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# Challenges of Southern Knowledge Production
## Reflections on/through Iran

ABSTRACT: Focusing on the specific case of knowledge production in and about Iran, in this chapter, we discuss the risk of reproducing a Northern perspective in the attempts to produce knowledge on and through the Global South(s). We argue that such reproduction leads to cognitive suppression, further peripheralization, or even recolonization of the South(s). We also stress the lasting effects of methodological nationalism among attempts at decolonization and its political consequences, such as in the adoption of nativist discourses historically connected to the 'Islamic' Revolution by scholars focusing on the Global South(s) and in area studies concerning Iran. To avoid these effects, we suggest considering the politics of scale in our recognition and problematization of the hierarchization of Northern and Southern sites of knowledge production and their particularities.

KEYWORDS: Iran; knowledge production; methodological nationalism; decolonization; nativism; Iranian studies; politics of scale

# Challenges of Southern Knowledge Production
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### INTRODUCTION: CHALLENGES OF SOUTHERN POSITIONALITY

While we were finishing the first draft of this chapter, a revolution was unfolding in Iran. It was not the first revolution in its history. However, like other parts of the Middle East, Iran has often been portrayed as an exception, a space of permanent conflicts and sectarian struggles, which reduces history to certain dichotomies such as modern-traditional and Islamist-secular. This reductive over-simplification renders the unfolding feminist revolution in Iran, with its slogan 'Women, Life, Freedom', rooted in the Kurdish struggle around the Middle East and, particularly, Rojava, more unthinkable. For it cannot account for the multiplicity of forces with diverse histories that

are involved. Many of those who are active in this revolu-
tion are marginalized in the knowledge production on the
country and in efforts to decolonize it. In other words, the
new revolutionary subjects of the ongoing revolution are
mainly those subjects and forces whose accounts and deeds
are missing in knowledge productions about Iran.

We aim to elaborate and reflect on three intertwined
challenges in our attempts to discuss the conditions of pos-
sibility for knowledge production on, in, and through the
Global South. All these challenges are related to the polit-
ics of scale. How does a specific scale become dominant
due to a particular history of power struggles? How does it
contribute to the reproduction of certain power relations?
Scale, in this sense, is socially (re)produced through in-
dividual and institutional actions. In other words, social
practices can create and transform scales. Thus, the dom-
inant scale results from historically accumulated power
struggles that act as spatial organizers of actions. In the case
of knowledge production, it is perhaps more evident in the
scale of problematization, where specific scales are repro-
duced at the expense of others. Is this a 'local' issue or a
'regional' one? What is the scale of available data? One can
think of the domination of methodological nationalism in
this sense. Another way of tackling the politics of scale is by
examining its impact on the political economy of publish-
ing scholarly work: At what scale of framing does the issue
at hand have a better chance of publication? Moreover, the
politics of scale is also about evaluating its consequences
in terms of knowledge production. Do we consider the
outcomes of our knowledge production on a local scale or
map it on a global one? What kinds of power relations are
reproduced as crystallized in specific scales?

Considering the politics of scale and focusing on spe-
cific cases of knowledge production about Iran in recent

years, we discuss the challenges and risks that we, as critical scholars, face in attempting to go beyond the dominant Northern perspectives.

First, the problematic of positionality: we, as scholars who claim that it is possible to theorize through the Global South(s), need to reflect on our positionality. This reflection should not be limited to intersectional social status regarding social class, ethnic/national, and gender/sexual relations; it should also include in-between positions in the academic realm, located between the margins of the North and, to some degree, the core of Southern perspectives. A kind of in-betweenness comes from occupying the marginal position of a migrant in Europe in contrast to the relatively more central position that one occupied on a smaller scale — consider the position of a Persian/Shi'a/male migrant in Europe and that of a Kurdish/Sunni/woman living in Iran. In other words, we are in the borderland and face its positive and negative effects on how we deal with theorizing in, from, and through the Global South(s).[1] In this respect, we need to acknowledge and reflect on the reality that the significant efforts of decolonization and our problematizations of cognitive Northern-Southern divisions have come from 'here', the Global North's zones of knowledge production, instead of 'there', i.e., the sites of struggles and knowledge production in the Global South(s).

