change. Women’s activism “without direction, leadership and structure” reveals “women’s greater awareness of [...] individual rights, individual autonomy within

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of case studies including Senegal (Nadine Sieveking), Tunisia (Roman Loimeier), Egypt (Liza Franke), Lebanon (Johanna Kühn) and Iran (Katja Föllmer).

<sup>3</sup> This paper by Katja Rieck was presented at the third “Private Pieties Conference”, Processes of Individualization: Social Milieus, Gendered and Intergenerational Perspectives, held online 22.–25. July 2021. The paper’s title was “Fashioning Upstanding Selves – Foucault’s Analytics of the Subject and the Shifting Terrains of Socio – Religious Life in Iran”.

<sup>4</sup> This paper was presented at the 3<sup>rd</sup> “Private Pieties Conference” by Katja Föllmer under the title “Empowering the Self: Women, Employment and the Role of the Family”.

marriage, family independence within the kinship network [...]” (Ali Akbar Mahdi quoted in Vakil 2011: 7). Even though there is no monolithic group of women in Iran in relation to their affiliation to the state, many find themselves having to work within the system to try to advance, protect, or alter laws and policies affecting women and to demand greater gender equality. In sum, women in recent years appear to have become more empowered and creative than they were just after the revolution. Not only for that reason various paradoxes have emerged in society, with which women in particular are confronted. There are, for example, contradictions between women’s legal status and their social reality and aspirations. As one concrete example, one can point to how the number of employed women and female university students has dramatically increased over the course of the post-revolutionary period. But at the same time, Islamic conservatives continue to insist on women being first and foremost housewives and mothers. The contribution has proved the hypothesis that education and employment of women not only contributed to the emergence of these paradoxes, but also enabled Iranian women to navigate through the existing conflicting situations and to develop strategies of self-maintenance and self-defense to become powerful individuals within a given social and political frame.<sup>5</sup>

The preliminary reflections that took place within the context of the conference panel on Iran offered us, the two authors of this article, the opportunity to discuss conceptual and analytical weaknesses present in prominent analyses of socio-cultural change in the Islamic Republic of Iran, both popular and academic. As noted above, whether explicitly or implicitly the idea of individualization is quite present in these narratives. We concluded that these accounts, through their focus on the role of the individual as agent of change, bear distinctive similarities that constitute a shared narrative thread, which we have referred to as the liberal narrative of change.

Because a detailed analysis of all works on post-revolutionary socio-cultural change in Iran would be rather tedious, we decided to elucidate this narrative trope by examining Asef Bayat’s *Life as Politics*. We chose to focus on this work because it represents a seminal empirical and theoretical contribution to the study of change in Iran and the Middle East more generally and continues to inspire research perspectives not only within anthropology but also in area studies and political science. That Bayat’s contribution to the study of change in the region comes from a particular perspective rooted in liberal tropes of social change and progress is not per se problematic. The days of claims to objectivity in our analyses are long gone. Any specific analytical heuristic will highlight some things and not others. But when a particular framework becomes so prominent that it overshadows other approaches and stands in the way of fully engaging in the richness of our empirical encounters, we are stifling the greater possibilities of our research. The following section of the working paper therefore seeks to draw attention to how both popular media as well as academic engagements with analyzing change in Iran are structured and therefore also limited by set narrative tropes leading to analytical foreclosures.

After discussing how Bayat’s portrayal of socio-cultural change in Iran is shaped by liberal narrative tropes, we analyze how this is connected to a research focus very much concerned with resistance as the primary impetus to change, whereby individuals assert their own desires against a dominating system thereby undermining it. As we will elaborate, this is a narrow and empirically thin conceptualization of how change transpires is rooted in simplistic black-white understandings of change as a consequence of conflictive state-society interactions and an underlying conception of power as a capacity held by the state to control its populace. From such a perspective, agency is seen only as the capacity of civil society (especially individuals) to refuse and resist state control. While this is certainly part of the picture, the empirical material suggests a much richer, more complex dynamic. The Manichean accounts of state-civil society, oppression-resistance in Iran do

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<sup>5</sup> A third contribution presented by Ariane Sadjed at the “Private Pieties Conference” under the title “Individual Religiosity as Civilizational Discourse. Contested Histories of Jewish life in Iran” was also part of that Panel. The presenter unfortunately could not join us in writing this working paper due to time constraints.

not adequately capture the nature of actors' agency in processes of change. Often agency is attributed to outside forces – images from “Western” media, globalization in general, the conditions of urbanization that erode “traditional” social orders. Much less attention is paid to agency as arising within Iranian social contexts, from internal diversity, from a long-standing tradition of critical self-reflection on the nation dating to at least the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as present-day contradictions and ambiguities within Iranian society.

We argue that to overcome the conceptual blind spots that result from the reproduction of liberal narrative tropes in our accounts of change in Iran, we must critically reflect on our implicit or explicit theoretical conceptions of power and agency and the degree to which these are embedded in ideas that are historically and culturally specific to European and North American self-understandings of their own historical development. Although anthropologists pride themselves on their commitment to the empirical richness of their material over and above theory, in practice, as the works here discussed show, theory continues to shape how we select and present what we have experienced in the field and what our interlocutors have taught us. Theory ultimately conditions our work as anthropologists at all stages of the research process. We must frame our research questions within a chosen theoretical framework when crafting our research proposals and applications for funding. When we present and publish our work, we do so as interventions in debates and discussions that generally also have theoretical contexts. So, although as a discipline we pride ourselves on our grounding in the field experience as central to our mode of knowledge production, this is heavily conditioned by the dictates of institutions of knowledge production and dissemination (applications for funding, conferences, journal publications, book proposals for publications, etc.) that make it necessary to frame our work in terms of theory. In doing so, it would be naïve to presume that theory simply plays a utilitarian role that helps us to package and communicate the results of our fieldwork. It shapes with what sorts of questions we enter the field, how we see what transpires there and then how we speak about our experiences as we present and publish the results.

The works discussed here will show that conceptions we have absorbed through our theoretical work are an integral part of the final products of our ethnography. Diversifying the empirical basis of our understanding of social change in Iran would therefore only solve part of the problem. This needs to go hand in hand with critical self-reflections on the theoretical (pre)conceptions that shape our research perspectives. Consequently, we undertake a rather lengthy discussion of how the liberal narrative of social change that dominates ethnographic works on Iran is shaped not only by empirical biases towards urban, middle-class and upper middle-class contexts but also by a theoretical background conditioned by the legacy of classical modernization theory. We therefore propose shifting to a different theoretical framework to disentangle ourselves from the baggage of tried and true perspectives, to put on a new set of glasses, so to speak, from which we can reconsider our empirical material (whether urban and upper middle class or not).

Although there would certainly be numerous possibilities for doing this, we have decided to draw on the work of Michel Foucault. This was for two reasons. For one, his decentralized, capillary conception of power as something working throughout the social fabric fits well with what the authors have observed in Iran (and elsewhere), where the enforcement of post-revolutionary norms is effected not just by the state but through society itself. Following from this, Foucault's work is ideally suited to allow us to gain distance from a central trope of the liberal narrative of change that conceptualizes transformation as the result of conflicts or negotiations between “the state” and civil society. In the closing section of the paper, we illustrate the scholarly value added of such a perspective that allows us to generate ethnographically and theoretically thicker accounts of how change can and does transpire in Iran.

## 2. From Darkness to Light – Liberal Narratives of Change in Iran

Those even with just a passing familiarity with Iran inevitably associate the country with almost ubiquitous images of Iranian society and culture as present in European and North American media, images of rebellious youth resisting the strictures of Islamic norms and asserting their desires to drink alcohol, listen to hip-hop or metal, host raves, attend football matches, dress according to more cosmopolitan practices of fashion and so on. Documentaries like *Nose, Iranian Style* (2005, Mehrdad Oskouei), *Offside* (2006, Jafar Panahi), *Generation Tehran* (2007, Sara Bavar), *Football Under Cover* (2008, David Assmann & Ayat Najafi) and *Raving Iran* (2016, Susanna Regine Meures) or films like *Persepolis* (2007, Marjane Satrapi & Vincent Parronau) or *Tehran Taboo* (2017, Ali Soozandeh) propagate and reinforce these images. Activist campaigns like Masih Alinejad's much noted "My Stealthy Freedom", in which Iranian women posted pictures of themselves on social media having taken off their veils (often in prominent public places), corroborate the narrative of a society in which individuals struggle to assert their freedom against the strictures of an oppressive theocracy.

What these popular media representations have in common is a conception of social order in which individual subjects are instilled with the inherent will to exercise autonomy to assert their interests. Change occurs when individuals successfully assert their wills against a prevailing socio-political system. This is what we mean when we refer to liberal narratives of change. These narratives embody an explicitly or implicitly held idea that humans' natural (and best) state is that of perfect autonomy to order their actions as they see fit without depending on the will of any other person.<sup>6</sup> It is an a-social, atomistic conception of freedom, in which humankind exists as individuals who only develop to their fullest potential in a situation of non-interference so that their inner potential, as expressed by their individual will, is permitted to come to full expression (cf. Mahmood 2005: ch. 1).

Part and parcel of these narratives is that the kind of freedom conceptualized and portrayed in these representations tends to be the freedom to be more Western, i.e. to pursue some aspect of secular, urban, capitalist society. The story of progress, it seems, is still very much conceived in terms of Europe's self-conception of transformation into secularized, urban, industrial societies (a conglomerate of transformations often subsumed under the term "modernity"). Consequently, in the films noted above we see young people striving for cultural forms achieved in the West through the modernization process and the attainment of late capitalism. This includes participation in the Western beauty and fashion industry, gender desegregation and sexual liberation in the sense of the right to date openly and have sexual relations outside of marriage, and to participate in late capitalist youth culture that entails certain practices of partying, music and drugs. Then there is the particular focus on the rights of women, which is pre-occupied with a very selective array of topics, such as struggles to perform as singers in public, to attend sporting events (especially soccer) and, of course, to not have to wear the veil. While these are certainly limitations placed on Iranian women, a whole array of other issues receives little to no attention, such as those concerning child custody, inheritance, employment, discrimination, etc. The selectivity of the kinds "activities of resistance" that these narratives focus on is interesting in and of itself. They tend to involve lifestyle practices, impingements on individual actions that are resisted by individual non-compliance – practices of dress, singing, doing a sport, drinking alcohol. The systemic issues that actors face – custody laws, inheritance, various forms of discrimination, children's rights, etc. – do not seem to make for such engaging documentary material, perhaps because they don't translate into performative lifestyle politics.<sup>7</sup> Focus on such individualized acts of resistance are embedded in and feed into liberal narratives of change, according to which individuals (women in particular) and

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<sup>6</sup> Paraphrasing of John Locke's classical definition as discussed in Courtland et al. (2022).

<sup>7</sup> An important exception is the 1998 documentary *Divorce Iranian Style* a collaborative project by filmmaker Kim Longinotto and the anthropologist Ziba Mir-Hosseini.

their pursuit of (Western-style) freedom against the tyranny of an oppressive state seems to be at the heart of what is driving developments in the Islamic Republic.

The images, and the aforementioned narrative underlying them, that have captivated audiences in Europe and North America, stirring imaginations of the power of the individual to resist and, on a micro-level at least, prevail over (and thereby erode) violent oppression, are echoed by significant and widely received scholarly studies, such as Roxanne Varzi's *Warring Souls* (2006), Pardis Mahdavi's *Passionate Uprisings* (2007, 2009), and Shahram Khosravi's *Young and Defiant in Tehran* (2008) as well as his later work *Precarious Lives* (2017). Mahdavi, for example, thus describes in her work, which first took the form of an article then a monograph, how many young adults "are now using their bodies and sexualities to speak back to what they view as a repressive regime", referring to their behavior as *enqelāb-e jensi*, sexual revolution (2007: 446). Shahram Khosravi opens his ethnography *Young and Defiant in Tehran* with the dramatic account of an incident that occurred in 1993. A young woman is unwittingly caught by the morality police while speaking with someone on the phone in a telephone booth. Her improperly positioned headscarf catches the authorities' attention. Yet confronted with her violation of the post-revolutionary Islamic dress code, she refuses to apologize and fix her veil. The confrontation quickly escalates, she is shot in the head and dies. Khosravi writes: "Her defiance, her laugh at the young man who saw himself as the envoy of God on earth, evoke the political as well as the existential standpoint the Iranian younger generation is taking up" (2008: xxii). The vignette is a powerfully emotional point of entry into his work on "power relations, control over space, bodies, desires, and sexuality" that aims to yield "a glimpse of life in contemporary Iran, a glance at power and defiance" (*ibid*). Moreover, his vignette presciently foreshadows an image that would go viral in 2009 and rally global solidarity for Iran's Green Movement – that of Neda Agha Soltan (Nedā Āqā-Şoltān) as she lay dying in the streets of Tehran after having been shot by *Basij* militia following a Green Movement protest on 20. June 2009.

Hence, popular media representations and scholarly accounts of the mid to late 2000s alike time and again portray as the central conflict defining the Iranian post-revolutionary condition as that between individuals bravely asserting themselves – be this through sexual behavior, consumer practices or fashion – against a totalitarian state. Of course, these accounts emerged in a wider discursive context that created their conditions of possibility, and it would be unfair to not give due credit to this. For one, such portrayals, especially those created in scholarly contexts, aim to intervene against perspectives from area studies and political science that focus on the political economy and institutional aspects of the functioning of the Iranian state as a totalitarian regime, particularly to explain its seeming immutability (cf. Bayat 2001; 2013: ch. 1). Against such political science perspectives that have made essentialist assertions on the Middle East's (including Iran's) inherent predilection for authoritarianism (a reincarnation of old tropes of Oriental despotism), scholars from the social sciences and humanities have been highlighting the role of ordinary people in breaking through authoritarian systems to initiate change from below. Perspectives focusing on the on-the-ground dynamism of these societies were bolstered by events like labor uprisings in Egypt in the 1990s and 2000s (Beinin 2012) and again the unexpected mobilizations that were part of the Iranian Green Movement and the Arab Spring (Oweidat et al 2008, Cavatorta 2012). Further, such portrayals of joyful youth and resilient women are deployed to intervene against stereotypes of Iran as a somber, misogynistic, totalitarian country by counterbalancing this with images of youth intent on asserting their desire to have fun, of women who will not let religious norms or taboos prevent them from acting on their desire to be beautiful, educated and professionally or otherwise successful (cf. Fayyaz and Roozbeh 2013).

In what follows we will discuss a specific example of what we mean when referring to "liberal narratives of change" by focusing on the work of Asef Bayat. We chose his work largely because it has been widely influential both in the study of Iran and the Middle East more generally. Moreover, it embodies in a very paradigmatic manner the key narrative tropes that characterize most other recent works on Iran. Further, not only is his work, at

least on the face of it, ethnographic, but it also aims to make theoretical contributions to the study of socio-political change in the region and more generally such that his accounts have a wider impact in shaping further research. Bayat's work, thus, is the outcome of a certain tradition of scientific discourse, while at the same time serving to further popularize that discourse by updating it to a contemporary context.

In his critical engagement with analytical concepts like civil society and social movement theory and their (in)adequacy to capture processes of change in Iran and the wider region, Bayat shifts his focus to the actions of individuals as a transformative force. Through his work on non-confrontational tactics of survival among the lower classes in post-revolutionary Iran he began to develop a perspective that focused on so-called non-movements (Bayat 1998, 2007, 2013: 15 ff.). In his view, both "Middle East Exceptionalism" – that is, the essential predilection of Middle Eastern societies for authoritarian government – and social movement theory have proven inadequate to capture the internal dynamics of politics and societies in Iran and the region more generally. Whereas the former posits an authoritarian stasis that does not hold up to repeated upheavals from below, the latter presents difficulties because Iran and other Middle Eastern societies lack free public spheres in which social movements can develop and perform their activism for change. Bayat's focus on non-movements, forms of uncoordinated collective activity that do not meet the criteria for social movements, ultimately lead him to a focus on the actions of individuals in everyday life as nodal points of socio-political transformation.