Second, the hierarchization of sites and zones of knowledge production in both the Global North(s) and the Global South(s) assigns a higher degree of importance and visibility to one specific context, site, or geography of knowledge production. This mechanism conse-

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1     Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 2012).

quently naturalizes the Global North's false claims about 'cognitive superiority', while imposing the rationality of the Northern perspectives as the dominant mode of rationality within the Southern zones. This hierarchization underscores the continuation of cognitive colonialism, in which one adopts and internalizes the epistemic principles of Eurocentrism and so-called Northern rationalities.[2] Therefore, we should assert that not every attempt at decolonizing knowledge production has contributed to overcoming power imbalances. In other words, by endowing the Northern sites of knowledge production with a higher degree of importance and initiating our problematization from 'here', we neglect the negative consequences of our decolonizing efforts for the Global South(s).

Third, the institutionalization and centralization of knowledge production on and through the Global South(s) in area studies have historically caused the (trans)formation of area studies (such as Middle Eastern studies, Iranian studies, Latin American studies, etc.) into by-products of colonialism. Consequently, a particular power structure and in-between positionality have been imposed on those who work on and from the Global South(s), thus legitimizing hierarchization between sites and zones of knowledge production.

In order to elaborate on these challenges, which certainly have affected the conditions of possibility for producing knowledge on, in, and through the Global South(s), we discuss two examples concerning Iran in the following pages.

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2     Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Decolonising the University: The Challenge of Deep Cognitive Justice* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018).

NATIVISM IN IRAN

Attempts to decolonize and resist the global power struc-
tures often include searching for or returning to neglected
capacities and so-called marginalized figures in the Global
South(s). Discussing nativism is particularly important as
we witness an increasing interest in Iranian nativist intel-
lectuals, among whom there are scholars, mainly working
within Global North academia, that we identify as hold-
ing in-between positions.[3] The Iranian nativist intellectual
production mainly dates back to the 1960s and 1970s
and has close ties to Islamists and the later official na-
tivist discourses in the Islamic Republic. We, therefore,
find it problematic that these nativist anti-Western or anti-
colonial figures (e.g., Ali Shariati and Jalal Al-e-Ahmad)
are frequently presented in the Global North as marginal-
ized decolonial thinkers, regardless of the present power
dynamics, particularly on (sub)national scales.

It is noteworthy that we do not talk about nativism
per se but rather about the conditions of possibility for
theorizing from and through Iran as part of the Global
South(s), considering the dominance of nativism as the
official discourse monopolizing the academic sphere in this
country, particularly in the humanities,[4] which goes hand
in hand with the more general philosophy of the Islamic
Republic. In the following paragraphs, we briefly discuss
the challenges and complexities of such efforts as well as
the risk of reproducing colonial hierarchies and enforcing
dominant repressive nativist discourses in Iran through

3    Afshin Matin-Asgari, *Both Eastern and Western: An Intellectual History
of Iranian Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018),
pp. 190–222.

4    This pattern is also apparent in other fields, such as Islamic Economics,
Islamic Medicine, and Islamic Physics.

them. After all, the road to hell is often paved with good intentions.

Even though the above-mentioned figures cannot merely be reduced to the perspective of the Islamic Republic, detaching them from their historical contexts, meaning their close ties with nativism, is also problematic. Historically, nativism in Iran has been a call to return to the self. Toward the mid-nineteenth century, the Persian Empire underwent several changes resulting from semi-colonial conditions,[5] integration into the world market, and the introduction of capitalism. In this sense, nativism grew from a collective disappointment in finding allies against colonial powers such as the British and Russian Empires on the international scene.