Through analytical concepts such as street politics (Bayat 1997a) and quiet encroachment (Bayat 1997a, 1997b) he draws attention to and provides a vocabulary for analyzing the cracks and crevices of authoritarianism, the spaces that allow for individual agency and the development of tactics of non-confrontational resistance. This, of course, is an immense contribution to the widening of analytical perspectives on processes of socio-political change. Moreover, the terms he introduces provide a language to analyze what anthropologists, historians and Iranian studies scholars have often observed and documented descriptively in specific contexts but not generalized further. However, like the scholarly accounts mentioned above, Bayat attributes the source of such agency to the capacity for *individual* refusal brought forth by the modernization process that has liberated individuals from the collectivism of traditional social norms and institutions.

A quotation from his very widely received *Life as Politics* is illustrative in this regard and encapsulates how Bayat conceptualizes the emergence of spaces of agency that underlie the dynamics of change in the Islamic Republic:

The truth is that under the Islamic Republic, Tehran – and by extension the country as a whole – has paradoxically grown more modern. *This rather tortured modernity is expressed in high literacy rates, growing urban individuality, the decline of the mahalleh, the extension of a modern public sphere, trends toward apartment living, and the increasing autonomy and public visibility of women. According to the 2012 census, a staggering half of men and one-third of women between twenty and thirty-five years of age lived alone, separate from their families. These developments tend to subvert theocratic rule that subsists on shapeless, standardized and ideological mass society.* Thus, while the Islamist authorities impose the hijab on women, many respond by turning it into a symbol of fashion; the regime coerces young people into adherence to official Islam, but they turn religious rituals into opportunities for socializing; the government pushes people to watch only state television, but satellite dishes sprout from the rooftops like uncontrollable weeds. It is ironic but not surprising that this capital of "moral virtues" now houses 400,000 drug addicts, 200,000 prostitutes, and more than 4.5 million victims of depression. *A governmentality that invests so much on biopolitics and social control is bound to be susceptible to the everyday doings of its modern citizens.* It will have to *undo this modern urbanity* or else rule by clubs, cameras, and callousness. (Bayat 2013: 174, emphasis added)

We see here that Bayat regards a process of modernization causing the disembedding of individuals from traditional face-to-face social institutions of neighborhood and family. With the rise of "modern urbanity" as the predominant social condition, social actors are

released from the social control of the traditional face-to-face contexts of neighborhood and extended family into the anonymity of single households. According to him, this cover of urban anonymity provides the space for the disembedding of individuals that allows them to exercise resistance to and subversion of the traditional social institutions that, according to Bayat, have been made the pillars of the post-revolutionary social order. Hence, the veil can be transformed into an individual fashion statement rather than stand for a symbol of piety and modesty; and public (state) rituals can be reappropriated as leisure events. It is thus the space of anonymous urban modernity that brings forth the individual agency to resist the state's normative order and to defacto create alternatives. Ultimately, this rehashes the classical perspectives of modernization theory dating from the 1960s that assert education, greater wealth, urbanization and access to cosmopolitan media flows will bring forth modern, liberal subjects, implicitly conceptualized along "Western" lines. This interpretative paradigm follows along the same lines as the liberal narrative of change mentioned above. Ultimately, it is the disembedding of individuals from their traditional social structures and institutions that frees their will, opens the space of refusal and resistance and sets the dynamics of transformation in motion.

However, in the study of socio-cultural and political change in Iran, and in the context of Bayat's work, the Middle East more generally, focus on modernization and the postulated emergence of liberal subjects from that process takes on additional valences specific to that context. In the quotation given above we see how at its very outset it plays on dichotomous stereotypes held with regards to the Islamic Republic. By portraying the state as having "*paradoxically* grown more modern", Bayat casts the post-revolutionary government as intrinsically opposed to modernity, which he conceives of as the tendency toward individualization. The citizenry in contrast, yearns for distinction, for freedom from collectivist institutions despite the regime's ostensible attempts to stifle such developments. In a scholarly context this is a rather odd statement, as the works of sociologists like Fariba Adelkhah have highlighted how the post-revolutionary state is a quintessentially modern phenomenon, not some throwback to medieval traditionalism (Adelkhah 1999, also Namazi 2019). In any case, key here is how the self-assertion of individuals (equated with modernity) is cast against a monolithically collectivist, essentially anti-modern, oppressive totalitarian regime that can only retain its grip on rule with violent oppression.

This narrative of the monolithic oppressive state against a freedom-loving citizenry, which has become even more entrenched following the Western interest in the rise of the Green Movement and the protests of 2009, is empirically rooted in a perspective that largely focuses on a young generation, living in Tehran, born after the revolution, that has been exposed to globally circulating media images and discourses and had access to greater educational opportunities. According to this account, the higher level of education, urbanization and exposure to new ideas and other ways of being through cosmopolitan city life and via the globalized media allows this generation access to new points of reference that enables it to question the legitimacy of post-revolutionary Iranian norms and institutions. In the case of Bayat's work, this narrative undergirds his theory of a politics of "the quiet encroachment of the ordinary" in which individuals create change through the pursuit of their everyday personal prerogatives (cf. Bayat 2001: 154; Bayat 2013: ch. 2). Whereas political science and sociology had previously looked to political parties, associations, unions, or social movements – i.e., the force of collectivities engaged in confrontational political activism on a given socio-political system – when studying processes of change, Bayat has highlighted the role of people acting individually yet tacitly in concert with others. This shift in analytical focus certainly makes sense in authoritarian contexts since civil society activism as it takes place in liberal democracies is not possible. From this perspective the focus on how change can be brought about in other ways, through changes in attitude, thinking and the practices of everyday life, certainly marks a significant contribution to the scholarship on socio-political change in Iran and the Middle East more generally (Bayat 2013; 2021).

That said, ethnographic gestures notwithstanding, the narrative Bayat presents still reproduces a liberal default story similar to the other works mentioned previously. According

to his account, modernization is inevitable, and only violent state suppression can hold it back. It is a tale of the insuppressible “will of the people” against tyranny, a tyranny that remains undifferentiated and faceless. Although he incorporates stories of individuals and their voices, these come exclusively from the citizenry, and what he includes serves to enrich a narrative of which he is the author.<sup>8</sup> There is no fundamental disruption of that narrative, and when there is, he glosses over rather than engage with it more deeply.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, despite his claims to the contrary, his analysis ultimately falls back into confrontational models of change, only that now the confrontation stems from individuals’ resistance to state power rather than from political parties, unions or civic organizations presenting an organized opposition for change. The young generation’s avid pursuit of global fashion trends is pitted against the earnest tristesse of the Islamic dress code enforced by the state’s moral police. Somber public rituals are reappropriated as occasions for joyous fraternizing (also between the sexes). And against the propaganda of Iranian state television Iranians have mobilized their satellite dishes. All these scenarios are ultimately confrontational, and in fact starkly so.

Yet, if all these practices were as clearly oppositional as Bayat and others portray them, then there would be little room for the state to make any kinds of accommodations that would be required for non-violent change to take place. This suggests that the analysis is missing a significant part of the picture, the part where subtle non-confrontational negotiation, manipulation of social networks of influence, creative reinterpretation of legal sources and bending of norms and rules takes place. This narrative blind spot results because for all the attention given to the actions of everyday persons with regards to how they resist and subvert the post-revolutionary order there is no engagement with the more nuanced non-confrontational ways that state and civil society, in all the internal diversity that characterizes both, interact on a day-to-day basis. Without due attention to the state, its specific institutions and contexts of action and, just as importantly, other non-state governing institutions, we cannot adequately account for the manifold changes taking place in everyday non-confrontational interactions. And it is these interactions between state institutions and civil society as well as interactions between civil society and non-state social institutions (all sites of on-going negotiation and bending of norms and rules) that would be central to pushing us to new concepts and narratives of change.

Perspectives, such as those of the sociologist Kevan Harris, do a somewhat better job of integrating into the analysis of the transformations taking place in Iran the kinds of intra-state dynamics missing in Bayat’s analysis. Thus, Harris’s contribution shows how the Islamic Republic itself through its own policies created the conditions of possibility for the emergence of an urbanized, highly educated middle class that began to share what he characterizes as typically middle-class aspirations for continued upward social mobility and lifestyle (Harris 2017). A large demographic of youth, now comprising both men and women, had been provided with access to university education and acquired the social and cultural capital to be qualified to work in technical, administrative, business, or entrepreneurial professions and thus achieved middle-class status. However, sufficient economic opportunities for many to materially realize their social positions, like suitable jobs and

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<sup>8</sup> Interview conducted by Mehdi Sanglaji, 11. March 2022, New Books Network (<https://newbooksnetwork.com/revolutionary-life>). In this interview Bayat discusses the relationship that his empirical material has to his theoretical work, namely as material for colorful illustration. This is rather different than anthropologists’ or historians’ relationships with their material, which is to challenge theoretical concepts and established scholarly understandings and to inspire new avenues of theorization (cf., for example, Comaroff and Comaroff 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Bayat recounts an incident from an Iranian radio show discussing “model Muslim women”, in which a young woman called in to comment that her model of womanhood was Osheen, a character from a *Japanese* television series set in Meiji Japan and focusing on the trials and hardships of a young woman during that time (2013: 90). He does not comment on this incident further and continues with an account of how women have progressively liberated themselves along the lines of the Western, liberal feminist movement. However, given the popularity of other Asian serials, particularly those focusing on the challenges facing women, one wonders if there are not more facets to women’s renegotiation of their subjecthood than reflected in Bayat’s account.

incomes, did not exist. According to Harris, this fed and continues to feed an atmosphere of growing dissatisfaction with the state, much like it did in Eastern Europe.

There are, however, other ways in which the state itself has created the spaces of agency for citizens to push back. In Harris's analysis of the Green Movement that mobilized in response to accusation of electoral rigging in the 2009 presidential election when conservative candidate Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was declared a landslide winner, he shows how spaces of agency emerged from within state institutions and practices. Concerns that massive voter apathy would tarnish the legitimacy of the elections, moved the Iranian government to open the public sphere in the last weeks preceding the election. There were public, one-on-one televised debates, public rallies, gatherings and active commentaries and discussions in blogs and other media (cf. Alimagham 2020). Public space was less strictly controlled. Harris argues this mobilization of the electorate to cultivate voter participation provided a space of "brokered exuberance" that mitigated what would normally have been anxieties over participating in any kind of collective action (Harris 2012). It was an atmosphere or relative openness that began to excite the electorate and created a space for the formation of new kinds of solidarity. When the election results became contested, it was this new public social space, created by the state itself, that was quickly mobilized to voice protest and discontent. Highlighting the contradictions, ruptures, fissures and contingencies within the Iranian state itself, brings to light an important part of the picture in gaining a better understanding of the dynamics of change in Iran (and potentially other parts of the region).

Yet, although Harris's account does cut against the grain of simplistic analyses positing a monolithic somehow anti-modern religious regime against a population with an innate desire for freedom, it falls back into conventional liberal narratives by unquestioningly postulating that the social consequences of post-revolutionary welfare policies and economic liberalization lead to the formation of a new middle class along Western, liberal lines, characterized as "educated and cognizant of cosmopolitan habits" and innately desirous to be free of an authoritarian bureaucratic regime that eventually ostensibly hinders them from participating in the bourgeois lifestyle they aspire to (Harris 2012: 451). It is as if the formation of such a class were some anthropological universal that set in once income levels permitted participation in a "cosmopolitan" (i.e. "Western") consumer culture and therefore requires no further analysis or contextualization.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, Harris, like Bayat, attributes the transformations Iran is undergoing to a post-revolutionary middle class that has become more educated (and hence aware of ways of being in other parts of the world), wealthier (in the sense of having more disposable income for consumer goods), urbanized, and thereby increasingly "individualized", i.e., detached from existing post-revolutionary social norms and institutions. Why or how this detachment inevitably pulls Iranians towards a universal (Westernized) middle-class culture is not analyzed further. It is taken as given and likened to developments elsewhere, like the rise of the Orange Movement in Ukraine or the Third Wave democracy movements in Latin America, East Asia and Eastern Europe (*ibid.*).<sup>11</sup>

Hence, for all the nuance that Harris brings to his analysis of how the Iranian state in its efforts to maintain an adequate degree of legitimacy for it to continue to function contributes to creating the conditions of possibility for citizen activism and ultimately resis-

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<sup>10</sup> There is a long-standing scholarly tradition in political science and Middle Eastern Studies that has focused on the middle class as the primary agent of social transformation (along modernizing lines). The focus on urban middle classes in scholarly works of social change in the Middle East is rooted in this discourse that has accorded particular agency to this class. For one such seminal work, see, for example, Halpern (1963, 1969).

<sup>11</sup> Mahdavi's analysis makes the same assumptions (2007). She also focuses on upper middle-class Tehrani youth and justifies the limitations of her sample by writing "I am interested in this particular group of young people (non-religious middle class) because it is known that, historically, social movements start amongst certain groups in certain classes and then spread to other groups in a trickle-down-effect" (2007: 449). She provides no citations for this assumption, which indicates its acceptance as basic fact, not in need of citations for support. Bagguley (1992) has, in any case, raised questions about this simple association and pointed out how it rests on rather tenuous assertions and lacks empirical evidence.

tance, the part of his analysis that deals with the actions of citizens themselves is quite thin. The forms resistance takes are not in themselves analyzed but are read as expressions of a broadly shared liberal, middle-class habitus inspired by Western cultural forms. This analysis therefore remains rather superficial, impressionistic and ultimately falls back into liberal tropes. It fails to show how the Green Movement protests themselves drew on revolutionary and post-revolutionary political discourse in formulating its critique of the functioning of the state, basically turning Iranian post-revolutionary political discourse back onto those in power (Alimagham 2020). So, although Harris provides a more nuanced account of the cracks and crevices in state power that provide spaces for resistance and activism, his portrayal of the nature of that resistance and activism follows the same sorts of tropes seen in Bayat's work. Western-oriented, liberal youth pushing back against a state antithetical to its way of being.

What we have endeavored to show in this section is that ethnographic gestures that *seem* to give space to authentic voices notwithstanding, prominent accounts of the dynamics of change in Iran are structured and limited by liberal accounts of socio-political transformation rooted in narratives of "the West's" own self-understanding as liberal, secular and modern. This is problematic on two accounts. First, they foreclose any "thick" empirical engagement with processes that are happening on the ground that might push us to reconceptualize how change is taking place in Iran (and what different dynamics of change might be more generally). Instead, these accounts selectively highlight certain empirical material that undergirds already familiar narratives of progress, whereby individuals by their own heroic efforts erode oppressive structures rooted in religion and tradition.

The proliferation and unending popularity of these portrayals as they circulate both inside and outside of academia suggests that they are consumed because they trigger arousal and stimulation. There seems to be something titillating and exciting about these accounts of women and youth doing the forbidden, breaking laws, evading the police, and doing so because they refuse to be limited by outside structures. To put it perhaps rather polemically, such representations of change transpiring in Iran serve as a kind of liberal political pornography in which resistance is fetishized.<sup>12</sup> These portrayals on the one hand trigger in readers disgust at a wholly evil and cruel regime, while stimulating excitement and arousal of courageous protagonists doing the forbidden, transgressing boundaries and taking initiative to change their own situation in a way that most citizens in liberal democracies never do. As Steward has commented with regards to the fetishization of resistance in the study of the Iranian popular music scene:

This romanticized politicization may indicate a nostalgic desire for a revival of countercultural movements in the West... As Western political goals are projected onto non-Western cultures, so is a sense of longing for the West's "lost" underground. This gives rise to a desire to portray the "new" non-Western undergrounds as embodying the ideals of their lost Western counterpart... The narrative of relatable "revolutionary" music grants listeners the opportunity to live vicariously through what is often portrayed as the dangerous but "exciting" lives of Iranian underground musicians, fighting for "Western freedom". (cited in Nooshin 2017: 188)

In any event, rather than continue to cater to the market for images and narratives that follow these liberal tropes, we must begin a process of critical reflection on the political and cultural conditions that lead to the seemingly endless repetition of the same sorts of accounts at the expense of taking seriously the plurality, nuance and context of what actors are doing.

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<sup>12</sup> Nooshin (2017) also provides an incisive commentary in this kind of liberal fetishization of resistance and the violence of representation done in its name. She also relates how academic research is "spiced up" before publication to make it more marketable, even without the author's consent. Terms chosen carefully by the researchers/authors like "unofficial" are replaced with "illegal", "diaspora" with "exile", or "restrictions" with "oppression". This not only deliberately silences the nuances researchers actively attempt to contribute to research perspectives, it also endangers the researchers themselves and any collaborating research partners and interlocutors by putting an explicitly anti-regime political spin on their work.

That said, the politics of representation are complex, and this should in all fairness be duly acknowledged. We discussed above how accounts of Iranian resistance to the Islamic Republic are also intended as interventions against older orientalist accounts of the region's predilection for despotism and resistance to full modernization as well as against popular portrayals of post-revolutionary Iran being a backward society "stuck in the Middle Ages". This explains what is meant to be a corrective portrayal of Iran by especially focusing on those segments of society that are just as modern and educated as the European or North American readership (cf. Fayyaz and Shirazi 2013). But even so, replacing one narrative trope with another that is well intended, but just as inadequate, is not rectifying the violence done by these practices of representation. Turning Iranians into idealized heroes of a liberal struggle against authoritarianism negates the specificities and complexities of the Iranian situation and is just as inadequate to achieving any deeper understanding of Iranians' lived realities and how they grapple to make meaningful lives for themselves. We must do better. Not only ought we to carefully listen to and take seriously what our interlocutors are saying and doing, but we must also push the horizons of our theoretical imaginations to make space for what their experiences can teach us about power, culture and change (cf. Ortner 1995; also, Comaroff and Comaroff 2012). To do so we need not only to take our interlocutors seriously but also to understand how our own theoretical and empirical biases and political sensibilities, well-meaning as they may be, stand in the way of the new perspectives our research would open to us. Having in this section examined how prominent scholarly perspectives on the dynamics of socio-cultural and political change in Iran produce a fairly consistent narrative trope of social change driven by individual insubordination and disobedience, we will next reflect specifically on how limiting this perspective is. Although we have already touched on some shortcomings of the analyses discussed we will go into more depth in the next section.

### 3. Empirical Biases of Liberal Narratives of Change

Although Bayat, Harris and others have made important contributions to trying to theorize the dynamics of change in Iran and the region more generally, we must remain critically aware of how the narrative tropes they fall into limit not only their empirical perspectives but also their capacity for theoretical innovation. We thus are faced with empirical biases on the one hand and theoretical ones on the other, the two being closely intertwined. In this section we will discuss both of these and how they overshadow a much larger, messier picture that requires our attention.

If we return to Bayat's very telling description quoted at length above, we can identify several empirical biases. Most blatantly, his observations focus on developments in Tehran. Although the kinds of middle- and upper-class Tehran youth counterculture he highlights in much of his book (with exception of the first chapter) may resonate with academics and an educated readership, one must remember that it is specific to a certain ethnic and religious background, class/social milieu, age and socio-economic position and does not stand in for Iranian society as such. Life in Tehran is quite different from that of other cities like Isfahan, Mashhad, Qom, Kerman or Tabriz. And the situation in Tehran certainly differs even more than that in the smaller cities and provincial towns, not to mention the situation of the 20–25% of the population still living in rural areas.<sup>13</sup> That said there is a real lack of research on social change outside the urban context, in Iran's rural and provincial areas. When one does find works dealing with social change in rural areas, most of these deal with the "development" context. Works concerning on-the-ground socio-cultural changes beyond development goals

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<sup>13</sup> World Bank estimates from 2020 based on the United Nations Population Division's World Urbanization Prospects (2018) have calculated that 24% of the population lives in rural areas (Iran Country Report of United Nations Population Division's World Urbanization Prospects: 2018 Revision, <https://population.un.org/wup/Country-Profiles/>).

are few and far between, notable exceptions being the works of Erika Friedl and Mary Elaine Hegland, who continued their ethnographic engagements with Iran's rural areas after the revolution, and also Manata Hashemi, who explicitly located her own work in the provincial town of Sari in Mazandaran precisely to counterbalance the excessive focus on Tehran and other urban areas (cf. Friedl 2009, Hegland 2009, Hashemi 2020). But sometimes, even such works can reproduce the same narrative tropes found in the analyses of socio-cultural change in Tehran. For this reason, we argue here, that empirical diversification, while very important, alone may not be sufficient gain new perspectives on socio-cultural change.

As we will see in the following discussion of an article written in 2009 by Erika Friedl, a doyenne of the anthropology of Iran, without critical reflection on how implicitly or explicitly ascribed to theoretical models shape what is seen in the field and how it is presented to a wider readership. As noted above, since the revolution, works on rural Iran have become quite rare compared to the deluge of works on Tehran. Friedl's work is especially worth discussing due to her multigenerational perspective on the changes that have transpired in a rural context since the mid-1960s. In this article, Friedl discusses the developments she has witnessed in intra-family relationships in the Kohgiluyeh/Boir Ahmad area of rural southwest Iran that she has been researching for more than 50 years (7 of those spent in Iran). She writes in the article summary:

Trends in intra-family relationships in Iran point to fast changes in regional and class-linked cultural patterns following the rapid spread of the national culture and of modernist ideologies and practices. People redefine their responsibilities and expectations as small nuclear families increase, women aspire to higher education and employment, and the bad economic situation necessitates various adaptations. Analysis of recent ethnographic data suggests that the shift from traditional authoritarian intra-family relations to relationships based on autonomy, individuation (sic), independence and companionship creates new intimacies but also conflicts. The prevailing ideology of "progress" in Iran likely will further weaken patrilineal ties and kin relations while strengthening ties based on friendship and collegiality. (Friedl 2009: 27)

The summary reproduced here as well as the article's introductory discussion paint the picture of a text-book case of modernization. According to her account, continued contact of cultural elites with the West and diaspora communities has led to the people in Iran "changing their lifestyles in tune with life in western countries" as part of their pursuit of progress, which is seen as the "single most important motivation for change, for getting ahead, for making money for being 'modern' and sophisticated" (2009: 29). Consequently, the "process of individuation that started before the revolution accelerated in the Islamic Republic" (2009: 30). The narrative is by now quite familiar and sounds very much like those grounded in studies of Tehran mentioned previously.

Friedl contrasts these recent developments with a description of the power structure in "traditional" rural families, in which power and authority are vested exclusively in the family patriarch, with all other members subservient to him. She writes:

The hierarchy that puts male above female in the androcentric, "patriarchal" society of traditional Iran structures gender relations to this day, including changes. Men were/are privileged over women in law, in economics, in everyday practices, in the division of labor. The authoritarian bias of this hierarchy puts the burden of responsibility for women on their male superiors. In this ideology, men can discharge their responsibility only with corollary obedience and cooperation from the women in their care, in accordance with what is proclaimed to be the God-ordained order of relationships on earth. (Friedl 2009: 30)

This hierarchy, she argues, has become unsettled as family planning initiatives have reduced the size of families and led to greater care being taken in the raising of each child, shifting the nature of parent-child relationships. Post-revolutionary educational initiatives promoted the education of girls as well as boys and normalized high school and tertiary education for both sexes. Consequently, the authoritarian power structures underlying

Iranian patriarchy have begun to erode, changing relationships between fathers and daughters, husbands and wives and brothers and sisters, generally with a trend to less authoritarian and more caring relationships that, according to her, leave space for more individual autonomy. Fathers have a more affectionate, caring relationship to their children, and their daughters in particular. Children are better educated and thus more assertive in voicing their wishes and articulating their own life plans.

As Friedl delves into her ethnographic material the theoretical framework and argument begin to jar with her introductory remarks. For one, we learn that in post-revolutionary Iranian society was left enough space for women's own authority, for example, in accumulating and managing her own income and wealth, as well as asserting her right to her share of inheritance. At the same time, fathers continue to exert a great deal of authority and control in, for example, the selection of a course of study at university or a marriage partner. Friedl's rich account of shifting family relationships between fathers and daughters, brothers and sisters and husbands and wives raises questions: Do the lessening relevance of the patrilineage and increasing importance of the nuclear family alone suffice for suggesting there is greater individuation and autonomy in society? What about the continued ties of obligation within nuclear families between children and parents, husbands and wives and parents and children? And is the patrilineage wholly irrelevant or sometimes still selectively activated in times of need? Yet, following her complex account of shifting familial relationships, Friedl stays her theoretical course, concluding (after all the complexities she has recounted):

In an unintended convergence of consequences of social politics in the Islamic Republic and of the juggernaut of modernity, the traditional, commonsensical understanding of personhood is shifting, as are the interpersonal relationships anchored in authoritarian relationships within a patriarchal hierarchy. The dynamics of individuation in the ideology of personal autonomy challenge the androcentric responsibility/obedience links within the family. This leads to a questioning of male authority generally, and in particular to behaviors of female family members characterized by assertion, demands, and confrontation with paternal/fraternal/viral authority.  
(Friedl 2009: 43)

We thus see here, that although Friedl's account of change taking place in a rural context is quite rich and complex, her theoretical predisposition towards a perception of power as something that one has or not as well as her unreflected adoption of modernization theory to explain her data, leads her to gloss over the potential of her material to push us to new narratives and new models of socio-cultural change that go beyond an all-too-familiar narrative of linear progression of traditional collectivism to modern individual autonomy.

Friedl's subsumption of her observations under a model of modernization along western lines brings us to the second bias that the narrative tropes of change in Iran produce, namely that the facile narratives that resonate with liberal perceptions of change as it ostensibly transpired in Europe and North America naturalize too much. The researcher thus homes in on a few familiar "symptoms" and from there concludes that the underlying processes, too, must resemble what we (think we) know from Europe. As we have just seen, Friedl also falls into this trap of all too quickly presuming one development (the shifting of family ties from the patrilineage more towards nuclear families) must necessitate the next step in the model, namely greater individual autonomy.

In the excerpt from Bayat quoted earlier and many other accounts, "modernity", or however one wishes to label emergent, seemingly liberal, "individualized" cultural formations in Iran, are deemed as natural, even inevitable outcomes of wider socio-economic developments. In Harris's account there is a similar tendency to naturalize how the post-revolutionary welfare state and subsequent economic liberalization policies fostered the emergence of a bourgeoisie with middle-class aspirations that are implicitly understood as being typical of the European and North American middle classes. Harris even makes the rather sweeping comparison how developments in Iran are more or less analogous to how middle-class disaffection fueled the uprisings in Eastern Europe.

But the explaining away of developments by referring to a general tendency of disaffected middle classes pushing back against regimes that don't deliver on their expectations is problematic. It presumes that similar symptoms have the same underlying causes. In other words, that cultural forms (e.g., a seemingly Western-style, individualized bourgeois consumer culture) will have the same cause (and therefore meaning) regardless of context. So, practices and habituses following the aesthetics of "Western" (European and North American) modernity must essentially be anti-regime whether these appear in Morocco, Ukraine or Iran. It is a conclusion quickly jumped to when the sociological or ethnographic engagement with the actors themselves is quite thin and superficial.

Yet, as Suszana Olszewska and Manata Hashemi have pointed out in their research on marginalized Afghan and poor Iranian youth respectively, once you actually engage with the contexts and meanings that actors themselves attribute to their actions as well as the various interpretations of those actions, the meanings, intents and contexts become far more complex. The ubiquity of a certain middle-class/upper middle-class habitus and associated social practices in some Iranian milieus does not necessarily mean that those actors are particularly individualistic and autonomous or hold liberal, anti-authoritarian political attitudes. Rather, middle-class and upper middle-class habituses are often also adopted by actors as part of their efforts to improve their social standing within the social field by presenting themselves as respectable persons "with class" (*bā kelās*) (Olszewska 2013, Hashemi 2020; cf. Sadjed 2016). In other words, rather than signaling any political commitments or asserting personal autonomy, the adoption of a certain habitus has more to do with efforts to acquire relevant forms of social, educational and cultural capital (that are displayed by having certain consumer goods and, if possible, acquiring educational credentials) to manage one's class positioning. As Olszewska points out in her intervention, and direct critique of works like that of Harris, even attendance at election rallies and Green Movement protests was used by some to associate with what was seen as middle-class and upper middle-class events and hence a way of maneuvering to gain entry into those social circles. Hence, the presentation of cultural forms, and even the participation in an event like the Green Movement is not per se indicative of a particular political orientation and resistance to the state. Nor is it necessarily indicative of greater individual autonomy in society, since such class positioning is performed precisely because actors rely on social networks to attain their means of existence – be this to get a decent paying job, to find a financially better off spouse, to acquire connections in the bureaucracy to succeed in business dealings, etc.

That said, tactics of subjectification inspired by the aesthetics of "Western" modernity of course can and do go hand-in-hand with socio-cultural shifts, but not in the kind of dualistic black and white oppression-resistance face-off portrayed in liberal narratives of change. As the work of Manata Hashemi shows, for example, notions of middle-class and upper middle-class respectability are used to re-negotiate conceptions of what it means to be a good person and to live a good life. It is not enough, for example, for women to simply mimic the chic, fashionable upper-class and upper middle-class styles of dress in order to perform respectability. Women must also embody the appropriate way of acting and being, which involves not only dress that is chic without being too forcibly chic, but also mastering a cultured communicative style, etiquette, command of a cultural repertoire as well as maintaining professional and moral virtues (2020: 100–101, 118). The politics of dress for many Iranian women and men therefore are not so much about resistance to the regime but about maneuvering to achieve a class position that will help them achieve a redistribution of goods and services to alleviate or escape poverty (*ibid.*: 119). And in fact, although actors bend the limits of the state-imposed dress code, they also draw on and thereby reproduce a code of morals and virtuous behavior that is not in the least subversive. Being *bā kelās* means cultivating beautiful mode of presentation both in forms of dress as well as behavior; the one necessitates the other. Having thus achieved respectability one can win the support of a wealthier patron to fund university studies, attract a marriage partner from the upper middle class, or attain professional opportunities that can bring about upward social mobility. As we see in Hashemi's text, socio-cultural and political change can take place in ways that are not confrontational or even explicitly

political (in the sense of being addressed to the state and its norms). It can come about through cultural shifts, slippages, interpretative twists and appropriations undertaken by actors to achieve the ends *they* desire (higher class, status for example). Or, as Sherry Ortner has pointed out, it can even be an outcome of practices that are not at all intended to be oppositional or subversive (1995).

A further bias that goes along with this tendency to focus on select phenomena that resonate with European-North American aesthetic forms of modernity, is that it also completely overshadows cultural influences coming from other parts of the globe, such as from East Asia, for example, as the impact of Korean serials and martial arts, especially Tae Kwon Do (Koo 2020) on Iranian popular culture would suggest, or the Turkish television dramas that are also popular in Iran (Partovi 2018, Azeri Matin 2021).<sup>14</sup> The impact of globalization is complex, but the studies of media flows in recent years have shown that conceptualizing globalization and cultural flows is far more differentiated than old models of Western defined “globality” encroaching on “the local” (Azeri Matin 2021). Instead, there are multiplicities of flows even within the global South impacting local imaginaries.