According to Negin Nabavi, the discourse of 'authentic culture' rose in Iran, during the 1960s and 1970s, in response to 'a combination of Third-Worldism and the movement of counterculture predominant in the West'.[6] This discourse also targeted the central part of the then dominant discourse on modernization, which has, from its beginning, advocated for a universal departure from what is formulated as the 'traditional'.

Modernization discourse, as a vital part of state-building projects, has been one of the two main trends of universalism that shaped the backbones of knowledge production in and on Iran. The other one is Soviet Marxism. Interestingly, both universalistic approaches share an understanding of history as linear, although with

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5    Iran has never officially been a colony but became a site of semi-colonial intervention and competition, mainly by the British and Russian empires. Perhaps it was this very competition that saved it from becoming a colony of one particular colonizer.

6    Negin Nabavi, *Intellectuals and the State in Iran: Politics, Discourse, and the Dilemma of Authenticity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), p. 104.

different stations and destinations. Modernization theory and related concepts have constituted what is and remains the most influential social-theoretical approach in Iran. Indeed, they have shaped the main body of sociological studies as the 'sociology of development'.[7]

In this sense, nativism in Iran, by calling for a return to the 'self', has been a response to the claim of universality by modernization theory and Marxism. It means that progress will be achieved by reviving what we were before instead of imitating what is happening elsewhere. Before the revolution, the return was pointed towards a narrative of the pre-Islamic Persian Empire. However, instead of the archaic, pre-Islamic Aryan self that was prominent in the pre-revolutionary era, the post-revolutionary Islamic state has adopted a return to an 'Islamic self'. Interestingly but not to our surprise, perhaps, both narratives of this self are colonial, orientalist, and entangled with imperial aspects of Iran. After all, this self has been historically constructed in the context of power struggles across different scales.

The most celebrated Iranian anti-Western intellectuals, such as Ali Shariati and Jalal Al-e-Ahmad, appeared in this historical context. While they cannot be held responsible for the dominant Islamist discourse of the post-revolutionary era, one should not forget their contribution to what later served as justifications for what happened after the revolution that none of them lived to see. To name one of the post-revolutionary incidents relevant to knowledge production, we can mention the Cultural Revolution (1980–83) in Iran and its purge of so-called Western ideas, including but not limited to Marxism, in the name of Is-

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7    Ebrahim Towfigh and Shirin Ahmadnia, 'How to Overcome "Oriental" Sociology?', in *Spatial Social Thought: Local Knowledge in Global Science Encounters*, ed. by Michael Kuhn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), pp. 313–26 (p. 318).

lamic and native identity, which was followed in the 1980s with mass execution of the opposition.

The purge was narrated as an effort to reform Iranian culture, which resonates with attempts to correct 'traditional' culture in the modernization discourse historically connected with colonialism. In both cases, the dominant argument was that there are problems in people's 'culture' that need to be addressed or reformed to make way for the further progress of society. Nevertheless, this concern with authentic culture, which was always rendered religiously after the revolution, was not limited to that purge. One can see that connected terminologies such as 'cultural invasion by the West' (تهاجم فرهنگی غرب), the 'soft war against Iran' (جنگ نرم علیه ایران), and 'Cultural NATO' (ناتوی فرهنگی) have become usual topics in crucial speeches by the supreme leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei[8] (and before him, Khomeini).[9] To Khamenei, the material war mutated

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8   For example: 'Today there is a vast cultural invasion against Islam which is not directly linked to the revolution. This invasion is more extensive than only targeting the revolution: it targets Islam' (Khamenei, 28 November 1989); or 'The enemies focus on culture more than anything else' (Khamenei, 21 March 2014). These speeches are compiled in 'Cultural Invasion on Islam: A Reality or a Conspiracy Theory?', at the official website of Khamenei, the supreme leader of Iran, 15 July 2018 <https://english.khamenei.ir/news/5798/Cultural-invasion-on-Islam-a-reality-or-a-conspiracy-theory> [accessed 24 January 2023].

9   Khomeini wrote the following in his decree establishing the Cultural Revolution Headquarters on 12 June 1980: 'It is for some time the need for cultural revolution — that is an Islamic issue requested by the Muslim nation — has been highlighted but little has been done in this regard. The Muslim nation, especially the faithful and dedicated university students are concerned about this. They have also expressed concerns on sabotage of the conspirators, instances of which raises its head now and then. The Muslim nation are worried the chance might be missed without any positive work, so that the culture might remain the same as in the past corrupt regime. During the past regime, this fundamentally important center had been put at the disposal of the colonial powers by uncultured and uneducated employers. Sustainability of this

into a war in the cultural field with scholars as its generals. He stressed the need to return to the authentic roots of humanities and social sciences to avoid the influence of the West on Iranian students. Indeed, nativism in knowledge production is the official policy of higher education in Iran. The cultural invasion discourse, among others, renders a victim subject called Iran in that it focuses on global power relations at the expense of covering colonial relations between the national state and its 'margins' within the country.

Thinking about the politics of knowledge production means mapping our research onto the power structure dominating the very context of that production. Then, the geography or cognitive site we are referring to should be at the heart of our problematization, which is to say, in the case of Iran, it should be toward 'there' and not 'here'. By this, we primarily mean mapping out the power matrices that form the context of knowledge production 'there' and reflecting on the politics of scale in its historical problematization. For, if we start from 'here', a problematization about Iran remains captive to Northern perspectives, maybe even for the sake of addressing the expectations of Northern markets of knowledge production. In this context, one finds that the quest to discover anti-colonial figures and contributions has often ended with the same Islamist/nativist figures — the usual suspects. In the Global North, what is considered to be 'the authentic' Iran is often reduced to a 'cultural' narrative that, most of the time,

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catastrophe that is the wish of some groups affiliated to foreign powers, will send a deadly shock throughout the Islamic Revolution and Islamic Republic of Iran. Any moderation in this vital issue is a grave treachery against Islam and against this Muslim country.' See the official website of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution (SCCR) <https://sccr.ir/pages/10257/2> [accessed 24 January 2023].

is equivalent to the 'Islamic', too. In short, it should not be enough to go back to the same affiliated figures and rebrand them as decolonial contributors. Although such a gesture escapes the official colonial Islamist narrative of these figures/concepts, it does not allow for a deeper exploration of these figures promoted by the current regime in Iran and of other marginal figures overlooked by institutions in the Global North.[10]

## IRANIAN STUDIES AND INSENSITIVITY TO THE PERIPHERY

Another example of the dominant paradigm of knowledge production on and through Iran concerns the importance and centrality of Iranian studies. We refer to Iranian studies as established area studies in North American and European academia to discuss how this institution has refashioned or even advanced, in some instances, the cognitive Southern-Northern division about the Iranian territory in Anglophone academia. Our focus, however, is on those works and scholars of Iranian studies who, working in the margins of the Global North, are critical of the orientalist gaze and adopt postcolonial and/or decolonial approaches in addressing their main subjects of study.

Before delving into that, let us briefly describe the demographic context of modern Iran. The current territory of Iran is home to diverse sociolinguistic and ethnic communities, which also include different religious groups. Farsi (Persian), the official language of Iran, which

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10    For instance, Majid Rahnema, who criticizes the reproduction of colonial relations that takes place through the myth of development, is an example of those whose contributions have less often appeared in the quest to find anti-colonial figures in the so-called Global South. See Majid Rahnema and Victoria Bawartree, *The Post-development Reader* (London: Zed Books, 1997).

is politically and geographically associated with the central and eastern parts of the country, is the mother tongue of around sixty per cent of Iranian citizens. Farsi's history of domination as the national language of Iran coincides with the formation and centralization of Iran as a national state in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Persian empire, which took place along with the ethnicization and linguistic divisions that occurred under the watchful eyes of colonial powers and their administrators. The spatial implication of the centralization of the modern state was and still vividly is the constant accumulation of power, capital, science, and technology in the dominantly Farsi-speaking centre of Iran, particularly its capital Tehran. It also parallelly resulted in the marginalization and exclusion of the rest of the territory, i.e., the former frontier zones of the Persian empire, where the majority of non-Farsi speakers and many religiously non-Shia Muslims are located.