So, while cultural flows coming from Europe and North America are undoubtedly present in Iran, impacting people’s socio-cultural imaginaries and engendering new socio-cultural practices, cultural flows coming from East Asia are also significant. As the literature on the popularity of Turkish and Korean soap operas suggests, for example, Iranian viewers are attracted to these shows because of perceived cultural affinities that are not present in North American and European cultural productions. Focus on love relationships, family dynamics, tradition, moderation, justice and striving for the common good all resonate strongly with Iranian viewers in a way that European, North and Latin American<sup>15</sup> content does not. Hence, the influence of media flows on Iranians’ critical engagement with their own socio-cultural context is not as simple as being inundated with images of Western consumerism and individualistic freedom. The history of modern Iran from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards entails a long, complex engagement with Western modernity and its alternatives, be these grounded in other cultures further East or in Iran’s own past. Consequently, the cultural models on which Iranians draw in shaping themselves and their social surroundings are much more diverse than most of the Euro-American sociological and anthropological literature discusses.

A further point of critique concerning the literature on socio-cultural change in Iran is the focus on urban middle-class youth or youth in general. We see little engagement with the lives of older generations (those born before the revolution or even participated in it) as agents of change. While the generation under thirty-five is certainly Iran’s largest demographic, the generation over forty is active in the workforce, as well as in political and social institutions. It is this generation that is in positions of authority as parents, employers, community leaders, etc. (cf. Hegland 2006, Hoodfar 2009). One therefore simply cannot ignore their role in processes of change. For example, for all the focus on youth in the Islamic Republic, their bending of norms, their cosmopolitanism and experimentation with styles of life would often not be possible without parental or other family support (or at least tolerance), material or otherwise. In a society where elders are given respect, they have the capacity to broker new possibilities.

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<sup>14</sup> “Iranians Hooked on Korean TV Drama”, *The World*, 30. May 2010 (<https://theworld.org/stories/2009-12-20/iranians-hooked-korean-tv-drama>); Kang Hyun-kyung: “Korean Drama Boom in Iran to Create Business Opportunities”, *The Korea Times*, 23. February 2016 ([https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2016/04/665\\_198617.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2016/04/665_198617.html)); “Cultural Ties Put Iran, S. Korea Closer Than Ever for Cooperation”, *Tehran Times*, 5. May 2016, (<https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/301161/Cultural-ties-put-Iran-S-Korea-closer-than-ever-for-cooperation>). For one of the few scholarly discussions, see Koo (2020).

<sup>15</sup> Not only has North American and European content made it to Iranian televisions, Latin American telenovelas have also been broadcast. These, however, have not attained the popularity they have elsewhere in the world. Instead, East Asian content, particularly from Japan and South Korea has become popular. South Korean content in fact so much so that Korean is now among the offerings at many language-learning institutes in major Iranian cities (Nourzadeh, Fathi and Davari 2020).

Last but not least, one must ask how far liberal narratives of change that highlight the role of autonomous individuals in breaking through oppressive structures can take us in contexts of precarity or ethnic or religious discrimination and consequent structural inequalities? How many parents from the lower middle class or the poor can afford to put their unmarried children up in their own apartment? With a youth unemployment rate of somewhere between 17% and 27%,<sup>16</sup> how many youths can afford to finance independent, consumer-oriented lifestyles (in their own apartments in Tehran) without the support of family members and a wider social network? With a few notable exceptions (Olszewska 2013, Khosravi 2017, Hashemi 2020) the fundamental precarity of many Iranians' material existence has not been adequately integrated into the picture.

The erosion of state social support, such as the steady reduction of subsidies for daily necessities, means that people continue to rely on family and other networks of mutual support to manage uncertainty and crises. Marriage, although now not the only option for long-term heterosexual relationships, continues to be an important institution, not only because it is the pillar of the state's heteronormative gender order, but because it allows people to extend social networks (through marriage) to facilitate access to and the pooling of resources as well as the distribution of risk (Hegland 2009). In more impoverished contexts it is a way for families to unburden themselves of their daughters. Lack of institutionalized childcare or old age care also reinforces the importance of family. Similarly, social class and status continue to be important social facts, especially in the context of fierce competition over scarce resources and access to overburdened public and private services. The family name carries weight and can be useful in finding a job, getting access to expert medical care, etc.<sup>17</sup> Although the gender roles in many parts of the region are shifting and changing, there are also reaffirmations of "traditional" or religiously institutionalized gender roles and an insistence that these are NOT a matter of choice. Particularly given the high rate of unemployment there are repeated appeals for women to stay home and not deprive men of the opportunity to fulfill their duty to provide for their families. This of course runs counter to the other material reality that the rising cost of living often means that families need women's extra income (Hegland 2009).

Hence, the kinds of pre-conditions required for the emergence of an individualized, de-traditionalized society that resists the state, as postulated by liberal narratives of transformation, simply do not hold for Iran, particularly not since economic reforms have dismantled important pillars of state support and sanctions have limited economic opportunity for large parts of the population. The centripetal forces of labor flexibilization, mobility, migration and globalized media flows co-exist with the centrifugal pressure of manifold forms of material precarity mentioned above that make continued social networks and dependencies necessary, constraining individualizing tendencies and limiting the kinds of resistance that feature in narratives like those of Bayat and Harris. That said, norms, institutions and practices also continue because they are valued and associated with cultural identity and resistance to loss of self. As noted above, if there is one long-standing continuity in modern Iranian history, it is the concern, present across large segments of the society, including among the younger generation, with navigating between Western style liberal ("individualized") modernity and "cultural authenticity" (Mirsepassi 2000, Sadjed 2016). Hence, once one delves into the local context, there are many factors that do not sit well with accounts that analyze changes taking place in Iranian society largely by focusing on how certain subsets of the population assert their desire for an individualized Western lifestyle against the strictures of the state.

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<sup>16</sup> The Statistical Center of Iran indicates 16.5% unemployment of persons aged 18–35 for the fiscal year 2021–2022 ("Youth Unemployment at 16.5%: SCI", *Financial Tribune*, 9. June 2022, <https://financialtribune.com/articles/113841/youth-unemployment-at-165-sci>). The International Labor Organization (ILO) has published much higher figures of youth unemployment, at 27.2%, but defines youth unemployment as unemployment of persons aged 15–24 (International Labor Organization, *ILOSTAT database*, June 2022, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS?locations=IR>).

<sup>17</sup> For further information about the importance of the family, see Föllmer (2022b).

#### 4. Theoretical Biases of Liberal Narratives of Change

So far, we have discussed the empirical biases of the literature dealing with social change in Iran. But there are also biases that stem from theoretical preconceptions. Bayat's, Harris's and other works on Iran are informed by resistance studies. This means they adopt some variation of the conception of the workings of power from that disciplinary field. An opening statement in the introduction of Shahram Khosravi's *Young and Defiant in Tehran* encapsulates the kinds of theoretical preconceptions that many scholars working on social change in Iran from the perspective of civil society resistance implicitly or explicitly hold:

The book concerns the battle over the right to identity. On the one side, there is the state's effort to construct a hegemonic identity for young people. On the other, there is the pervasive struggle by the young people to resist a subject position imposed on them from above. The book examines how young Tehranis struggle for subjectivity – in the sense of individual autonomy. It also deals with the generational divide in Iran between those who made the Revolution and those who reject it. (Khosravi 2008: 1)

Like in the quotation taken from Bayat's *Life as Politics*, we see here a Manichean model of power that divides social space into "the regime" that dominates "from above" and "young people" who struggle and resist from below to assert their *individual* autonomy. What comes from above is again portrayed as a monolithic hegemony. Subsumed under this oppressive monolith is also the older generation who "made the revolution", which is pitted against the younger one who was not born at the time and had no say in the matter. We have already discussed how such a model can only be upheld if one works with significant empirical omissions.

Bayat endeavors to break out of this analytical corset by claiming to focus on non-confrontational dynamics of change. Yet, because his underlying model of power remains unchanged, a face-off between a monolithic state and a recalcitrant civil society that has been exposed to ideas and images of other ways of living than that desired by "the regime", he reproduces an analysis that is little different from that of Khosravi or many of the other writers inspired to examine "Iranian resistance". We noted previously how this analysis is unsatisfactory. If this indeed were all there was to the picture there would be little room for the state to make accommodations so that changes take place in non-conflictive ways, as Bayat insists they do.

To move beyond the same simplistic analyses requires a departure from such Manichean models of power. In our own engagement with understanding the dynamics of change in Iran this process of theoretical reconceptualization has taken place at two levels. The first, has been the level of ethnographic engagement, an openness to learning from the field and our interlocutors, developing new perspectives based on their experiences, or as Sherry Ortner has put it, a commitment to "ethnographic thickness" (Ortner 1995: 174). Such a commitment to empirical thickness shows what is patently missing from portrayals shaped by liberal narratives of change are the everyday working and personal relationships between citizens and government employees and the on-going non-confrontational negotiations of norms and practices, the manipulation of networks of influence, the creative reinterpretation of legal sources and bending of norms and rules that mark daily life in Iran. This quite clearly shows the extent to which the Manichean portrayals of the battle between state and civil society do not do justice to empirical complexities. Yes, there are dramatic face-offs, and yes, the state can and does resort to violence in its exercise of power. But even authoritarian regimes cannot exist over such a long period on violence alone. Violence is periodically and strategically deployed such that many citizens believe that the state only targets certain people who have behaved in a way to illicit the state's wrath. This allows part of the citizenry to feel insulated from the violence (as good or a-political citizens) and in their daily affairs turn to the state for the delivery of services and infrastructure, for protection of their rights, for the provision of special benefits or employment.

This brings us to the second important facet of an ethnographically thick understanding of the workings of the post-revolutionary order. That is that the “the state”, “the regime”, does not exist apart from society. It is staffed by members of that society who have kinship ties, friendships and professional and other networks that extend into the social fabric. Rules therefore can be subject to some degree of flexibility depending on who one knows in the relevant places and what one’s own standing is. This provides leverage for the reinterpretation or bending of rules and norms, sometimes only in very specific local contexts, sometimes to the extent that policy changes become possible. Such ethnographic complexities, which we argue are central in understanding the emergence of the spaces of agency that make up Iranian’s quiet encroachment, do not make their way into accounts like those of Bayat or Khosravi. Instead, change is attributed to individuals pushing through social and political change against or in spite of the state. By letting go of Leviathan inspired models of state versus civil society as institutionally separate entities and instead conceiving of the two as organically interlinked through manifold social relations that can be tactically activated, we can proceed to better theorize the subtle renegotiations of norms, policies and practices that govern everyday life in Iran.

There is, however, yet a third dimension for rethinking state-society power relations in more empirically thick terms. To adequately account for non-confrontational processes of transformation that Bayat quite justifiably identified as being important to understanding the dynamics of change in Iran, requires not only an ethnographically thick engagement with social actors and how they relate to state actors but also an equally nuanced account of the internal dynamics of the state itself, including its ideological, institutional, and practical contradictions and aporias. For one, the historical reality is that there was no grand plan for the founding of a theocracy when the Islamists took control of the state in 1979. The practical workings of social and government institutions did not follow some coherently preconceived master plan and so were in many cases developed ad hoc (Alimagham 2020: ch. 2). There was considerable internal debate even among religious authorities what the state should look like and how its institutions should function (Abrahamian 1993: 133 ff., Saadatmand 1991). In some cases, pre-revolutionary institutions continued to operate, although in modified form. For example, for practical reasons some of the development policies of the Pahlavi regime continued and were even intensified after the revolution under the *Jahād-e Sāzandegī* (Construction Jihad) (Lob 2021).<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the *Kānūn-e Parvaresh-e Fekrī-ye Kūdākān va Noujavānān* (the Institute for the Intellectual Development for Children and Young Adults, also simply known as *Kanoon*), was founded in 1965 and continues to operate into the present.<sup>19</sup> There were also certain norms that were maintained – at least for some time. For example, there existed an understanding, at least until the student revolts in 1999, that state security forces would not enter university campuses, which allowed the universities to foster a degree of student activism and organization that would make the 1999 mobilization possible.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, there were the imperatives of a war economy and later, after the war, the pressures from both a globalized economic system and internal fiscal demands to implement neoliberal reforms. The Iranian state thus was and is far from the totalitarian ideologically governed monolith that Bayat, Khosravi and other scholars portray it to be. It is an assemblage of institutions with varying governmental orientations. The politico-religious ideology of the Islamic Republic

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<sup>18</sup> Eric Lob: “Institutional Continuities and Changes in the Islamic Republic of Iran: The case of the Construction Jihad”, The Iran 1400 Project, 4. November 2021 (<https://iran1400.org/discover/the-case-of-construction-jihad/>).

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Lilly Amir-Arjomand in “The Contemporary History of Iran, Part 5: The Creation of *Kanoon*”, 4. November 2021, Roqe podcast/Roqe Media (<https://podcastaddict.com/episode/130825418>).

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Mohammad Manzarpour in “The Contemporary History of Iran, Part 15: The 1999 Student Uprising”, 20. January 2022, Roqe podcast/Roqe Media (<https://podcastaddict.com/episode/134311224>). Manzarpour was a student during the 1999 uprisings and discusses in this interview how the entry of state security forces onto a university campus represented a radical break with an unwritten pact that universities should deal with security and disciplinary issues on their own without the intervention of state security forces.

(which in itself contains contradictions as well as multiple interpretations) is just one element, one discursive field among a variety that all exist juxtaposed to one another. It thus exists alongside scientific expertise, philosophical discourses, technocratic norms and practices as well as varying professional self-understandings, and particularistic institutional interests. The ruptures and fissures within and between the different elements of the assemblage that comprises “the Iranian state” provide openings to accommodate new practices and ideas as well as spaces for rethinking established understandings (cf. Christensen 2011).

Ultimately, however, our reorientation of perspective must go much further than simply complexifying our empirical understanding of “the state”, its internal workings, and how it interacts with civil society. Leila Abu Lughod in her critique of the “romance of resistance”, i.e., the tendency to focus study on forms of resistance as signs of the incapacity of power to wholly suppress the human spirit, has pointed out that it forecloses important questions on the workings of power and hence also our capacity to fully appreciate the complexity of the agency exercised by our ethnographic subjects (Abu Lughod 1990: 42). Hence, besides taking our ethnography seriously, we must also critically re-consider well-established conceptual paradigms that shape how we perceive what power is, how it functions and how it plays into processes of change. We still too unreflectively fall back on conceptual frameworks (i.e. theories) that understand power to be an individual’s or an institution’s capacity to enforce its “will” onto others with change resulting when one group can exert “power” over another and establish new practices and norms. This conception leads us to focus on the kinds of agonistic processes that feature in Bayat’s work, while ignoring “messier” processes for which we would have to seek out different theoretical paradigms in order to describe and contextualize them adequately. But, various theories of power exist, theories that provide a better fit with what we see when we take our ethnography or other empirical material more seriously and that possibly disturb the liberal narratives of change we often almost unconsciously always fall back into.