This has led us to ask: Who have been the subjects and objects of social research in so-called Iranian studies? Who has written the modern history of Iran? Who has imposed a certain order on its archive? Who has had the privilege to be represented as the Iranian people? The answer is: it has been predominantly the male Persian Shia figure. This is also the very same figure/subject that Iranian studies have mostly reproduced, even in their critical versions.[11]

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11  For a few examples, please visit these prominent critical historical works that, despite addressing the others (e.g., ethnic, religious, and gendered others) of Iranian nationalism, have failed to integrate these others into their accounts of Iranian modernity: *Poetry and Revolution: The Poets and Poetry of the Constitutional Era of Iran*, ed. by Homa Katouzian and Alireza Korangi (London: Taylor & Francis, 2022); Homa Katouzian, *Iranian History and Politics: The Dialectic of State and Society* (London: Routledge, 2012); Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017); Mohammad Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism and Historiography* (London: Palgrave, 2001).

While women's and gender studies in the past two decades, more or less, have been successful in releasing themselves from the gaze of heteronormative and male-dominated historical narratives, many of the works in Iranian studies and its broader institution, i.e., Middle Eastern studies, are still insensitive about the peripheries of Iran and the very processes of ethnic and religious marginalization. In other words, one can recognize systemic indifference and, in many instances, cognitive ignorance or suppression of non-male, non-Persian, non-Shia Iranians within the domain of Iranian studies. For instance, we reviewed most of the articles published in the past ten years in the journal of Iranian studies, which belongs to the Association for Iranian studies and is the most prestigious Anglophone journal in this area. Through our findings, we are surprised to realize that the peripheries and, more importantly, the 'peripheralization' of the national territory of Iran have barely appeared in analyses of Iranian modernity,[12] be it about subjects as diverse as development, nationalism, authoritarianism, or sexuality.

It should at least be noted that in the past decade, Iran has growingly witnessed political unrest and social protests in its peripheries, in the most marginalized neighbourhoods of both its cities and its provinces. Looking at, for instance, the geographical distribution and frequency of demonstrations in the current revolutionary movement and in the previous one in 2019 in Iran, one can see how their cartography is in line with the map of the most marginalized groups and peripheralized spaces of the country. The legacy of the political turmoil and revolutions in the

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12    By 'peripheralization', we mean the mechanisms of constant centralization of knowledge and power in specific spaces and the parallel subjugation and suppression of other spaces and localities.

Middle East and the consequences of recent protests in Iran have inspired young scholars, mostly within Iran's isolated academic sphere or outside academia, to revise and reclaim the history of Iran and the Middle East differently by writing from and through the peripheries or, better to say, the Southern sites of the national state of Iran. However, we argue that these legacies have not yet been transferred or translated within the domain of English-speaking Iranian studies.

Instead, we recognize two important reactions in Iranian studies to the ongoing conflicts and struggles of peripheries against the core, as well as to the confrontation of the new political and discursive frame of the Middle East after the so-called Arab Spring:

*1. The Persianate Studies Approach*

This first approach has departed from Middle Eastern or Iranian studies in response to the critiques of the modernization theory in the Global North and is inspired by Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt's concept of 'multiple modernities'.[13] For its accounts of modernity, it focuses on civilizational analysis and the collective identities of the global periphery,[14] in this case, the Persianate region.[15] For

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13   *Comparative Civilizations and Multiple Modernities*, ed. by Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt (Leiden: Brill, 2003); Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt, 'Multiple Modernities', *Daedalus*, 129.1 (2000), pp. 1–29.

14   Said Amir Arjomand, 'Multiple Modernities and the Promise of Comparative Sociology', in *Worlds of Difference*, ed. by Said Amir Arjomand and Elisa P. Reis (London: Sage, 2013), pp. 15–39.

15   These are examples of the first approach: *The Persianate World: Rethinking a Shared Sphere*, ed. by Abbas Amanat and Assef Ashraf (Leiden: Brill, 2018); Said Amir Arjomand, 'A Decade of Persianate Studies', *Journal of Persianate Studies*, 8.2 (2015), pp. 309–33; Said Amir Arjomand, 'From the Editor: Defining Persianate Studies', *Journal of Persianate Studies*, 1.1 (2008), pp. 1–4; Mohammad Tavakoli-Targhi,

Persianate scholars, this civilizational frame, provided by Persianate studies, is a convincing field of research against 'the divisive forces of modern nationalism, Islamic fundamentalism and imperialism'.[16] The initiators of Persianate studies justify the necessity of this field by stating that in contrast to Middle Eastern studies and Iranian studies, which are by-products of colonialism and nationalism, Persianate studies claim an objective and historically authentic and interdisciplinary field of knowledge production about a transnational entity, i.e., the Persianate world.[17] Thus, they claim that the ideal form of Persianate studies is free of methodological nationalism,[18] and that it provides 'the resources for decolonizing ourselves, for envisioning a future outside the heritage of European colonialism'.[19]

Despite its success in discussing similarities and 'longue durée commonalities' among South Asia, Central Asia, and Iran in a transnational framework,[20] Persianate studies, in some instances, reveal an imperial desire and tendency by some of its advocates to revive the glory of the pasts by assigning Persianate heritage in literature, culture, governance, and thoughts to certain people and places in nationalist discourses, notably in

'Early Persianate Modernity', in *Forms of Knowledge in Early Modern Asia: Explorations in the Intellectual History of India and Tibet, 1500–1800*, ed. by Sheldon Pollock (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 257–87; and Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran*.

16    Arjomand, 'Defining Persianate Studies', p. 4.

17    The Persianate world refers to a vast region that 'stretched from China to the Balkans, and from Siberia to southern India', where Persian was the main 'language of governance or learning'. See Nile Green, *The Persianate World: The Frontiers of a Eurasian Lingua Franca* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), p.1.

18    Ibid., p.2.

19    Mana Kia, *Persianate Selves: Memories of Place and Origin before Nationalism* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020), p. 4.

20    Assef Ashraf, 'Introduction: Pathways to the Persianate', in Amanat and Ashraf, *The Persianate World*, pp. 1–14 (p. 1).

Iran and India.[21] Furthermore, Persianate studies have not offered a path towards making sense of the current conjuncture, notably as far as mobility and mobilization in and across different geopolitically important regions, including the Middle East, are concerned. Indeed, as Mana Kia rightfully puts it, 'reconceptualisation [and denationalization/decolonization] requires self-reflexive engagement with our own time and place.'[22] For instance, Persianate scholars mainly depart from Iranian or Middle Eastern studies by shifting their analytical focus and interest towards a new cognitive site and broader historical entity, the Persianate world. Yet, this does not allow them to ignore the current political crisis and core-periphery divisions in Iran and beyond. Nonetheless, the dominant Persianate studies continue to undermine the existence of both conflicts and commonalities in the Middle Eastern context by attributing them to the heritages of nationalism, colonialism/imperialism, and political Islam. [23]

## 2. The Common Past(s) Approach

The second reaction to the intensification of the processes of mobility and mobilization on the regional scale, in contrast, builds upon the idea of the common past(s) in the Middle East and beyond, as well as on the possibility of their restoration. This integrative approach emphasizes what we know as 'cosmopolitan worldliness' as a strategy to

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21   Kia, *Persianate Selves*; Green, *The Persianate World*; and Ashraf, 'Introduction: Pathways'.