In this section we have discussed how research perspectives informed by a liberal narrative of change that focuses on individuals’ (everyday) resistance to the regime as a significant driver of change entails problematic biases and blind spots. They are perspectives derived from an empirical bias towards upper and upper-middle-class Tehrani youth counterculture, particularly those aspects that resemble youth culture in Europe and North America and are construed as existing in necessary opposition to the norms and institutions of the Islamic Republic. Such perspectives tend to be ethnographically thin and essentialize aesthetic forms rather than more closely examining the context and emic understandings of those practices. These research perspectives fail entirely to consider youth practices inspired by cultural flows from Asia or even by Iran’s own cultural heritage. Nor do they consider the socio-cultural dynamics of other segments of Iranian society, other demographic groups, life in other cities, provincial towns or the countryside or the impact of continued pervasive inequality and precarity that certainly limits individuals’ autonomy and hence their capacity to resist the prevalent order. At the same time, as our discussion of some of the few works grounded in some of Iran’s rural or provincial areas shows, an empirical shift of context will not necessarily in and of itself provide a corrective. Without critical reflection of the conceptional/theoretical tool box that shapes our research perspective and thus what we see in the field and how we describe it, we risk to unwittingly transpose existing narratives onto our research contexts.

Consequently, apart from assessing the empirical biases of these liberal narratives of change, we also have considered how these narratives are rooted in specific theoretical models of change as resulting from confrontations between ruler and ruled or between oppressor and those who resist. This focus on resistance as a locus of change certainly produces narratives that have considerable market appeal, both within the academy and in the wider sphere of media production. But ultimately this leads to perspectives that are not just empirically but also theoretically thin. What exactly constitutes the agency of “resisting subjects” that subvert the state order? From what subject positions do they develop their agency or practices of resistance? By what kinds of engagements do these

tactics change power relations and the kind of hold the state and other social institutions have over society? There is little conceptual space to accommodate such questions within liberal narratives of change and the underlying theoretical paradigms. In the next section we will therefore present an alternative theoretical perspective that can provide a richer array of conceptual tools to bring into dialog with empirical observations that will allow us to develop thicker understandings of the dynamics of social change in Iran.

## 5. Creating Space for Thick Conceptions of Power and Agency in the Study of Change in Iran

In this section we would like to discuss how a different theoretical understanding of power can support thicker understandings of agency and hence the dynamics of social change in Iran that go beyond the rather stale portrayals framed in terms of oppression and resistance. Our discussions of the empirical complexities of the context-dependent meanings of social practices as well as of the fractured and internally differentiated structures of state and society encourage us to move away from state vs. civil society conceptions of the Islamic Republic. Instead, we would suggest that an empirically and theoretically thick understanding of post-revolutionary Iran is better accommodated by concepts such as those presented by Michel Foucault. We are not by any means suggesting this is the only approach, and certainly would welcome that scholars draw on other thinkers as well to enrich the ways we can conceptualize change. But we do think his work, particularly his later writings, provides a useful heuristic lens through which to understand the workings of power that more satisfactorily accommodate the kinds of agency actors exercise in the course of managing their daily lives.

Although Foucault's work is often (mis)used in studies of power and resistance, it is most often used very selectively and thinly. Khosravi, for example, draws on Foucault in his *Young and Defiant in Tehran*, but only on Foucault's earlier works that focused more on the disciplining capacities of institutions and the repressive normalizing aspects of power. Khosravi then uses this to portray the confrontation between rebellious youth and the oppressive state. He thereby completely ignores the main thrust of Foucault's theory of power, which is twofold: 1) power is not a force possessed but rather a field of relations connecting all members of society and 2) the state is by no means even the most significant locus of power relations upholding a given societal order (Foucault 2000j [1982]: 337, 343, 345). On the contrary, since power, according to Foucault, is diffused throughout society, "the state" has little special importance at all. It is only one of many institutional actors (or rather a particular agglomeration of practices) acting in society and through which social actors themselves act. Such a conception of power as diffuse, extending in a capillary manner throughout society and suffusing all social relations, accommodates quite well various aspects of the dynamics of change in Iran (Foucault 2000j [1982]: 343).<sup>21</sup> It allows us to consider the manifold ways that state actors and citizens outside the state apparatus interact and are interrelated, allowing us to overcome very dualistic conceptions of how state and civil society engage in daily life. Moreover, it allows us to see power as something

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<sup>21</sup> Foucault writes: "[...] power relations are rooted deep in the social nexus, not a supplementary structure over and above 'society' whose radical effacement one could perhaps dream of. To live in society is, in any event, to live in such a way that some can act on the actions of others. A society without power relations can only be an abstraction. Which, be it said in passing, makes all the more politically necessary the analysis of power relations in a given society, their historical formation, the source of their strength or fragility, the conditions that are necessary to transform some or to abolish others. For to say that there cannot be a society without power relations is not to say either that those which are established are necessary, or that power in any event, constitutes an inescapable fatality at the heart of societies, such that it cannot be undetermined. Instead, I would say that the analysis, elaboration, and bringing into question of power relations and the 'agonism' between power relations and the intransitivity of freedom is an increasingly political task – even, the political task that is inherent in all social existence." (2000j [1982]: 343, cf. *ibid.*: 345).

shifting and not a zero-sum game between those that have it (or can attain it) and those who cannot. So, rather perceiving actors as having or taking power, we can begin to analyze how they leverage it in order to do what they wish to do (Foucault 2000c, 2000d, 2000e; Rieck 2019).<sup>22</sup> That said, the diffuse nature of power, does not mean that all actors are acting on an equal playing field. Some actors of course have more capacity for leveraging the range of possibilities of action in their favor than others by virtue of a particular status or a network of allies, perhaps, or by access to certain kinds of knowledge or simply resources such as time and money.

Even in accounts that focus on rural Iran and are not focused on change as resulting from state-civil society conflicts, a more nuanced conception of power would allow us to more fully engage with the lessons of our ethnographic material. It was noted above in the discussion of Erika Friedl's work on the changes transpiring in a rural context (2009), that her implicit conception of power as something possessed and wielded over others leads to a rather Manichean and very oversimplistic account of how patriarchal power relations work(ed) in family relationships. Men as family heads had power, and hence they had the capacity to dictate the lives of their wives and children. This jars with the ethnography that portrays patriarchal gender power relationships not as unilateral and dictatorial, but as shifting and leveraged exists in and through specific relationships. Older sisters could leverage their seniority over younger male siblings. Male power exercised in the form of head of household also entailed the obligation to financial support. Conversely, women's roles as mothers and care givers as well as their capacity to accumulate and manage their own wealth, were also significant parts of the "patriarchal" order, giving women some leverage of their own, a leverage that gains greater purchase in contexts, such as in the present day, when women pursue higher education and their own line of paid work. In Friedl's work we see clearly how a different, perhaps Foucauldian notion of power would have permitted a more serious engagement with how recent developments have shifted family relations and opened new avenues for agency for women, children/young people, wives, as well as for men, rather than simply asserting the demise of a patriarchal order and the rise of greater individual autonomy.

A second consideration drawing on Foucault to reassess our conception of power and notions of agency to which it is constitutively linked is to understand that power is not only negative (i.e., the capacity to prevent actions) but also productive, i.e., having the capacity to elicit or engender action and ways of being. Generally, Foucault sees power as that capacity that conditions the field of possibilities for human action and existence. While in Foucault's earlier works the negative, disciplinary aspect of power (de)limiting the possibilities of human existence was at the center of attention, in later works he focuses more on its productive aspects (Foucault 2000j [1982]: 326–327). This also includes the ability to engender new ways of being, i.e., new kinds of subjecthood, as well as new kinds of social relations and practices. His engagement with gay subcultures of the 1970s and 1980s as well as his avid interest in the Iranian Revolution were significant sites for his theoretical reflections on how actors can bring new forms of existence into being (Foucault 1990 [1979], 2000k [1979], 2000c [1982], 2000d [1982], 2000e).<sup>23</sup> The

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<sup>22</sup> Foucault's ideas concerning the dynamics of power (which he insists on referring to as power relations) become the clearest in his reflections on the gay movement. For example, in the interview "Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity" he says: "... but what I mean by power relations is the fact that we are in a strategic situation toward each other. For instance, being homosexuals, we are in a struggle with the government, and the government is in a struggle with us. When we deal with the government, the struggle, of course, is not symmetrical, the power situation is not the same; but we are in this struggle, and the continuation of this situation can influence the behavior or nonbehavior of the other. So, we are not trapped. We are always in this kind of situation [...] We cannot jump outside the situation, and there is no point where you are free from all power relations. But you can always change it" (2000e: 167).

<sup>23</sup> With regards to the gay movement, Foucault states in an interview: "Sexuality is part of our behavior. It's a part of our world of freedom. Sexuality is something that we ourselves create – it is our own creation, and much more than the discovery of a secret side of our desire. We have to understand that with our desires, through our desires, go new forms of relationships, new forms of love, new forms of creation. Sex is not a fatality; it's a possibility for creative life. [...] We don't have to discover that we are homosexuals ... Rather,

productive capacity of power in particular is important if we wish to conceptually engage with how subjectivities are formed (Rieck 2020). In previous sections of this paper, a main thrust of critique has been the naturalization and hence under-theorization of the kinds of subjectivities actors in Iran adopt, how they come to adopt them and how these become meaningful in specific contexts. If we wish to engage with the empirical observation that Iranians are transforming their society from the ground up through creativity in their everyday practices and new ways of being, then we must develop heuristic tools to analyze how this process transpires in specific historical, social and cultural realities (cf. Foucault 2000f [1981]: 177, 2000g). Understanding that by creatively appropriating, reinterpreting and re-contextualizing norms as well as drawing on competing authoritative discourses and forms of expertise actors are able to push the possibilities of existence beyond what certain authorities within the state or in religious or social institutions (such as the family) would conceive of as possible or permissible.<sup>24</sup>

A third element in reconfiguring our conceptions of power (using Foucault as inspiration) is understanding that knowledge is essential to its workings. In his attempt to move away from state-centered approaches to understanding the exercise of power as the monopoly on violence and ability to assert one's will, Foucault coined the term governmentality, which refers to the art and rationality of "the conduct of conduct" that can be exercised by any agent in society (Foucault 2000j [1982]: 341, also Foucault 2000i [1978]).<sup>25</sup> In so far as the exercise of power is conceptualized as a practice made up of techniques as well as of rationalities, the centrality of knowledge to power becomes clear. Power/knowledge thus is exercised in and through expertise. It provides a framework for identifying and talking about problems to be addressed through action and produces practices and techniques for addressing these problems (Foucault 2000h [1984]). In line with the dual conception of power discussed above, such practices and techniques can be disciplining; and this tends to form the focus of studies that draw on Foucault's conceptions of power for their analyses (Khosravi 2008; Christensen 2011). But they can also be productive, inviting or enabling actors to behave in certain ways, do certain things, have certain kinds of thoughts, to be in the world in a certain way (Foucault 2000a, 2000h [1984], Mahmood 2005; Rieck 2017, 2020).

It is important to keep in mind that when we refer to knowledge/power that it is not a monolithic entity of some definitive body of knowledge through which power is exercised. So, it would be inadequate to conceptualize the workings of knowledge/power in Iran as some corpus of post-revolutionary Shi'i Islamist ideology through which power is exercised. Rather the field of power relations in Iran is constituted through a multiplicity of knowledge/power formations that can and do overlap. Medical discourses can be deployed alongside or against religious or philosophical and literary ones, which can then elicit the

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we have to create a gay life. To *become*. ... it is a process of our having to create a new cultural life underneath the ground of our sexual choices" (2000e: 163–164). He goes on to comment that the sexual, ethical and political choices we make foster the creation of new forms of life, relationships, friendships in society, art, culture, etc.

<sup>24</sup> Important to note here is that Foucault highlights that in such processes of resisting a prevailing order and creating new ways of being people rely on the very situation against which they struggle. He goes on to give the example of how "in the gay movement the medical definition of homosexuality was a very important tool against the oppression of homosexuality in the last part of the nineteenth century and in the early twentieth century. This medicalization, which was a means of oppression, has always been the means of resistance as well – since people could say, 'If we are sick, then why do you condemn us, why do you despise us?' and so on. Of course, this discourse now sounds rather naive to us, but at the time it was very important" (2000e: 168).

<sup>25</sup> Explaining the underlying concept of government as the "conduct of conduct" Foucault writes: "To 'conduct' is at the same time to 'lead' others [...] and a way of behaving within a more or less open field of possibilities. The exercise of power is the 'conduct of conducts' and a management of possibilities. Basically, power is less a confrontation between two adversaries or their mutual engagement than a question of 'government' [...] in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed – the government of children, of souls, of communities, of families, of the sick. It covered not only the legitimately constituted forms of political or economic subjection but also modes of action, more or less considered and calculated, that were destined to act upon the possibilities of action of other people" (Foucault 2000j [1982]: 341).

deployment of economic discourses and development expertise and so on. Agency in such a framework thus has less to do with somehow escaping or evading power, and more to do with the capacity of any actor to deploy knowledge/power to position him/herself tactically in the field of power relations (Foucault 2000e: 168; Rieck 2017).<sup>26</sup> Agency thus need not be seen exclusively in terms of the exercise of autonomy but more broadly as the capacity of actors within a field of knowledge/power to create subject positions, practices, ways of being that allow them to pursue meaningful lives for themselves and possibly to achieve social recognition in that subject position (Foucault 2000d [1982]: 157–158).

Conceptualizing agency as something linked to subject positions that emerge/are engendered through the manipulation of knowledge/power allows us to disentangle our analytical perspectives from culturally and politically specific conceptions embedded in liberalism of actors as autonomous individuals with some sort of innate essential desire or will (cf. Mahmood 2005; also, Foucault 2000f [1981]: 177). Foucault's framework allows us to be much more open, to presume less of how subjects are constituted and how they act in their social field. Further, it allows us to bring together conceptually the "two faces" of agency that Sherry Ortner highlighted in her own theoretical reflections on that concept, namely the "pursuit of projects" (i.e., agent's pursuit of what they see as desirable or necessary in life) and the "exercise of or against power" (Ortner 2006c: 139). Whereas in Ortner's own formulation of practice theory these two faces sit juxtaposed and somewhat disconnected from each other, Foucault allows us to see how the pursuit (and even conceptualization) of projects is completely entangled in knowledge/power.

These introductory remarks on Foucault's conception of power and the analytical framework that follows from this are quite abstract. In the following we will thus turn to the work of Janne Bjerre Christensen who draws on Foucault substantially in her analyses of the workings of power in Iran through the empirical window the problem of drug addiction in the Islamic Republic (2011). Her work shows how a conscientious engagement with Foucault's concepts and perspectives can open more nuanced understandings of the workings of power and how these can illuminate processes of socio-cultural and political change that take our understandings far beyond tried-and-true narratives.

Christensen's work explores how a fundamental shift occurred around 1998 in how drug addiction was dealt with in Iran. Criminalized after the 1979 Revolution and subject to draconian penalties (including death), conceptions of the problem of addiction broadened in the 1990s, culminating in the introduction and acceptance of new approaches to dealing with the problem. It was a significant shift in perspective and one that is difficult to adequately explain within the conventional framework of resistance studies. Nor do approaches like social movement theory help us much either. Christensen instead takes inspiration from Foucauldian governmentality studies and the anthropology of the state. By disaggregating the state into an assemblage of discourses, functions and professional orientations, she shows the logics by which drug use ultimately came to be regarded not only as a security issue but also both a social problem affecting upstanding citizens as well as a medical crisis (thanks to the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS). She writes, central to this normalization of drug users

...was a convergence of disparate elements and actors, including the support of professional and middle rank authorities, close cooperation between prison departments, health authorities, judiciary authorities, and the UNODC (setting up extensive programmes), and pressure from the State Prisoner's Organization, NGOs, the media, and clerics. But key 'to the conditions which make these [practices] acceptable at a given moment' as Foucault says (1991b:75), was also a change in the order and means of power envisioned by the reformist governmentality. The changing

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<sup>26</sup> Drawing on the medical discourse of homosexuality as an illness, which Foucault discusses in the interview referenced here is a very palpable case in point. "Knowledge" of homosexuality as an illness could be leveraged by gay persons to argue for social acceptance, as their condition was a medical one, not a choice. Hence, this body of knowledge that had created the homosexual as a pathological phenomenon, as a biological deviant, was leveraged against homophobic discourses. An illness cannot be condemned but must be accepted as fact and treated with empathy.

keywords merge in the drug ‘apparatus’ and make a different policy acceptable. Three issues are of particular interest: the reformists’ focus on tolerance and non-violence instead of violence as legitimate means of governance; efforts to reach expert solutions by merging expertise with more pragmatic interpretations of Islam; and increased freedom of the media and professionals to criticize government policies and point to the internal, social reasons for addiction.