22   Kia, *Persianate Selves*, p. 15.

23   In recent years, many have intuitively felt that those commonalities refer to a shared destiny more than to the sharing of a (imaginative) past.

understand social movements, regional conflicts, and civil war conditions,[24] and to criticize the processes of ethnicization and racialization as part of the colonial legacies in the Middle East and neighbouring regions. In his earlier book, *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism*, Hamid Dabashi argued for the emergence of a new world characterized by cosmopolitan worldliness in the aftermath of the early phases of the so-called Arab Spring and the overthrow of a few authoritarian regimes in the region.[25] For him, cosmopolitan worldliness 'has always been innate to these societies and is now being retrieved with a purposeful intent toward the future. This purposeful retrieval I call liberation geography'.[26]

In Dabashi's later book, *Iran Without Borders: Towards a Critique of the Postcolonial Nation*, this project of retrieving liberation geography emboldens the emancipatory potential beyond national borders and even criticizes methodological nationalism along with the marginalization of the former frontiers of empires. For Dabashi, the recent Middle Eastern revolutionary movements, including the Green movement of 2009 in Iran, transcend both colonial and postcolonial experiences by retrieving cosmopolitan worldliness. Indeed, these movements produce a new regime of knowledge that, according to him, 'decentre[s] the world and overcome[s] "the West" as a master trope of European modernity'.[27]

While the post-Arab Spring regime of knowledge production that is suggested by Dabashi acknowledges the

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24    Hamid Dabashi, *Iran without Borders: Towards a Critique of the Postcolonial Nation* (London: Verso Books, 2016).

25    Hamid Dabashi, *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012).

26    Ibid., p. 14.

27    Dabashi, *Iran without Borders*, p. 125.

Southern-Northern division within postcolonial states in the region and within Iranian borders, it shifts the temporality from the present to the past. For instance, the book implicitly claims that all of the different tensions and ongoing conflicts in the post-revolutionary moment of the region are historically 'imported conflicts' from the colonial powers or results of the malfunction of postcolonial states. Thus, cognitive preference is again given to utopian cosmopolitan pasts on a regional scale, as evident in Dabashi's insistence on the 'purposeful retrieval of [the] liberation geography' of the precolonial Middle East. However, this focus on the essentialized past overlooks the task of illuminating the ongoing processes of cognitive peripheralization and silencing imposed by post-Arab Spring national states in the region, which have led to further ethnicization or racialization on subnational and translocal scales.

To sum up, despite its progressive and decolonizing/denationalizing claims to promote liberation geography, the 'cosmopolitan worldliness' approach, as developed by Dabashi, cannot actualize the critical capacity of postcolonial critiques due to its focus on utopian past(s) and civilizational analysis, as similarly happens with Persianate studies.

## CONCLUSION: OVERCOMING THE COGNITIVE SOUTH-NORTH DIVISION

Returning to the problematic of this essay, one of the crucial demands of knowledge production in, from, and through the South(s) would be to shed light on the dual processes of centralization/marginalization or, in more political-economic sensitive terms, of peripheralization in line with the cognitive South-North division. However, at

least in the context of Iranian studies, as discussed above, we are currently witnessing how localities and subnational peripheries, as Southern sites of knowledge production, are sacrificed and reduced to data-gathering zones in the name of resisting and undoing the very same mechanism of South-North or core-periphery divisions on a global scale. Therefore, we elaborate here on the importance of thinking about scale and the power asymmetries involved in knowledge production. At the same time, we aim to show how knowledge production can have different consequences and effects depending on scale.

What are the consequences of the kind of knowledge production on Iran that only stresses and takes into account transnational hierarchies and power structures, i.e., North-South divisions on a global scale? We suggest that it brings forward a relatively homogenizing account of Iran and, therefore, of a part of the Global South(s), which is, at best, methodologically nationalist and, at worst, politically nationalist and exclusionist. Thus, these accounts ignore the extreme hierarchies, cognitive injustices, and evidently harsh discriminations on other scales (regional, national, and subnational) that have day-by-day advanced ethnic conflicts, racism, sexism, and xenophobia within and beyond the national borders. In so doing, such accounts contribute to spreading these tensions across the region. Thus, focusing on a global scale of hierarchies, in this case, overlooks, if not obscures, power relations involved on a smaller scale.

Let us conclude our contribution with some suggestions as to how to address some of the main questions put forth by this volume:

First, since part of the problem we have raised here has been inherited from the legacy of area studies, we propose to address this institutional structure directly. Area

studies in general are deeply entangled with colonial histories and continue to serve the extractivist approach to knowledge production. As we have argued, they suit the interests of both national states and regional powers. While being aware that area studies and the discursive prisons they produce cannot be dissolved overnight, what we can do is to critically reflect on their claims and functions. We need to understand them as a site of intervention for decolonizing the above-described power asymmetries involved in hegemonic modes of knowledge production. Within this frame, we should take both the critiques of methodological nationalism and the politics of scale seriously. By the latter, we mean how the dominant scales of problematization are constructed and reproduced, as well as the power struggles that form the context in which it takes place. In this sense, far from being merely a methodological choice in a voluntarist sense, scale is a historical construct with a specific power matrix as its context.

Our bringing forth the politics of scale as a contested site of intervention aims at resisting the logic of othering underlying the South-North division. This binary thinking not only overlooks South-South efforts and affinities but also fosters the further peripheralization of marginalized sites and subjects even within those contexts. For example, Baluch Sunni females are as crucial as other figures in conceiving Iranian modern history. The processes of marginalization and exclusion of such subjects must be revisited if the histories of the national states in the Middle East are to be written differently. This sensitivity to power structures might even contribute to transforming the research agenda of area studies. As already mentioned, problematization must come from 'there' as the site where knowledge is produced, not from 'here' as the institutions where the Global South(s) is consumed and conceptualized.

Our second concern goes beyond the specific field of area studies. It is broadly an epistemological concern and aims to overcome insensitivity to the peripheries in our effort to theorize through and from the Global South(s). We, therefore, adopt Edward Said's conceptualization of anti-orientalism as 'a decentered consciousness'.[28] We can and should nurture a decentred consciousness to confront potential cognitive division and peripheralization in the process of knowledge production in and through the Global South(s). In this regard, feminist contributions to the relationality of what we define as the South or, better to say, the South(s), are very crucial. As Amy Piedalue and Susmita Rishi have noted, we need to view the 'south as a flexible and mobile marker that draws our gaze to the operation of Imperial power, manifest in complex inequalities articulated at local and global scales'.[29] In this sense, they argue that 'theorising from the South' requires 'a kind of counter-mapping that centralizes the insights and theories that emerge from positions of struggle and marginality'.[30]

This brings us to our last point: ethical/political concerns. Regardless of their scale and space, social struggles and emancipatory politics must guide us to evaluate how we decentre our consciousness to problematize and theorize in, through, and from the South(s). That said, perhaps we need native problematization and universal inspiration in order to develop the fresh perspectives that Asef Bayat suggests and to change two interconnected things

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28   Edward W. Said, 'Orientalism Reconsidered', *Cultural Critique*, 1 (1985), pp. 89–107.

29   Amy Piedalue and Susmita Rishi, 'Unsettling the South through Postcolonial Feminist Theory', *Feminist Studies*, 43.3 (2017), pp. 548–70 (p. 555).

30   Ibid., p. 569.

simultaneously:[31] first, our understanding of the Global South(s), and second, the relations between the Global South(s) and the Global North(s).

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31   Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), p. 5.

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