(Christensen 2011: 133–134)

By examining the shifting political conditions surrounding the phenomenon of addiction, Christensen unpacks the plurality of ways that the problem was discussed by various institutions: different government ministries, religious authorities, NGOs, medical experts and activist groups. She shows actors drew on a variety of discourses/corpora of knowledge to frame the problem and propose solutions: the discourse of securitization that framed drug use and trafficking as a criminal offense and security risk to the state; the sociological and psychological discourses that perceived addiction as an endemic problem resulting from the trauma of conflict and war as well as the difficult situation of youth; and the medical discourses that perceived addiction as an illness or treatable medical condition. The value placed on scientific expertise in the post-revolutionary order meant that scientific discourses were seen just as valid as religious/moral ones and could even be linked. Consequently, the techniques and practices by which state and non-state actors addressed addiction were pluralized. Alongside the punitive measures of security (death sentences and incarceration), social work interventions and medical substance dependency treatments became part of the repertoire of practices to which addicts could be subject. The result is a “drug apparatus” that brings together conflicting policies, conceptions of good government and governmental practices. It is within this apparatus that medicalized and less stigmatized conceptions of addiction were made possible and taboos on the handling of addiction broken.

To trace how this shift in political and cultural understandings could come about, she carefully maps the relationships between state institutions as well as interdependence of state institutions and NGOs. Rather than being locked in conflict, they enter a plurality of strategic relationships. As Christensen notes,

This is partly because ‘the state’ is not monolithic but institutionally divided and bound in internally opposed policies, which both limit the NGOs and make room for their manoeuvring. Partly it is because the NGOs, although challenging the state, also become an extension of the state. In relating to the drug users, the NGOs reach out to and protect drug users from the law enforcement forces, but they also form part of and extend the range of state bureaucracy and control.

(Christensen 2011: 159)

She thus astutely highlights the internal divisions between ministries that pursue different policies with regard to drug abuse. These divisions thus allow non-state institutions, like NGOs, to cultivate a plurality of relationships to the state. Those ministries that share similar views of and approaches to dealing with the issue of drug abuse can become important allies; and these ministries will see those NGOs as useful partners in tackling the problem. From the vantage point of other ministries, who operate according to different discursive logics, NGOs are a potential threat. This portrayal of institutionally divided (and sometimes conflicting) government organizations on the one hand the fragmented and context dependent relationships between those formally working within state institutions and those working outside those institutions in “civil society organizations” on the other hand is precisely what we referred to above when we discussed the need to pursue a thicker empirical understanding of what “the regime” (i.e. “the state”) is and the many ways it is connected and relates to civil society. Such interrelations go far beyond the resistance-oppression or government-governed framework. But they are key to understanding the social conditions of possibility for discursive exchanges and reinterpretations that will create new norms, values and governmental practices.

Although Christensen's account of interactions between state and civil society is incredibly rich and nuanced, it focusses entirely on the interactions and forms of agency as they manifest in and between institutions. So, while the account shows how change emerges from interactions between NGOs, professional organizations and various ministries within the state, it gives less attention to the processes by which individual actors (so those outside of formal organizations/corporate entities) can by means of everyday encroachment, as Bayat calls it, shift discourses, norms and practices. That said, her account makes a significant contribution to opening more nuanced perspectives on "the state" or "the regime" in Iran.

In the following section we will explore how a thick framework of analysis that conceives of agency as the capacity to act within a web of knowledge/power in pursuit of one's own culturally defined projects can enrich our understanding of the shifting conditions of possibility for new subjectivities and ways of being (cf. Ortner 2006c: 139). We will explore this aspect of social change, driven not by the interventions of institutions but by the everyday "encroachment" of individuals on the social order, by examining how women have used the discourses and norms circumscribing their subjecthood to exercise agency to accommodate their own projects. Rather than simply attributing the expansion of women's possibilities of being in the post-revolutionary order to the resistance of liberal subjects against the state, we will examine the conditions within post-revolutionary society for women to expand the possibilities of their subjecthood.

## 6. Women at Work: Expanding Spaces of Agency

The role of women as agents of change in the Islamic Republic has featured prominently both in popular representations of Iran as well as in the academic literature in North America and Europe. Much of it has been shaped by liberal discourses and the narrative of the oppressor vs. the oppressed as we have problematized in this paper. Even though such liberal concepts and narratives of resistance and protest are not completely wrong, they reduce the complexity and dynamics of social change with regard to a proper analytical basis for the investigation of certain issues of change. Moreover, the liberal Euro-centric concept of social change does not fit for Muslim societies, as has been discussed, for instance, in the context of social movements in general (Mukherji 2013), and in the context of Islamic feminism and the understanding of women's agency in particular (Mahmood 2005, 5–25, Bucar 2010). Historical and cultural specificities matter and must be considered (Mukherji 2013: 108).

Iranian society with its historical and cultural heritage is characterized by certain developments that distinguish it from other Muslim societies. This becomes evident when we look at the individual and his or her capacities to realize his or her own interests. When determining agency feminist approaches refer to it as "the capacity to realize one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individual or collective)" (Mahmood 2005:8). But individual agency must not necessarily always be directed against customs and traditions. Rather, on the basis of knowledge, experience and social background the individual can make use of customs and traditions to be accepted and to succeed in reaching his or her aims. Bucar calls it "creative conformity" (2010); or with the words of Saba Mahmood: "In this sense, agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms" (Mahmood 2005: 15). This happened for instance in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Iran, when Iranian intellectuals tried to find a way for reform and modernization. They were only successful in bringing forward their message of progress when they communicated with ordinary Iranian people in an appropriate manner while using familiar concepts, ideas and customs. The individual intellectual and author could thus find acceptance and give those concepts and customs a new meaning.<sup>27</sup> In post-revolutionary Iran, for example, we see writers and film directors who do not resist the state but act within its boundaries

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<sup>27</sup> This is demonstrated by Föllmer in a case study on the *Travelogue of Ebrāhīm Beyg* (Föllmer 2022a).

and the rules of state censorship. In doing so, they have developed their own methods and strategies to expand the boundaries of the sayable, be it through the use of a specific satirical language or particular film-aesthetic symbolism.<sup>28</sup> Such tactics can lead to change within a system, without necessarily being opposed to the system itself.

Even though Bayat (2013) carries change in ordinary practices of everyday life forward to system change, such change remains only hypothetical. Mahmood, too, has preferably chosen aspects that are admirable from a secular liberal feminist perspective “such as women reading and interpreting religious texts for themselves, women teaching other women about piety, and women critiquing visions of motherhood imposed by mullahs or the secular state” (Bucar 2010: 673). In this section, we would like to explore a different avenue of analysis of social change by looking at how women have come to push for new possibilities of existence in post-revolutionary Iran and in the post-war decade of the 1990s, in particular, when women’s employment was not actively supported by the state. The cases will demonstrate how social change can happen on the individual level without becoming a collective movement or a non-movement opposing the state or inducing system change. We’d like to discover and recognize the societal and communicative spaces in which women can recondition established norms.

With the founding of the Islamic Republic and the efforts to Islamize society at all levels, the ambivalences between ideological aspiration and practicability became apparent. This is particularly evident in the questions on women’s equality in employment. The employment of women should not undermine the authority of the man as the breadwinner of the family. Women should primarily fulfill their function as wives and mothers. Certain professions were considered a danger to the moral integrity of the family and should therefore not be practiced by women. Moreover, they were seen as competition for male workers (Paidar 1995: 322–324). On the other hand, women’s labor could not be dispensed with in those professional fields where gender segregation was sought, such as education and health care. (Paidar 1995: 324–325). Nevertheless, the woman first needed her husband’s permission to pursue employment (Paidar 1995: 327). In practice, many women, especially from the lower and middle social classes, were informally employed. Due to the economic consequences of the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988), also called “imposed war” (*jang-e tahmili*), low wages, high inflation or the lack of a male provider for the family made the employment of women necessary. These were often jobs that women could do from home without neglecting their family duties. When women wanted to apply officially for a job, they had hardly any chances because of their gender. The only remaining option, in many cases, was taking other jobs for which they were basically not qualified (Paidar 1995: 332). Despite a legal situation that has allowed women to pursue employment, political positions tended to range from complete rejection to limitation of certain occupations specific to women. These should be occupations where women should not be decision-makers (Paidar 1995: 333). Women were also exposed to various restrictions based on their gender in the everyday practice of hiring and exercising employment. Women’s work was only considered necessary when the man was not able to support the family. In this respect, the financial and economic importance of women’s work was recognized, but its social importance was not (Vakil 2011: 115). Notwithstanding this, women have become important and partly indispensable workers since the beginning of the 1990s, contributing quite significantly to the country’s economic growth. Although there were professions that were primarily reserved for the male sex for various reasons, more and more women were able to successfully establish themselves in previously male-dominated professional fields as film directors or as journalists and writers, for example. They not only dealt with general social issues, but above all brought specific topics into the public discourse that mainly affected women in Iranian society.<sup>29</sup> These were, on the one hand, the

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<sup>28</sup> On the methods in satirical press columns see Föllmer (2008); on film-aesthetic symbolism of the Iranian film director Rakhshān Banī-E‘temād and its transcultural implications see Föllmer (2017: 142–149).

<sup>29</sup> On developments in Iranian film before and after the revolution regarding gender relations, see Föllmer (2017).

unequal legal treatment of women, but also their access to education and to professions of their choice, which were limited by social conventions and traditional role models.

In post-war Iran, and in particular in the 1990s, women learned to assert their interests mainly in practical ways rather than resorting to political campaigns. This becomes clear in the case of divorce at the family court. In Iran, it is generally more difficult for women to end a marriage than for men. It is only accepted when there are plausible and legally sound arguments and extreme circumstances. The judge then must determine if the situation warrants a divorce or not. The main problem for many women was that they did not know how to use the existing law. In the 1990s, public discourse on women's rights emerged. Women in particular exchanged information, ideas and experiences. This is why Arzoo Osanloo could observe an increasing number of petitions for divorce, because women had learned the procedural mechanisms of the informal system of justice (Osanloo 2006: 195). For them, it was not enough to know their rights, but also to know how to assert them. The most evident strategy for women was not to contradict and protest, or to question the system as such. Rather, they could most effectively achieve what they needed if they followed the instructions of the judge as authority and presented themselves as obedient and demur during the personal interviews with the judge (for detail, see Osanloo 2006). Such informal, non-confrontational tactics were also necessary for women to gain employment and to successfully establish themselves as entrepreneurs as the following examples will demonstrate.

After the revolution, the proportion of working women was high, especially in middle-income families in the cities. Their employment did not serve solely to earn a living but had above all cultural and social goals (Kadivar 1394/2015–2016: 155). Women worked mainly in the education sector as well as in the health and service sectors, in agriculture and as employees of the state (Kadivar 1394/2015–2016: 156–157). Statistics confirm that women have a significant share in agricultural production of fruits and vegetables and in handicrafts and thus a considerable impact on the economy (Kadivar 1394/2015–2016: 158–159). Fīrūze Šāber notes that although a high proportion of women are well educated, the appropriate economic, legal, cultural conditions are not in place to employ them accordingly, even though according to the Basic Law, Art. 28, everyone who wants to work has the right to do so, provided that this is not against Islam and the benefit of the general public or prejudices the rights of others. The state is obliged to create the corresponding prerequisites and conditions for all equally (Šāber 1392/2013–2014: 60–61). But the state has not yet succeeded in making the appropriate arrangements for the employment of women (Šāber 1392/2013–2014: 67).

The following case descriptions are the result of the interviews conducted by Fīrūze Šāber in the 1990s in the context of her MA thesis. The monograph was published in 2002 for the first time. With her scientific work, she wanted to contribute to the recognition of women's abilities as an important social and economic resource (Šāber 1392/2013–2014: 8). Her analysis demonstrates that women are not recognized solely on the basis of their formal qualifications, but have been able to assert themselves on the basis of their cultural, social and also emotional competences and experiences. What is crucial in this context is that while interacting, communicating and cooperating with the others women had to negotiate the distribution of tasks and hierarchies. The case studies follow a certain pattern: the author describes the family situation of her interviewees and their very personal and individual contribution to the economic growth of the country. Religious issues are only addressed insofar as they were relevant to the life situation of her interviewees and could help her realize her professional goals. Šāber's narrative reflects those points she considers relevant and sayable from an emic perspective. Her research design is aimed to correspond to national goals of progress while demonstrating that the women in her studies are recognized for their patriotic contributions to the economic growth of the country without the help of the state. These cases present a non-confrontational narrative of active women who – each in her own individual manner – were able to successfully overcome different kinds of obstacles and manage conflict situations created by contradictions between structural opportunities and real hindrances. We draw on Šāber's empirical

study for several different reasons. First, even though the study is rather old, it cannot be denied that it has been well received by Iranians until recent times, proven by the book's multiple editions. Second, it offers an emic narrative that passed state censorship and has been given permission for publication. The author's narrative of change is thus far from being liberal and confrontational. Third, it is the basis for similar works in which working women serve as a role model. Şāber's publication presents creative measures of individual agency both of the author and of the women in the case studies within the given social and political structures and thus transpires the possibilities of creative compliance that is not necessarily intentional resistance.

Şāber introduces Faride Meshkat (45 years old at the time of the interview) as the owner of an international logistics company for refrigerators and frozen goods, which was established in 1364/1985–1986. She was the only child of a doctor and a nurse. She lived with her grandmother in Mašhad for four years because there was no secondary school at her parents' place of work. She married while still a student. After graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in accounting, she accompanied her husband to America. She was unable to continue her studies there due to lack of financial resources. In 1359/1980 she became head of finance of a Bulgarian meat import company. Due to a rift in the company management, she initially took over the company on a provisional basis before the company went bankrupt (Şāber 1392/2013–2014: 70–71). This happened at a time when women in Iran found it particularly difficult to be accepted in the economy. Even Meshkat's father had had great doubts (Şāber 1392/2013–2014: 72–73). In the account related by Şāber, however, we don't learn how long Meshkat stayed in America or why she suddenly started working for a European company. In Şāber's account we find out that her interlocutor before starting her own logistics company and taking over the exclusively male workers and drivers, Meshkat first had to resolve the family's reservations about her professional activity. The fulfillment of duties as wife and mother were important for the family and especially for the husband, before they were ready to give their consent. Since this profession was not considered appropriate for a woman, Meshkat also met with resistance from her husband and her husband's family, as well as her own family. They were afraid that the job would involve her travelling a lot and dealing exclusively with men. However, only when she had her household well in hand and to her husband's satisfaction, catered to her husband's interests such as attending family gatherings and meetings with friends, and ensured the care and supervision of her son throughout the day, did her husband's resistance subside (Şāber 1392/2013–2014: 70–71).

The initial period, which fell in the first years of the revolution, Meshkat in some cases faced conflicts, especially with men. The first widespread obstacle that she as a working woman had to overcome was the prejudice that women should not work per se and that this work in particular was not appropriate for them because a woman's feelings would prevail over her reason and she would not be able to make decisions. A further obstacle were meetings at which she was told to call in a man instead of speaking for herself or was told not to sit opposite a man because they might have eye contact. She was assigned another seat, or she was told not to participate in a meeting at which only men were present, because she was *nāmaḥram*, an illicit non-related person from a religious-moral point of view. By talking about and referring to the law and comparing her situation as a businesswoman with that of Khadije (arab. Khadija), the Prophet's first wife and a trader, Meshkat finally succeeded in gaining acceptance. She said that although she had walked out of meetings hopeless sometimes, she had not suffered any defeats. We do not know how important veiling was in the situations described and if the wearing of the veil had any impact on the behavior of the men towards her, because, remarkably, the author Şāber does not say a word about it. This is important insofar as veiling should give those women access to public spaces, schools and work, who so far had not participated in those spaces for religious and moral reasons.

Another problem was that Meshkat usually worked with men. In most cases she was accompanied by a male relative on her forwarding tours. In 1991, when she had to import goods from Turkmenistan into Iran with a non-related driver, she was not afraid of the

journey because she had taken measures for her own safety and had prepared her staff for such situations. She considered the company's staff to be like a football team and valued a good group culture (*farhang-e gorūhi*). This included the proper treatment of workers and staff during work. In addition, there was an authorized representative who was to pay attention to this and ensure the further training of the drivers, such as English language lessons. There were company football teams, work clothes, craft courses, joint trips and close contact with the drivers' families. Meshkat had extensively read psychological guidebooks on how to deal with the male drivers, especially on team-building issues. She has also acquired specialist knowledge in the transport sector and has continued her own education. (Şāber 1392/2013–2014: 75–76).

Since she never took advantage of state aid for her business, Meshkat developed several strategies. She, for example, managed to get people to invest in her business and pay them monthly shares of the profits. Success obviously proved her right. Moreover, profit-sharing in Meshkat's business could be interpreted as concern for others because this qualified her as a woman who did not follow selfish interests but acted in a good and responsible manner for collective welfare, that means the welfare of the investors and that of her staff and her family.

When the company had grown to the point where Meshkat could no longer run it alone, she asked her husband if he wanted to step in and support her. Again, there were reservations from the male side because a man could not work in a company run by a woman. She would make all the decisions, when they say: "A man does not put himself in the hands of a woman" (Şāber 1392/2013–2014: 74). Finally, after mediation efforts by friends, he agreed to join his wife in running the business. First, he worked as an accountant, then as managing director, so that the company could expand further and grow into an international enterprise. As a result, the company was split into two sub-companies: the husband was responsible for domestic transport and his wife for international business.

During the war, the company supplied the front. After a 20-ton freight container of meat was stolen in 1989, and the company had to compensate the damage, it was decided to stop inland transport and operate exclusively internationally. Meshkat's husband became managing director, and she became chairperson of the supervisory board. Meshkat was a member of the Organisation of International Freight Forwarders and the first woman to serve on its board from 1995–1998.

Another entrepreneur, Homā Kamālī, was also an entrepreneur before the revolution, initially with the help of her husband. After his death, she took over his responsibilities as managing director of a company that produced advertising billboards. According to the law, she would have been entitled to only 1/8 of her husband's shares in the company, but in fact she received 1/3, so that including her own shares she still owned the majority share of the company. This circumstance, which the author considers positive, is underlined by the interviewee's statement that her husband belonged to the rare men (*mardān-e nāderī*), "who were one with their wife all their life and even afterwards." Some close friends felt that she had her husband under her control during their life together because she was responsible for the financial matters (Şāber 1392/2013–2014: 82).

Homā Kamālī was a mother of three children, two daughters and a son, all of whom were students. She took time for her children's problems. In the household, she had support from a domestic worker. Dinner was usually eaten together because, according to Kamālī, it strengthened family cohesion (Şāber 1392/2013–2014: 82–83). Most of the day she was busy managing her companies and new projects, so she usually had a 16-hour working day. She never received support in the form of loans or other forms of financial assistance. When she launched the digitalization of her company she was able to employ more young, qualified people, increase the number of manufactured products and improve their quality.

Kamālī had a close relationship with her young employees. A culture of family-like ties (*bāft-e farhangī-ye khānevādegī*) with the employees was very important to her. So, she usually addressed them by their first names and invited the senior staff to dinner once a month. She thus was able to establish a family connection with them and became

partly involved in their private affairs. She even advertised for a spouse for them. (Şāber 1392/2013–2014: 82).<sup>30</sup> One of her daughters was to join her company. She accustomed her to a 16-hour working day while continuing to invest in her company and her daughter. She attached great importance to this (Şāber 1392/2013–2014: 84).

According to her own account Kamālī was regularly confronted with men's prejudices about her professional skills and knowledge. Some customers asked for a male interlocutor and behaved extremely rudely towards her, for example by addressing her in the 2nd person singular. She always tried to remain calm in the face of this because she knew that she would achieve nothing if she reprimanded these men. With her employees, she proceeded similarly to her colleague Meshkat. She sought contact with the staff and their families and was thus able to gain the necessary respect. When concluding contracts, potential business partners did not accept her signature on its own; she had to have a male co-signatory from the management (Şāber 1392/2013–2014: 79–82).

In this case, the description of the entrepreneur Homā Kamālī's path to success is focused on her assertiveness on a social level, her professional commitment, her creativity and her investment of time. What is characteristic, as in the first case, is that success was based on the support of the family and especially the husband. The company also functioned in everyday professional life by building and promoting family-like networks between the entrepreneur and the employees. The age difference between the younger employees and the entrepreneur was helpful in this regard. Patriotic sentiments did not play any role in this case.

In the third case, Mehrī Mardāsī took over the management of her husband's company, which was specialized in the extraction and sale of industrial salt. The husband himself was no longer able to work for health reasons. Mardāsī also had to fight prejudices at the beginning. When she wanted to sell the salt to companies and appeared in person to do so, expecting entry, the guards of the company in question sent her away with the phrases: "Girl, mind your own business", "What do you mean you want to sell salt?", "Who has sent you?" (Şāber 1392/2013–2014: 87–88). She herself, who was the mother of a son, later earned extra money by sewing to make up for the financial shortfall. She faced the problems, which according to her own description were mainly administrative and financial, by saying: "Whenever I was confronted with problems, I climbed the mountain and felt myself getting closer to God and God listening to me" (Şāber 1392/2013–2014: 90). She also made a pilgrimage to Mašhad every year to visit the tomb of the 8th Imam and financed the journey for another ten people.

In this example, the personal faith of the entrepreneur served to give her the necessary strength to overcome the difficulties that arose. Religious arguments are not used in comparison to Meshkat's case. This can have various reasons and does not indicate the religiosity or non-religiosity of the entrepreneur. Kamālī's husband's male relatives lacked understanding for the fact that she wanted to continue the business as a woman. The closest male members of her own family, such as her brother and son, were also dependent on her with their families due to war injuries. Accordingly, she received little support from them. The entrepreneur emphasized the close relationship of trust with her employees based on a family-like relationship. However, there is no further details on this are given. In the case of Mardāsī, the intrinsic motivation of perseverance based on her faith and national sentiment is particularly emphasized (Şāber 1392/2013–2014: 90). The same can be seen in Mehrūye Pāzānī's case.

In Mehrūye Pāzānī's career, the priority was to fulfill her domestic duties in order to win over her husband. Only then did he give up his resistance and supported her by allowing her to open her own carpet weaving school and getting her a loan from the Ministry of Labor. Nevertheless, she still had to manage the household and find the right balance between gainful employment, housework and childcare. Her strong will always let

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<sup>30</sup> Courting a potential spouse (pers. *khvāstegārī*) is usually done by older close family members. In this respect, this statement emphasizes that Kamālī was equated to a close family member in terms of her importance to the younger employees.

her find a way to get closer to her goal. This enabled her to inspire her children for the same activity and to participate in many exhibitions. Sometimes she trained the indigent without pay and worked for a welfare society for girls and women. Pāzānī loved what she did and excelled in tenacity, patience and perseverance, skills she said she saw less often in men. She was convinced that if one knows the law and acts according to it, one will have no trouble. However, she admits, one must be persistent (Şāber 1392/2013–2014: 92–96).

The fifth case focuses on a woman's experience and commitment as a regional member of parliament and employee in an agricultural company: Şedīqe Gīyāhī entered her father's agricultural business cooperative with the support of her husband. She was elected as the representative for rural people's affairs in Amīrābād in Khorasān province and had good contacts with the women who were primarily active in this cooperative. She was particularly committed to improving rural infrastructure by obtaining loans to build and pave roads or to set up a bakery. To do this, she collected the signatures of all the residents. Some male residents initially refused to give their signature to a woman, arguing: "For us, death is better than running after a woman for a signature" (Şāber 1392/2013–2014: 102). Her counter-argument was that in this case it was not the individual who was important but the interest of the community that counted. Gīyāhī saw the problem mainly in the prejudices against women. People did not give them much credit or talked down their importance. Many women had little confidence in themselves. She wanted to remedy this. She is quoted as saying: "If it weren't for the grace of God, I wouldn't be able to do anything." (Şāber 1392/2013–2014: 101).

In the cases presented, there are quotes that Şāber reproduces verbatim, while she summarizes the other aspects of the women's careers in her own words. This means that Şāber felt it was important to reproduce these quotes. One can see that men's statements in the case studies underline existing prejudices against women. The verbatim reproduction of interview partner's religiously connoted thoughts highlights for the reader that the interviewed women had underpinned their actions with their trust in God and their faith, which obviously seemed to be important for their success. Faith, a sense of duty and responsibility towards the family and employees and a certain degree of patriotism unites all the case studies listed. The women managed to fight against existing prejudices either through their quick wit, patience, knowledge or skillful tactics, without completely abandoning their role as mother and housewife. On the contrary, they not only lived up to this role in the family, but also assumed it as entrepreneurs towards their employees. This gave them the necessary respect and recognition, especially from male employees. Those women who continued the business without their husbands, however, could not manage without male support, usually from the family. Sohaylā Ḥasanzāde sums it up in her own words: "The insecurities made it necessary for me to have a man with me. This is the most important prevention of a woman, because alone and independently she can do nothing" (Şāber 1392/2013–2014: 110–111). In addition, male competitors would take more liberties with women than with men. The legal disadvantage of female heirs and especially of the wife due to the unequal inheritance regulations is another obstacle that women must overcome in order to be able to continue the deceased husband's business. Great hopes are pinned on the promotion of their own children, especially their sons, so that they can later join and take over the company. Some of the women entrepreneurs specifically have the promotion of women within their company or through additional civic engagement in mind.

Şāber concludes that the entrepreneur's family, husband and husband's family are among the individual factors that support or hinder her activity. The main reason for refusal is the fear that the wife would not be able to fulfil her domestic and child-rearing duties if she worked. Non-familial work contacts who are reluctant or dismissive of women as colleagues or supervisors often are so due to prejudices against women such as their lack of skills or reliability or due to reservations about women working outside the home, which makes proximity to strange men unavoidable (compare Şāber 1392/2013–2014: 142).

Şāber identified the following as women's strategies to counter the negative attitudes towards their leading role as an entrepreneur and women's employment in general: 1) cooperation and conversation, 2) maintaining family life, 3) cooperation with male family members, 4) cooperation with husband, 5) focus on occupation/work, 6) family cohesion, 7) expansion of activity, 8) sustained success in work. To fill their own knowledge gaps, they have sought the cooperation of their husbands, made use of the knowledge of state specialists, friends and acquaintances, involved their children and learned from the work of other colleagues. This means that they have been able to expand their competences primarily with the support of men who were willing to pass on their knowledge and experience to women. They managed to generate money when they were financially strapped by finding new marketing opportunities, taking out loans or finding partners. Family and acquaintances were the main supporters (Şāber 1392/2013–2014: 130–141). The case studies show very individual features of the women's family situation, career, education, assertiveness, assertion and success, so that each of them could serve as a role model for others, especially young women from different social and regional backgrounds.

The examples given by Şāber demonstrate that the women entrepreneurs did not demand equal treatment in the sense of Bayat when he says that women usually had to articulate their demands for equal treatment and equal rights on an individual basis (Bayat 2013: 101). Rather, the women in the case studies tried to find a way out of the prejudices and reservations of men towards them as a woman by leveraging within given social structures. While using their moral and social knowledge and capital they could negotiate the boundaries of what was possible and was not. From a moral point of view, they saw themselves as existing within the given structures and as operating inside these lines (cf. Bucar 2010: 682). Thus, the women in the cases gave importance to their belief and trust in God for their intrinsic motivation. They recognized the law, the family as social basis and the wellbeing of their employees. They did this vis-à-vis a patriarchal structured group in their own individual way, not in the form of resistance, but on a rational and pragmatic level. Consequently, they were perceived as outstanding and exemplary individuals. In their expanded exceptional roles, they did not directly challenge existing patriarchal structures. Yet, through their public presence alone they have set precedents for a scope of action that have made it possible to shake up patriarchal power relations (cf. Bayat 2013: 101). Furthermore, through their discipline, persistence and continuity in fulfilling their duties and expanding their knowledge they gained the necessary respect as entrepreneurs in their own right. But in all this, the family was central for all of them. Only with the support of male relatives could the women entrepreneurs be successful. The working atmosphere was intact and safe when the staff members had family-like relationships. They thus could contribute to the social mobility of their family and the younger generation.

In 2017 Iranian scholars of social and economic sciences confirmed the growth in women's business leadership. Despite this, they also confirmed that the problems women continued to face were still the same as in Şāber's cases. They assumed that – among others – there would be a lack of role models and called for a systematic state-run program to improve conditions for women and to support and encourage them to effectively participate in the economic development of the country (Modarresi et al. 2017: 250). But as we can see from the impact and spread of Şāber's publication via various weblogs and websites role models addressed to young people and women already existed.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Sometimes with explicit reference to Şāber's publication sometimes in the same wording the biographies of the women can be found there; the biography of Farīde Meshkat for instance at <http://plus.blogfa.com/post/121/> رانبل-لاچخى-ن-اهج- (ىر بارت) -لقن-ولم-ولم-ى-للمل-ان-ىب-تكرش-ى-دم-تاكشم-هدىرف/ and <https://article.tebyan.net/239480/> دن-تسه-ى-ن-اس-ك-ه-چ-ن-ىرف-آرا-كرت-رب-ن-ان-ز/

The biography of Homā Kamālī at the following sites:

<https://proje-karafarini.blogspot.com/1392/01/10/post-17/>,

<http://www.fereshte261.blogfa.com/post/26> and

<https://www.isna.ir/news/8601-04301.53091> اچ-ن-هك-اج-ن-ا-وب-ن-اون-تن-هك-اج-ن-ا

The biography of Mehri Mardāsī (*Bānū-ye namakī-ye Irān*) at:

The younger generation has benefited from the experiences and new self-confidence of adult women in the 1990s and 2000s. Young girls and women have been supported by the older generation in their individual plans to pursue (higher) education. These elders hoped for social advancement and a better life for their daughters. In 2000, young women were allowed by law to study abroad. At some universities it was also possible to study women's studies with a focus on women and the family, women's history and women's rights in Islam (Vakil 2011: 111). They benefited from the reform project during Khātami's presidency, which aimed to strengthen civil society and give marginalized groups a voice in the reform discourse. Adherence to social gender control and moral discipline became less important (Bayat 2013: 292).

Although, according to the law, male authority over women continues to be recognized and sanctioned because of their role as providers for the family, and conservative authorities have still tried to keep female students under social control, this has not been an obstacle for a more recent generation of women.<sup>32</sup> Despite the regulations, the women said that they had learned to think independently through their studies. Afterwards, pursuing a profession and pursuing a career was more important to many than getting married (Vakil 2011: 111).<sup>33</sup> In line with this trend, a perceptible change has taken place in families, which has influenced the individual self-perceptions of the young generation in particular and their desire for autonomous action.

For many young women, studying was the only way to be socialized outside the family and to escape social control in the home environment.<sup>34</sup> The self-image, which until then had been tied to the collective family identity, could thus give way to a consciousness as an individual, for example through the respect that the young women gained within and outside the family for their access to studies. Studying also offered them certain freedoms to come into contact with other people beyond their home environment, but also made them aware of existing limits due to their gender, for example in dealing with male students or professors (Shavarini 2006: 195–199).

The social changes described here happen through daily practice and discursive negotiations. In all the case studies summarized above, we have seen how women were able to create new spaces of action (i.e., becoming entrepreneurs), not by resisting cultural, religious and political norms and models of action, but by actively drawing on their knowledge of these and creatively leveraging them to pursue their own "projects" (as Sherry Ortner would put it, see also Bucar 2010). Actively handling traditions and patriarchal structures were and still are part of the tactical repertoire that women draw on to manage their lives. At the same time, experiences with such tactics grounded in informal knowledge, how it has been handled creatively, are not necessarily so widely known among all women. The contribution of Šāber's study was to systematize and present knowledge of various possibilities of action and being to a wider circle of women and other interested readers.

But there is another dimension to the significance of these case studies and Fīrūze Šāber's work to disseminate knowledge about them. None of the women in these case studies was portrayed as expressing any desire to be a "new woman" or to pursue a kind of womanhood along liberal, feminist lines. Their paths to entrepreneurship are related as having come about through contingent developments in the family: time spent outside Iran with one's husband led to paid corporate work; a husband's death led to taking over

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and <https://www.yjc.news/fa/news/4707709/> ناری-ای-کمن-یونابن-اتس-درب-را-گزور-م-خز

<http://astan.ir/fa/news/3109/> ناری-ای-کمن-ن-ز-ی-چن-د-ع-ی-ا-ه-ج-ن-ر [All websites accessed on 07.06.2022].

<sup>32</sup> Female students living in dormitories were not allowed to receive visitors or listen to music, for example (Vakil 2011: 110–111).

<sup>33</sup> However, according to official data, working women accounted for only 18.5 percent of the total working population in 2006 (Vakil 2011: 115). Others report a proportion of 12.4 percent in 2014 (Modarresi et al. 2017: 248).

<sup>34</sup> The education of women that was promoted by the Islamic Republic to strengthen their role in family and the society has created ambiguities: the women should be traditional and modern at the same time (see Mehran 2003: 270).

the family company; the inability of male family members to earn a living made it necessary to undertake a line of work, etc. In all cases, the entrepreneurial role emerges from developments within the family. Moreover, women's performance of an entrepreneurial role is framed as an extension of her familial care work. Women head their companies like they head their families: they work to care for the well-being of workers and their families and to further the common good with their labor. Moreover, none of these women question or re-negotiate their domestic responsibilities. Instead, they manage these with the same kind of care with which they manage their companies. Home life and work life exist hand in hand. Women's particular capacities as entrepreneurs are thereby shown to stem from precisely the same kind of strength, perseverance and organizational skill they have cultivated as outstanding homemakers who also fulfill a patriotic duty, mainly visible in the case of Farīde Meshkat.

By presenting this kind of conservatively grounded subjectivity for expanded possibilities for being a woman within the norms of post-revolutionary Iranian society, Fīrūze Šāber also disseminated new models of being with expanded possibilities. This greatly contributed to the even further expansion of the scope of women's agency in the 1990s, which positively impacted the younger generation. Thus, the agency of this early generation of post-revolutionary women entrepreneurs was both indicator, and also itself a promotor of change. Even though social mobility and financial independence might also have been important for the women entrepreneurs and for the younger generation in particular, this is not explicitly evident in the presentation of the cases. It remains to be noted that change, as we have seen, is not necessarily intended. It is not always the result of demands for new norms or of active resistance to existing ones. Norms can be shifted and renegotiated through the contingencies of social situations that generate new contexts that demand new forms of action. Further, by creatively applying such norms to new contexts change can begin to develop its own momentum. Iranian scholars have thus observed an increasing proportion of women who work as entrepreneurs, and conservatives are now fearing the dissolution of traditional family structures.<sup>35</sup> It is perhaps rather ironic that female entrepreneurship in Iran has (or at least once had) its roots precisely in traditional family structures and in an understanding of women's subjectivity as being circumscribed by her caregiving role.

## 7. Conclusion

As the empirical section of this working paper demonstrated, a thicker description of social change together with a self-reflexive theoretical framework is open to the narratives of social actors and provides space to take these as the point of departure for trying to understand and theorize how processes of social change transpire. Taking the empirical study, the narrative related to it and the continuous reception of the publication into account permits us to move beyond already familiar narratives structured by some form of modernization theory and culturally and historically specific conceptions of (liberal) subjecthood.

The material on women entrepreneurs presented here shows how new horizons of action can emerge from women's responses to contingent developments within one of the key institutions of post-revolutionary governmentality, the family, and how the expansion of women's agency has resulted from applying fairly "traditional" patriarchal norms and understandings creatively to new contexts which also attribute a patriotic value to their commitment. Women's entrepreneurship in post-revolutionary Iran emerged from socio-economic need on the one hand (the death of a husband or inability to work due to war injuries, etc.) and an extension of her role as caregiver on the other hand. In all

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<sup>35</sup> More about the discourse on the family and the strategies and arguments of maintaining traditional family structures see Föllmer (2022b).

cases presented here, the path to women's entrepreneurship was created through an extension of her caregiving responsibilities beyond her immediate family towards other "dependents" (in the form of employees). This is what Foucault meant when he referred to productive capacity of power, which we discussed above. Patriarchal conceptions of women as caregivers not only limit women to the home, in the cases detailed above, they also inspired them to expand their care work to new contexts and thus become entrepreneurs. At the same time, this pushing at the boundaries of women's subjecthood, would set precedents for succeeding generations of women to push boundaries even further. Bit by bit the understandings of women's subjecthood have over time been stretched and bent, leading to major shifts and even more possibilities for women to claim new spaces of action and new ways of being.

The cases discussed also showed that this expansion of women's horizons of action and being is not necessarily explicitly planned or intended, nor is it resistant and opposed to the state. In fact, when there were conflicts and re-negotiations, it was vis-à-vis other members of the family and business partners or clients. The state was not the primary adversary for these women. Rather, it was the pushback from more immediate social circles. We noted above how Foucault was critical of conceptions of power that overemphasized the importance of the state and instead proposed a capillary conception of power that suffused all of society. In these case studies, we can see such capillary manifestations of power at work. The refusal of men to give women a loan, to let them sign contracts in their own name, to participate in meetings, etc., all these demonstrate how it is more than state violence that upholds patriarchal order in present-day post-revolutionary Iran. In this regard, the role of the family is key, particularly the role of husbands. In several cases, the husband was the first obstacle. Without the husband's consent, however reluctantly given, women would not have been able to break new ground. At the same time, we see it is the husband's support, sometimes there at the outset and other times gradually won, that enables the expansion of these women's agency. But this support is often initially won through perseverance and super-conformism. Many of the women portrayed in the case studies embodied exemplary upstanding homemakers and wives and so "earned" the trust of their husbands to expand their activities into entrepreneurship. We thus see that women were able to create new possibilities for themselves not by resisting and refusing, but by using their knowledge of gender role expectations to leverage the give and take of power in their immediate social relationships.

The importance of knowledge/power in bringing about transformation is evident in other regards as well, especially when we consider the project underlying Şāber's work. In the first case discussed above, knowledge of religious accounts, namely portrayals of the Prophet's first wife Khadija, was used in legitimizing entrepreneurship as a woman's activity. In other case studies it was noted that the women entrepreneurs studied up on various forms of expert knowledge related to their new field of activity: management techniques, technical expertise related to their industry, etc. Iran is a society in which knowledge, education and learning are highly valued. Technical expertise can speak louder than a person's social position. Women can thus, to an extent, compensate limitations on their subjecthood imposed by a patriarchal gender order by positioning themselves as experts. It is a lesson well learned by the younger generation of women that now outnumbers and outperforms men at universities. At the same time, knowledge/power also widens spaces of agency by spreading understanding of how to navigate situations. Şāber's work disseminates knowledge of the various ways pathbreaking women entrepreneurs confronted obstacles to the expansion of their way of being, thereby providing guidance to other women as to how they, too, can manage obstacles in their own lives. At the same time, Şāber also positions the activities of these women firmly in the discursive space of nationalism and good citizenship as well as internationally circulating development discourses concerning the importance of women for human capital development. But beyond this, and perhaps not least important, knowledge also expands the horizons of the imagination. Sharing the biographies of these women entrepreneurs allows other women to dream, to see that the seemingly impossible has been attained by others and

how they have done so without burning all bridges with regards to family relations, friends and reputation.

We hope to have made clear in this working paper that the accounts told by liberal narratives of change are rather impoverished when it comes to pushing our understanding of how change is transpiring in Iran. While accounts of rebellious women and youth wearing daring fashion and partying to resist the state may have a certain appeal to those who yearn for counter-cultural excitement, it does not do adequate justice to the work that many Iranians do in their daily lives as they pursue new possibilities of being. Further, these new possibilities are not just the outcome of the dissemination of Western ideas and ways of living; nor are they necessarily always the automatic outcome of urbanization and higher education (although education does play a role); nor must they inevitably be directed against traditional structures. As we saw in the case studies above, attributing the changes transpiring in Iran to the disembedding of individuals does not adequately describe how these women “gain empowerment” (nor any other social actors, for that matter). Instead, the material shows that relationships these women have with persons around them are creatively reinterpreted and given new meanings in new contexts as they redefine their subjecthood in light of their expanded spaces of being. While individuals are the locus of action and negotiation, they are only one node in a web of relationships that shift and are renegotiated to change the possibilities of subjecthood as well as the horizons of action.

## 8. Coda

As we prepare this working paper for final publication, events have overtaken us. The death of Mahsa Amini following her arrest for ostensibly being improperly veiled provoked widespread outrage; Iranians from different ethnic backgrounds, from rural and urban areas, wealthy and poor, all have taken and continue to take to the streets. Women have been at the center of this latest wave of protests, and the widespread removal of veils in public has been a visible (but not the only) expression of people’s great dissatisfaction with “the state” and deep distrust of the government and power elites and (alongside the cutting of hair) has featured prominently in what little Western media coverage there has been of these events. This is supported by discourses from among the Iranian diaspora who have elevated women to the heroes of change in Iran, focusing mostly on their refusal to wear the veil as an act embodying the triumph of modern, secular (and Western, liberal) values. Thus, the narratives being spun around the events in Iran, particularly among diaspora communities and Western observers, fall precisely into the liberal narrative of change we have criticized so extensively above. They project onto these events the narrative of the triumph of secular liberalism against the authority of religion.

That said, while for many years obligatory veiling was considered by some Iranian women to be a but certainly not the most central point of critique and activism, featuring alongside an entire repertoire of socio-cultural and legal issues that women struggle with in pushing for change, this has changed over the course of the past two decades. For young women in particular circumventing the state-imposed dress codes by freely and individually interpreting mandatory veiling has become not only an expression of refusal/resistance to the authority of the state in matters deemed to be personal issues (This is what has been widely commented on in liberal commentaries of change on Iran, but which simply presumes too much with regards to what is really at stake for young women). Rather, these acts of seemingly demonstrative refusal to comply with state-imposed gender norms are performed also and perhaps even mainly as signs of women’s more general discontent with Iran’s current complex social and economic situation, and in particular how these developments have impacted women in Iran specifically.

Yet, overemphasizing public acts of unveiling, important as they are in the current turmoil in Iran, makes us oblivious to the many other developments taking place. For

example, the expressions of solidarity from among conservative women (and men), who, while insisting on their own commitment to veiling as being part of their (religious) identity and subjectivity, have nonetheless joined in to voice their opposition to the continuation of a mandatory dress code.<sup>36</sup> Amini's death has thus also brought to a head discussion among politically, socially and culturally conservative Iranians to what degree it is useful to impose a certain set of (religious) norms by force or whether this in and of itself violates the principle of Islam that there should be no force or compulsion in matters of religion.<sup>37</sup> Thus, we see a shift in attitudes among some Iranian conservatives become more visible and politically vocal with regards to what sort of social orders would be possible even for conservatives. That said, these events have taken on such immense dimensions precisely because there is more than just the question of an ostensibly religiously legitimized gender order at stake. So, while the "woman's issue" without a doubt features prominently, as becomes clear from the central slogan of "Zan Zendegī Āzādī" (Woman Life Freedom), protestors are going to the streets for many other reasons as well, for example, with regard to the treatment of ethnic and in some cases religious minorities by "the state". Other protestors view Mahsa Amini's death as a "last straw" in state dysfunctionality. Not only is corruption all too common, the economy in shambles due to mismanagement and social inequality and economic precarity are rampant.

This rather disparate list of issues and cross-cutting lines of conflict is by no means systematic or exhaustive. However, it is intended to illustrate that while it is tempting to fit the present protests into a narrative of women who have freed themselves from the shackles of tradition and are pushing for the institutionalization of a secular, egalitarian gender order along the lines of Western feminism, for Iranians there are many more issues at stake, many motivations for taking to the streets and for engaging in all sorts of activism. Last, but certainly not least, the lines of conflict are messy and unstable and cannot be easily reconciled with liberal narratives of secular, freedom loving women finally rising up against a patriarchal theocracy. This would be doing a grave injustice to the variety of issues at stake for protestors as well as to the richness of debates and forms of civic engagement that have emerged.

In sum, social change in Iran is a rich and complex process. The on-going events make this clearer than ever. We have much to learn about power, agency, mobilization, the creation of new life possibilities and the struggles to get them institutionalized in the context of state structures. We would be best served to leave behind our pre-conceived narratives and our perceived analytical certainties. Instead, we should astutely listen to the plurality of voices coming from an immensely diverse society and learn from its debates, struggles and everyday practices. By doing so we could achieve a far richer understanding of how actors create new subjectivities and new forms of being. In this regard, we have much to learn from Iran.

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<sup>36</sup> On the public discussion on veiling and unveiling in the Iranian press in spring 2018 see Föllmer (2021: 98-104).

<sup>37</sup> The principle that there should be no compulsion in religion is anchored in the Qur'ān, Sūra al-Baqara 2: 256.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Katja Rieck was a senior research fellow at Orient-Institut Istanbul from 2019 until 2022 responsible for the new research focus on Iran and was also project lead of the *International Standing Group "Iran and Beyond: Breaking the Ground for Sustainable Scholarly Collaboration (IRSSC)"* (April 2019 – March 2022). The IRSSC, the framework within which work on this article was carried out, was part of Max Weber Foundation's "Knowledge Unbound Internationalization, Networking and Innovation in and by the Max Weber Foundation" initiative that was funded by the German Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). She is currently Scientific Managing Director of the Leuphana Institute for Advanced Studies (LIAS) in Culture and Society at Leuphana University in Lüneburg, Germany.

Contact: [k.rieck74@gmail.com](mailto:k.rieck74@gmail.com)

Katja Föllmer is an experienced researcher specializing on modern Iran. After leading the Institute of Iranian Studies in Göttingen as deputy (April 2016 – March 2018) and getting the *venia legendi* (habilitation) in January 2017 she was working as senior research fellow in the ERC-project "Private Pieties: Mundane Islam and New Forms of Muslim Religiosity: Impact on Contemporary Social and Political Dynamics" (October 2016 – September 2022). Currently she is doing research on the impact of women on social change in Iran.

Contact: [kfoellm@gwdg.de](mailto:kfoellm@gwdg.de)